The Changing Face of Faith in the New Century
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As Susan Davis joins the congregation after the sermon to sing "The Church's One Foundation," she can't help but smile wistfully. It is not that she no longer believes that the church's foundation is "Jesus Christ her Lord." Rather, it is that she's no longer sure she knows who or what the church is that the hymn talks about. It all began two months ago during the worship committee meeting, when Joe Carlton proposed that the church start a new worship service. We need a "seeker service," Joe explained, geared at people who are not interested in a "traditional" worship service. Seeker services, Joe continued, use "praise choruses" and a "praise band" instead of the hymnal and the organ. Preaching takes the form of "teaching sermons" and the dress code is very casual—the worship leaders, including the preacher, don jeans and T-shirts. (Incidentally, Joe got the idea during a seminar on church growth he attended earlier at a nondenominational megachurch "up north.")

Predictably, Joe's proposal set off a vigorous debate in the worship committee. Some members enthusiastically endorsed Joe's idea, arguing that if the church is to grow it must do a better job of meeting unchurched people "where they are" and speaking "their language." Others feared that Joe's proposal is too radical. It threatens to jettison the very traditions that give the church its identity as God's people and will end up blurring the necessary distinction between the "church" and the "world." After extensive and often acrimonious debate in two more meetings, the committee referred the issue to a special taskforce "for further study and review."

This story neatly illustrates the peculiar challenge facing the church in the new century as it seeks to fashion an identity and mission in what some are calling a "posttraditional" or "detraditionalizing" society. In a post-traditional world, authority resides not in time-honored traditions, habitual
practices, or ascribed identities but rather in the reflexive decisions of the self or the community. Consequently, "no single, uncontested tradition provides a secure and seamless narrative framework for our lives"; instead, the posttraditional posture is characterized by selective use of traditions and by creativity, innovation, and invention.

Throughout its existence, the church has had to negotiate the extremes of hard-line resistance and extreme accommodation in hammering out its identity and mission in the world. But in a posttraditional society the challenge is particularly complex: How do churches formulate truly reflexive ecclesiologies—ways of constructing identities as God's people that eschew the temptation, on the one hand, to reify received traditions and identities and, on the other hand, to treat all traditions as elements of a cultural "tool kit" out of which to fashion a "pastiche"-like religious identity?

In some way, every theme essay in this issue wrestles with this question. David Lyon and Werner Jeanrond outline the challenges of fashioning a faithful ecclesiology (Lyon) and meaningful forms of discipleship (Jeanrond) in a world of "structural uncertainty, free-floating spiritualities, and mediated relationships" (18). John Cobb, Jr., examines the nature of Christian community amid the pluralism that characterizes posttraditional societies. The challenge for Christians is to celebrate and participate in a plurality of communities while at the same time they nurture "the central role of the church as keeping alive the memory of Jesus Christ ..." (37). W. Harrison Daniel takes up this challenge, arguing that the missional dialectic of participation and marginality in European Methodism has valuable lessons for all churches in detraditionalizing societies. For Robert Phillips, the struggle for ecclesial identity among United Methodists has all the markings of a "wicked" problem. A faithful response to this problem takes the form of neither authoritative pronouncements nor unbridled competition but rather of clear-eyed, hope-filled collaboration.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review.

Endnotes
2. See ibid., 26-27.
Jesus berated his listeners for being strong on weather forecasts but weak on interpreting the times. I fear that he might say the same to Christians in the twenty-first century. It is not so much the weather as it is social forecasts of declining religious adherence and drifting cultures that seem to bother some of us so badly today. We very easily slip into the language of "loss," lamenting a lack of faith or deploring the drain from the pews. No doubt there is some tragic waning of faith in some parts of the world. Perhaps *The Tide Is Running Out* is an appropriate title for a book about the English church attendance survey. But it gives the impression of an irrevocable deficit, or at least a wistful waiting for the same tide to come back in.

My favorite story that touches on this theme comes from an Australian aboriginal group that was devastated when the river that had for generations sustained its people dried up and disappeared. Some members sat morosely, waiting for their river to return; but others headed upstream to discover what had happened. What they found was that the river still flowed, but in a different course. Their fellow tribespeople were watching faithfully over what was now a billabong. Could it be that in all our hand-wringing, breast-beating, and spiritual audit-taking we may be looking in the wrong places? Might the river be flowing elsewhere?

I don't want for a moment to deny the difficulties for Christian faith in the twenty-first century. Nor do I wish to pretend that statistics of church evacuation or the diminution of Christian influence in some quarters are not discouraging for those who have invested many years of time and
energy into them. But my own reading of the signs makes me neither complacent nor anxious. What I see is a tremendous transformation, especially in institutions and in the styles of believing, but also a challenge to fresh forms of discipleship. In Jesus' day, it seems, the people failed to discern spiritual crisis; but they also failed to see that this krisis was simultaneously kairos—the Messiah's moment.

How should we characterize our present times? Terms such as postmodernity and globalization are (at best) invented to help grasp the tremendous transformations that are occurring today. The modern world, with which we have all become so familiar, has in some respects become unfamiliar. This new world is not strange to the present generation, but for those born before 1960, the changes are remarkable. Nation-states, for instance, are no longer the focus of production and trade. Everything, it seems, depends on a network of relationships between countries. Yet not all is well. The complacent assumption of general progress, on which the so-called Baby Boomer generation was raised, is also in question. World Trade Organization meetings are routinely disrupted by protests against the effects of globalization, and Canadian journalist Naomi Klein has become a youthful and compelling champion of that cause. Modernity’s faith in progress is doubted in a risk-ridden, globalizing world.

The postmodern world is a product of two major shifts: (1) a shift toward consumerism and (2) a shift toward communications dependence. These "unfamiliar" factors are altering decisively the shape of modernity, making the older forms almost unrecognizable. Conspicuous consumption, once the preserve of the rich, has become not only the fuel on which contemporary globalized economies run but also the social glue that holds them together and that provides a source of meaning for life. Communications technologies, once merely a way of making contact, have now become the basic infrastructure for all societies, enabling the so-called "new network economy" to emerge and to reconfigure relations of production and consumption across the globe (but above all in the wealthy world). As soon as the computer was used more for communicating than for calculating, this trend became possible.

Disneyland brings these dimensions together nicely. It is globalized, consumerist, and heavily dependent on information and communication technologies. Disneyland serves as a useful metaphor for the postmodern world, not least because Disneyland is highly influential. Urban planners have to reckon with Disney, just as filmmakers and educators do.
Downtown cores and suburban zones are both affected by the Disney dream of maximizing spending and fun and doing so in clean, controlled, and safe environments. Churches are not immune from such influences either. Successful “seeker” churches in the United States send their employees to Disney to learn about everything from car parking to multimedia presentations. And the Roman Catholic Church has signed joint agreements with corporations like IBM and has licensed the image of the Pope for coffee mugs and T-shirts. In doing such things, churches reveal their reliance on contemporary culture, which provides for them either significant cues or seductive captivity. The phrase *Jesus in Disneyland* may remind us of why stories are important to social and spiritual life and of how easily salvation can be shrink-wrapped into a packaged product.

**Spiritualities, Seekers, and Strangers**

Two key motifs of modernity are order and control. The modern impetus to count, calculate, and predict has its roots in a strong sense of the orderliness of the world. Even weather, which seems in some ways so random, can be forecasted with a degree of accuracy, based in the science of meteorology. And if unruly weather may be put in its place, why not unruly people? Thus, bureaucratic forms of organization are another product of modernity, intended to extend the rule of rationality into the details of daily life. Although many bemoan bureaucratic practices, these practices do in many circumstances actually contribute to efficiency and convenience. However, many moderns suspected that there were limits to rationality or that bureaucracy may end up stifling the human spirit.

During the twentieth century, church life in Europe and North America became bureaucratic. Institutional churches adopted modern forms of organization, with the result that the denomination has become a classic expression of bureaucracy. For many people, this form of organization became synonymous with what “church” is all about. As early as the 1920s, H. Richard Niebuhr saw the denomination as threatening the chances for building a “Christian civilization” in the United States because of its divisiveness and of the way its power squeezed out spontaneous sect-like “fellowships of love.”

Peter Berger took up this theme from the 1960s, seeing the denomination as a product of rationalization that weakened religious monopolies and created the pluralism of belief that would eventually show itself in supermarket variety. *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* is a title...
that forewarns readers of its critical contents! Berger's critique was that denominations were incapable of mounting any prophetic analysis of American society (although, for Berger, such an analysis would remain at a Lutheran distance from the corridors of power).

The result was regulated religion, operating according to certain standards and codes that govern entry and exit. Some codes, such as doctrine, are formal and explicit. Other codes, such as the mores of Christian subcultures that exclude, for example, so-called "barroom vices," are informal and implicit. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, regulated religion is also associated with the anachronistic idea of a "Christian country," and thus with power-assisted religion, when the state supports the church in return for loyalty. In conditions of regulated religion, the expression of spiritual sentiment is limited and prescribed; alternatives are proscribed.

The expressive revolution of the 1960s, though occurring at varying pace and intensity in different countries of North America and Europe, was the cultural counterpart to the political and social upheaval of those times. The taken-for-granted authorities that had governed social and cultural life were now questioned. Spreading skepticism began to erode the complacent assumptions of steady progress through science and technology, educational expansion, organizational sophistication, and democratic development. And religious authority was among the targets. For churches aligned with the powers-that-be, or simply similar in style to other bureaucratic organizations, the expressive revolution seemed like bad news.

The consequences were varied. This was a period not only of dramatic draining of the pews in Canada but also of the start of a neo-Pentecostal movement in the United Kingdom. While church attendance did not drop decisively in the United States, alternative movements flowered, such as the Jesus People in California and the Sojourners in Washington, D.C. One way or another, regulated religion was losing its hold and its appeal. Of course, this process was not by any means evenly distributed, complete, or irreversible. But the trend was away from the fixed forms, the assumed lifestyles, and what Canada's Pierre Berton called the "comfortable pew." Berton was, of course, attacking the churches for their complacency and irrelevance; but it was precisely because of the seismic upheavals taking place at the time that he found a ready audience. Regulated religion was losing its grip, and the expressive revolution was part of the cause.

What took the place of regulated religion was a much more free-floating...
spirituality. This was encouraged not only by the effervescence of charis­
matic movements (some of which in any case maintained an almost funda­
mentalism approach to truth) but also by the growing mobility and multicultu­
ralism that characterized the last part of the twentieth century. Spiritual
authorities were available in other religions, now present in the West and
thus not merely exotic but with a next-door-neighbor familiarity. Such
authorities were also found in the “rediscovery” of elements of belief and
practice that had been there all along, such as Druidism in the United
Kingdom or native and aboriginal rites and perspectives in North America—
and, later, in Australia.

The shift toward free-floating spiritualities may also be seen in terms of
changing views of knowledge. Modernity is founded on the Enlightenment’s
dream that knowledge would gradually banish ignorance as certainty about
everything expands. Modern science committed itself to classification and
analysis, hoping to put everything in its place and to reveal the underlying
structures of reality. Universities grew with increasing rapidity in modern
times, both in population and in prestige. During the 1960s, however, it was
precisely the universities that saw some of the most virulent protests against
the past. And as the twentieth century stumbled unheroically through the
Vietnam War and into disasters such as those at the Union Carbide chemical
plant in Bhopal, India; the nuclear power station at Chernobyl in Russia; and
the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in the U.S., so skepticism about
science and technology settled in. What became clear is that technology
offers more risks than guarantees and that there isn’t much we can be sure
about anymore. (For some, we should never have been duped into the
Enlightenment’s quest for certainty in the first place.)

Daniele Hervieu-Lèger calls our current condition “structural uncer­
tainty.” Thinking of the present as the first “post-traditional generation,” she
argues that all reference points are now subject to mobility, reversibility,
and interchangeability. So much for the fixed points, transcendental
anchors, and universal scope of traditional religiosities. This condition is
the product of doubt about the Enlightenment project and its attendant
faith in technology, but it also resonates with the world in which
contrastingly cultural contacts are far more frequent than in any previous
time in history. This, in turn, may be seen in the multiculturalism that
yields a potpourri of start-of-day messages from different world religions
over my daughter’s high school intercom in Kingston, Canada, or the
mushrooming of "Christian" and "Muslim" schools in Bradford, United Kingdom, where my family and I once lived. And even in situations where there may be neither a strong sense of scientific skepticism nor day-to-day direct contact with those of differing beliefs, the new media ensure that structural uncertainty is now the order of the day.

Situations of structural uncertainty produce new populations dubious about the lust for certitude that once marked modernity and looking, rather more modestly, for short-term solutions for the moment. This approach is encouraged, of course, by another aspect of today's world: the quest for flexible workers within a restructuring capitalism. Here, short-term contracts are the norm, along with the requirement of mobility, project work, and constantly upgradable skills. This, too, encourages a search for some sort of story that will carry over from one day to the next, a narrative that will help knit together the tangled and apparently random skeins of experience and demand that wind around the everyday. For some, these new populations may contain among them "seekers"—people who are on the way, living tentatively, in an exploratory and experimental mode. This would seem to suit the situation of the ephemeral, the fragmented, the "until-further-notice" culture.

But if spiritualities and seekers are a product of the present, another category ought to be added: strangers. A century ago the perceptive sociologist Georg Simmel suggested that modernity generates a "society of strangers." In particular, the anonymity of the new urban areas of Europe and the organization of work in large bureaucratic structures made for a world in which the unfamiliar person became a familiar figure—not as a friend or a family member but rather simply as a stranger. And if strangers became—paradoxically—more familiar a hundred years ago, how much more common they are today. The number of relationships that are mediated by some means, often electronic, has multiplied today. We have multifarious connections, even contacts, with people who are not known to us in any serious way.

Strangers may also find themselves seeking relationships to compensate for the fleeting, shallow connections that may predominate from day to day. And they may also be involved in quests for a sense of social and personal identity. The heavy dependence on communication and information technologies and the engagement with consumerism that together characterize the postmodern help to generate the search, respectively, for relationship and for identity. The search for relationship is poignantly
expressed in Wim Wenders's film, *Until the End of the World*. Though involving a global chase through eight countries, in which participants use videophones and computers to stay in contact, real relationships remain elusive to the last. On the other side, many commentators have observed that the process of identity construction increasingly draws on consuming as a means of defining who we are. As Robert Bocock says, "Consumption now affects the ways in which people build up, and maintain, a sense of who they are, and who they wish to be."11

These, then, are some of the indices of cultural change at the start of the twenty-first century. Deregulated religion helps to create situations of free-floating spiritualities. Radical doubt about aspects of the Enlightenment project, and the social as well as epistemological condition of structural uncertainty mean—at best—that spiritualities are adopted by seekers rather than by adherents, members, or the confidently initiated. And all this occurs in situations where mobility and mediated communication have multiplied the category of stranger. The social world is generally more individualized in the West and, at the same time, has welcomed machines into it. We have become machine-dependent as never before, relying on email, fax, and cell-phone to keep the networked connections alive.

**Churchbells, Hybels, and Gumbel: From Contexts to Challenges**

The emerging contexts for faith are in flux. Where Christendom was once strong it is now in retreat. Where denominations once dominated the scene, they are now in a drastically defensive mode. A British bishop in the Anglican Church was heard recently in a cathedral, announcing the new task for the church: the "management of decline." It is hard to imagine how that would not become a self-fulfilling prophecy! Increasingly multicultural situations reveal Christianity as one religious option among many, while the consumer climate makes it merely a matter of spiritual preference. For those who have not forsaken the fold, there is a retrenchment in tradition, a nostalgia for times past that makes for Disneyesque reenactments of worship experiences from the sixteenth (Puritan), seventeenth (Anglican), or the nineteenth (revivalist) centuries. And not far away, there is always the specter of sclerotic fundamentalism, hardening its doctrinal edges or shooting on sight from atop the battlements.

But for those with eyes to see, there are even here green shoots of growth and a half-hidden population that has not bowed the knee to Baal.
In non-Western—and especially in non-English-speaking—contexts, there is vibrant expansion. (I am thinking of many African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American countries.) But even in North America and Europe, Anglican or Catholic traditions may be sought in sincere ways, at the same time as growth is experienced in very nontraditional settings, especially the neo-Pentecostal and the charismatic. Just because tradition may at some points exhibit vulnerable “empty ritual” tendencies or take the form of emotionally or sentimentally excessive charismatic worship is no reason for writing off such movements as insignificant or, worse, unChristian. There is, moreover, growing evidence (in most of the contexts I have mentioned) of what British sociologist Grace Davie dubs “believing without belonging.” Eighty percent of Canadians claim to believe in God; and 30 percent connect this belief with some very orthodox beliefs, even though only about 25 percent attend churches with any frequency (once a month).

In these emerging contexts, there is evidence of a number of fresh initiatives. Sometimes the scales of old assumptions have to fall from the eyes before we see them—but they are there. Ever since Christians started erecting special buildings as meeting places, there has been an enervating temptation to think of the edifice as the ecclesia. The church bells called the faithful to a place. Today, however, we have to look beyond not only the building but also the conventional “gathering” of the people. There are also references to the “church beyond the congregation” or to the “liquid church,” where the “called-out ones” are recognized as such also in their workplaces, campuses, and local communities. The challenge, then, is how to keep the connections strong—how to ensure that accountability and mutual encouragement can be maintained in a fluid, networked environment.

Fresh initiatives take different forms; and each brings liberating and expansive potential, as well as subtle snares and real risks. Seeker churches that have grown to megachurch dimensions, such as Willow Creek in the United States, provide new ways of worship that fit well with the new informality of corporate and consumer culture and that provide a welcome alternative to the stifling stuffiness of some conventional denominations. Bill Hybels started, after all, as a young musician in a rock band. Kimon Sargeant shows that many such seeker churches deliberately—and in some ways successfully—struggle to maintain Christian orthodoxy, even though, like Disneyland, they tend to support the status quo of consumer cultures and play little part in critique of, or modeling alternatives to, the American
DAVID LYON

way of life. While Sargeant applauds, say, the new appreciation of the whole body in worship, he also suggests that Willow Creek's "marketing strategy" may mean that "religion" will be seen as good for private consumption—and the "best product" be sought. But they are not unaware of the problem.13

Another highly successful venture from the last part of the twentieth century is Alpha. Begun at Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Brompton, London, the Alpha course has been hugely boosted by the videotapes made by Nicky Gumbel. Global sales of these tapes are now in their thousands. Alpha, too, has its merchandising, with sweatshirts, T-shirts, books, and bumper stickers. It is commodified and subject to similarly consumerist seductions as seeker churches. But it is a serious and theologically careful twelve-week course that uses new media in very effective ways. It is based in homes, a relaxed and highly relational setting. Whatever its middle-class biases and notwithstanding the fact that it may appear as more of a "package than a pilgrimage,"14 Alpha is imaginative, visionary, and in tune with many features of contemporary culture. It is a "no pressure" presentation of the old, old story: unlike nonparticipatory media such as religious TV, it can be contextualized; and it is intended to feed new believers into a church community. It is a model worth emulating, even if the accent might be altered in different contexts.

Much less obviously consumerist initiatives are also appearing. Among those who may be counted as "non-belonging believers" are people who have formed themselves into new kinds of Christian communities, such as pub-churches in the United Kingdom or home churches in Australia. Statistics of church attendance would reveal nothing about these churches.

In New Zealand, a growing phenomenon of what Alan Jamieson calls "churchless faith"15 is in evidence. People who have left conventional churches do not necessarily drift without attachments or, worse, forsake the faith altogether. Jamieson found that leavers tended to be mature Christians, often with some theological background and with leadership experience and, often, too, with families who leave with them. While some, suffering from spiritual abuse or disillusion with the church, may wander into cynical rejection, many find themselves in new, informal networks and groups of believers. When I visited one such group—Cityside in Auckland—I found what appeared to be a new form of Christian community in the making. It is experimental and informal (many sit or lie on floor cushions); draws upon new media (but also on ancient tradition such as the labyrinth and the
prayer walk); involves music, drama, and the arts; is socially aware and engaged; and at the same time is biblical and relational. It may not suit everyone's liking, of course. But that would be no reason for discounting it as evidence of green shoots of growth in a country commonly characterized as undergoing rapid secularization.

These fresh initiatives could be dismissed as the fads and fashions of consumer-seduced cultures, with short shelf-lives that will deny them any long-term stability or credibility. Or they could be viewed as sunlight slanting down through the gloom-clouds of ecclesiastical punditry, green shoots pushing firmly through the concrete sidewalks created by secularization spin-doctors. They could, to pile metaphor on metaphor, be where the river is flowing. They are at least worth attending to, because they disclose some important features of the present. They also show themselves to be ready to face the (communicative and consumerist) challenges of postmodern times.

On the one hand, communication and information technologies may give the sense that there are no limits, that the world is open to any and all messages, and that a computer-assisted Babel is confounding speech and rendering the world confused and fragmented. But the same new technologies may be thought of as coding systems, used to pursue certain purposes and offering new media for connecting dispersed and diasporic populations. In a world of flexible specialization, networks are needed to keep in contact, and new media are needed to provide new opportunities for multisensory communication. Is this crisis or kairos?

On the other hand, consumerism may give the impression that there are no duties, that hedonism has finally taken over, and that McDonaldization and Disneyfication are what we need the armor of God to protect us from. But, paradoxically, consuming itself may be considered a duty, and shopping may even be connected with sacrifice. Daniel Miller shows how shoppers may give themselves treats as rewards for their thrift, how time will be sacrificed to achieve consumption, and how consumers of some goods can become providers of others. In the process, consumers may display discriminating choices (without succumbing to the view that choice is the highest virtue or that personal choice is paramount). Consumption, too, has its own codes.

Engaging with a Networked World

Jacques Ellul often warned that churches should neither adapt to contemporary conditions nor relapse into religious forms (offering false consola-
Rather, he stressed, what is needed are reference points for each context. Current changes should be assessed for their conformity to the coming kingdom of God. New reference points are required today in a world of spiritualities, seekers, and strangers. Such reference points would highlight the significance for Christian commitment of cultural changes and would bring a renewed appreciation of Christian truths that may have become obscured or ignored. These, in turn, would contribute to rethinking how Christian discipleship is undertaken in the twenty-first century. Picking up from points made above, I suggest that these reference points could be thought of as rediscovering relational, worldly wise humanness. Such rediscovery could assist in forming new Christian communities in a networked world.

First, the differentiating of "religion" from the rest of life, which really began only in the seventeenth century, also produced religious professionals and a splitting of the categories Christian and human. Against this, to think of growing into faith as a rediscovery of true humanness is a move that not only emancipates but that also closes the reality gap (between "Sunday" and "Monday") that became increasingly evident in many conventional churches in the twentieth century. The apostle Paul talks of putting on the new self (Col. 3:9-10), custom-made by the Creator—which refers becoming Christian right back to Genesis. Conversion then becomes not just a new start in life but also a beginning whose reference point is creation. Personal knowledge of the incarnate—enfleshed, material—God-in-Christ becomes the way of opening life in every dimension to the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross and thus also of fulfilling the creation project. So the same Paul implores the church at Rome to "offer [their] bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1), as opposed to succumbing to cultural conformity.

Second, the reconciling dimension of Jesus' life and death also reminds us that Christianity is inherently relational and thus brings us again to creation. As Paul puts it, "We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created ... Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death ... " (Col. 1:15, 20). The old individualism of modernity that was embraced for so long by (especially Protestant) churches cries out to be replaced by a robust trinitarian sociality. And, communally, this sociality could be expressed in centered communities where there is commitment
at the core and “grace-full” acceptance at the margins, rather than the more exclusive “insider/outider” churches that modernity encouraged.

A helpful third reference point is what I call “world-wisdom.” That same creation–redemption focus requires realism about the world. Human life is inescapably ambivalent, when we are living between the times. The world is not divided into a Manichaean state of light and darkness. Rather, Christians are enjoined to shine like stars, offering the word of life within our contradictory, confused, and sometimes terrifyingly tragic situations (who does not remember September 11, 2001?). World-wisdom recognizes that there are no risk-free zones; but it suggests that there are ways of negotiating these agonizing aporias with integrity. Involvement with the present generation and with the planet itself is predicated on the reconciling work of Jesus; and this can lead to anything from appropriate explorations of multimedia to solidarity with the world’s poor in their protest of and action against globalization. Fair-trade coffee and investment in microcredit schemes count as Christian lifestyle choices. So do short-term mission programs and urban neighborhood renewal schemes. Acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God remain basic biblical requirements for human beings to be human.

In a world of structural uncertainty, free-floating spiritualities, and mediated relationships, these reference points help to orient life in Christian ways. Once cured of pathological cultural pessimism, we are free to search for where the rivers of faith are flowing today and to develop realistic responses to current conditions. Already existing initiatives, such as seeker churches, Alpha courses, and new experimental communities of faith, may be used as protem models of how to go beyond older individualistic, spiritualistic, and sequestered patterns of Christian life. However, the remedy for the excesses of consumerist and communicative modernity and for the cultural pessimism they generate in reaction does not lie in renewed experiments and techniques in themselves. The remedy is reconnecting—better, relating—again in every dimension of life and in communal ways with the Suffering Servant, the Shepherd-king, the human face of the invisible God–Jesus.

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Endnotes

6. This was, of course, the view of one of sociology's best-known founders, Max Weber, whose work is taut with the tensions of a deeply ambivalent world.
19. See the very fine work by Colin Gunton, The One, the Three, and the Many (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
The Search for Identity and the Meaning of Christian Discipleship

WERNER G. JEANROND

A longing among people for a clearer identity is often linked with experiences of change, transition, and transformation—experiences that lead to the need to establish a new personal and collective orientation in an unstable world. Today, the increasing search for the identity of the Christian church seems to be a direct result of the deep uncertainty that has befallen the Christian movement in our time. The church is facing many challenges today. In this article, I identify and discuss a number of these challenges. Naturally, my reflections are shaped by my European perspective.

Emerging Challenges for Christian Identity and Discipleship

Faith and Culture

For nearly two thousand years, the cultural history of Europe has been intimately linked with the emergence and development of the Christian movement. Neither the various tensions, splits, and reformations within the Christian movement itself nor the recurrent tensions between church and secular leadership radically altered this close relationship between Christian faith and European culture. However, since the beginning of the last century, this once rather intimate relationship has been undergoing significant changes. In many parts of Europe, the church finds itself increasingly marginalized. Indeed, a growing number of Europeans can well imagine the future of their continent, their state, and their region without the presence of the Christian church. The church, this once very significant force in Europe’s intellectual and social-political development, has become unnecessary in the life, thinking, and future planning of many Europeans.

Authority, Tradition, and Pluralism

Many Christians still consider the church to be important for their own spiritual, social, and cultural life and development. Yet, for many of them, the church has lost some of its spiritual authority in face of emerging reli-
gious pluralism in Europe, the globalization of European culture, and continuing mass migration. Are all religions equally genuine, true, and authentic? Is it appropriate to "shop around" for a suitable religion, trying out several religious options until one has found the inner peace one has been longing for? In other words, has belonging to a religious tradition become relative and arbitrary, allowing a person to move from one tradition to another without too many problems? What is the relationship between Christian faith and other faiths?

Discipleship and Church Membership

The still-existing confessionalist attitude in and between Christian churches in Europe leads many Christians to ask whether clear-cut manifestations of church belonging are acceptable at all. Consider a few examples: Is it reasonable for the Roman Catholic Church to continue its practice of excluding non-Catholics from its eucharistic sharing considering the large spectrum of different understandings of the Eucharist even within Roman Catholic parishes themselves? Are the differences between Christian churches really that significant when conflict between different factions in a church—opponents and promoters of the ordination of women, opponents and promoters of church rituals for homosexual relationships—highlights the need for an ecumenical understanding within the denomination? Am I a Christian first or does my Lutheran, Methodist, or Anglican allegiance come first? Does my belonging to one or the other church limit my Christian identity? What sort of authority do individual churches claim and have over against others? Should I defend my Christian faith against an authoritarian leadership in my own church and in other churches, or should I conform totally to the "laws" of my own tradition? How is my personal faith related to the doctrine and life of my own church? Questions such as these are on the increase in Europe today. Meeting these questions requires more than authoritarian statements; it calls for convincing criteria that will help us determine what can count as authentic discipleship today.

Discipleship and the Feminist Challenge

Is it possible for enlightened Christian women and men who are conscious of the feminist critique of Christianity to be actively engaged in a church that is so clearly based upon ancient patriarchal patterns? The feminist movement is not a passing trend in Christianity; it affects all our ways of imagining the church's future.
Doctrine and Christian Life
How important is the church's doctrine and teaching today? Should all believers be encouraged to think and express themselves as they please, or should there be limits to what one is to believe? Are worship, liturgy, and the life of prayer more important than the common confession of faith? Ought we to introduce our children, if they still wish to participate at all in our faith context, to our liturgical praxis and to our prayer life rather than to the clearly mediated knowledge of a particular church catechism? The relationship between Christian teaching and Christian life, as well as the vocation and tasks of theology within the church, need to be further clarified.

Structure and Leadership
Do the many empty churches on a given Sunday morning not demonstrate how little importance the Christian faith really enjoys in today's Europe? Does the acute lack of priests in a great number of Europe's Roman Catholic regions not prove the failure of the church's traditional form of hierarchical organization around a celibate clergy? Does the poor worship attendance in many of Europe's Protestant churches not point to the need to rethink and renew the form and structure of Protestant worship? Many of the external traditions and structures that have supported Christian religion throughout the centuries are about to disappear. What does this development mean for the shaping of Christian faith here and now? We need to rethink which dimensions of our current church life are most important for our understanding and practice of the Christian faith and which are of only secondary significance.

Theology and Christian Faith
Significant theological questions are being widely discussed today: for example, who is God? Jesus Christ? the Holy Spirit? What does the concept of a triune God mean for how we practice the Christian faith? It seems clear that the ongoing theological discussion of the concept of God points to the many uncertainties that characterize Christian faith and its intellectual conception in Europe today.

The questions and issues outlined above offer sufficient proof for the thesis that the Christian movement in Europe (and beyond) is now facing many and important challenges and concerns as it attempts to practice the faith in a rapidly changing world. In addition to these questions and descriptions of the current state of crisis within the Christian movement,
there are also significant changes and transitions taking place within Western culture at large. These changes and transitions provide the external context for the increasing Christian longing for a stronger identity. Let me identify just four of these changes and transitions.

The Cultural Context for Christian Identity and Discipleship

An Incredulity toward Metanarratives

The postmodern reflection upon Western culture has been promoting a strong mistrust of all large, overarching narratives and traditions—what Jean-François Lyotard has called "metanarratives." Postmodern women and men refuse to be dominated any longer by powerful discourses, traditions, and doctrinal systems.

From Lifelong to Functional Relationships

The interest in lifelong relationships and obligations has been decreasing sharply in recent times. Human relations are being considered more and more from a functional perspective. This perspective is based on the conviction that a person need commit to a particular relationship only as long as the relationship offers the desired results. The functionalist attitude often influences both relationships between couples and relationships within the (extended) family. A functionalist approach also frequently affects relationships that demand deep social, religious, political, and cultural engagement.

The Rise of Self-Help Groups

In recent years, all European countries have experienced a remarkable increase in so-called "self-help" groups. Someone who experiences the need for a particular kind of support or who suffers from a particular kind of loss or deprivation will likely become actively involved in a special group where his or her needs or interests are understood and met. This sort of group involvement lives from the interest of individuals to get something out of a certain activity.

A Deep Desire to Belong

Alongside the suspicion of metanarratives, we can observe the widespread fear of not belonging to a larger context—the fear of being excluded from relationships, groups, and networks. This fear finds expression and is celebrated in very successful TV shows that are organized around collective
rituals of exclusion, such as "Big Brother," "Robinson," "The Weakest Link," etc. This fear is also embodied in certain forms of addiction to mobile phone communication, especially among teenage boys and girls.

The postmodern situation is thus paradoxical: On the one hand, people express great mistrust in all sorts of stable and lasting relationships, while, on the other hand, they increasingly display the fear of being excluded from relationships. How does this postmodern context influence the current Christian search for forms of church identity? What does this specific longing mean when judged against the impact of this overall cultural context?

The upshot of our discussion thus far is that all longing for identity appears to be ambiguous. It may be the expression of a lack of trust in strong forms of relationship, now paired with the longing for precisely such a strong form of relationship. Longing for identity may thus indicate a lack of will or ability to break through the paralysis of relationships that so profoundly characterizes our postmodern culture. Therefore, we must be aware that the present conversation about identity is not necessarily a constructive contribution to either the general cultural discourse or the ecclesial-theological debate within the churches.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between two forms of identity: an identity that is based on idem, i.e., the Latin word for "the same," and an identity that is built on ipse, i.e., the Latin word for "oneself." Is the present longing for identity in the churches merely concerned with the uninterrupted continuity of the church (idem) or does it express a desire for the church's true vocation and authenticity (ipse)? In other words, does our longing for a clearer identity for the church express our concern and disquiet over the fact that so many ecclesial forms and structures have changed in recent years? Or does our longing express our desire that the church witness more clearly and faithfully to God's creative and redemptive project in the world as it presents itself to us today?

Reflecting upon the longing these days for the renewal of the church's identity may help disclose the very different images and views of the church and of ourselves that Christians hold. Within theology this disclosure could even lead to a critical reflection upon the relationship between the individual and the ecclesial community in our postmodern context.
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The Potential of the Present Quest for Identity

As we have seen, in our postmodern climate people like neither rigid nor vague identities. At the same time, they long for truth, clarity, and authenticity. What does all this mean for both the growth of faith and for building the church?

It is important to take the ongoing discussion about the church's identity seriously, in spite of its ambiguous and, at times, paradoxical nature. The reason for this is that this discussion raises a question that concerns the essence of the Christian church's future, growth, and ultimate goal. In other words, the conversation around identity brings to the fore the question of the vocation of the church. The fact that the identity question is complex and ambiguous must not be allowed to keep theology from tackling it head on, since it challenges the Christian movement's very understanding of its vocation in the world. The Christian church must explain its faith in God—including the personal and social implications of that faith.

If we consider identity not as a gift but as a task for the entire church, then we are ready to move on to a deeper search for the church's vocation. In other words, the present-day longing for the renewal of the church's identity may well give rise to the question of how the church approaches its own divine vocation—that is, whether or not it is prepared to construct that vocation in the concrete circumstances within which it finds itself. Such a task demands that there is movement, spirit, and power within the particular ecclesial community searching for its primary vocation and for ways to give adequate expression to its faith. The question now becomes this: What resources does the church have at its disposal as it sets to work on this task?

We who belong to the Christian church do not believe in any vehicle of identity, such as the Bible, tradition, liturgy, prayer, the priestly office, the college of bishops, theologians, or church organization. Rather, individually and collectively, we believe in the creative and redemptive presence of the triune God. Other resources, such as the Bible or tradition or prayer at best support our belief in God; but, if necessary, we believe in God in spite of or even against them. Of course, Christian faith is mediated through the Bible, worship, prayer, liturgy, sacraments, tradition, doctrine and instruction, works of faith and charity, and theological reflection; but faith can never be "produced" or "manufactured" by any of these. In tension with all Christian
efforts to formulate a stable "identity," faith is God's free and gracious gift that always gives rise to new and surprising insights into the depth of God's ultimate mystery—which shapes the forms of Christian witness and appropriate action in church and world.

Both faith as God's gift and identity as the Christian vocation to discover more of God's mysterious presence in the world are thus important dimensions of Christian ecclesial existence. A third dimension is God's invitation to all human beings to become disciples of Jesus Christ. A fourth dimension has to do with the personal and communal witness to God's coming reign on earth. Whatever spiritual authority Christians have in today's world depends upon the credibility of their Christian witness. What does faith as God's gift imply for the individual believer and the Christian community? What does Christian discipleship mean? How are we to bear witness to Christ in a credible way in our particular context?

The center of both Christian faith and Christian witness is Jesus Christ's proclamation of God's coming reign—the gift of eternal life that God has offered to us in Jesus Christ. This means that both Christian faith and the task of shaping Christian identity are eschatologically determined. Christian faith is radically focused on God's coming and transforming reign. Our existence—which is limited by time, space, and language—is already now touched by God's presence in time, space, and language. Eternal life is a quality of life offered by God already here and now—a quality that is to unfold its transformative power within the different sets of relationship that characterize Christian existence: my relationship to God and God's universe, to other people (even to my enemies), to our traditions, and to my own emerging self. That is why God's eternity will always challenge any attempt on the part of the church or the individual Christian to irrevocably define their "identity."

The Christian church is the community that, by following Jesus Christ, opens itself to God's creative and redemptive presence in the world. Therefore, if a church or ecclesial community really wants to remain open to God's presence—a presence that at all times wishes to transform the church's reality—it dare not attempt to limit its identity to boundaries that prevail at a given time in history. Every church and every ecclesial community must forever ask whether its present manifestation and structure represent an adequate response to the divine call and transformative Spirit that have gathered the community in the first place.
It is the task of theology to assist the church in the process of critical self-reflection and in the continuing interpretation of the church's vocation in Christ. The church needs theology. At times, theologians have been forgetful about this aspect of their important task; and, at times, the churches and Christian communities have forgotten that a public theology might be of service to the Christian movement as it struggles toward a more truthful self-understanding and a better testimony to God's presence in the world.7

How a particular church organizes itself—that is, which forms and structures it accepts in order to be able to rise to its eschatologically determined task—will always depend to a degree on the context and on the retrieval of the particular resources that are available to it. However, neither the context nor any sort of ecclesial theory or project must be allowed to compete with the divine vocation of individual Christians and of the Christian church as a whole. The church is God's eschatological project—God's sacrament: in and for the world. No statistical consideration will ever be able to enlighten us about the church's inner health. At the same time, a well-organized community can greatly enhance the church's public witness to its ultimate focus and orientation, namely, its prayer life and its work on behalf of emancipation from all forms of oppression.

The reign of God is not identical with the Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Methodist, or any other Christian community. At best, all Christian churches and communities strive to become fully theonomous and christomorphic. That means that all Christian communities ought to attempt to increasingly be defined by God's call and concerned to respond to this call by following Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The theonomous and christomorphic nature of Christian communion means that a church's identity can never be formulated in a definitive or exclusive sense. No church or Christian community is offered any sort of guarantee to have reached its ultimate goal more than another. Rather, all Christian churches and communities need to develop an attitude of openness that allows them to willingly admit that all authentically Christian manifestations of community strive for the same goal. Moreover, all churches and communities need to develop constructive, critical, and self-critical means of assessing any attempt to follow Christ in true discipleship. Mutual respect for ways of being seems to be the most adequate point of
departure for creating ecumenical understanding and cooperation between churches. The next step is for Christian communities to build relationships that allow them to critically yet lovingly become familiar with one another’s faith journey, prompting questions like these: How can we learn from one another’s faith praxis and direction? How can we challenge one another to further deepen our discipleship? And, finally, the ecumenical family of churches must continue its search for common criteria of authenticity of Christian discipleship.

Common prayer for a stronger faith and a deeper reflection upon faith are two promising resources on the way to this sort of ecclesial renewal. Here, both the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church can offer their Protestant sister churches a number of well-tested spiritual resources. The churches of the Reformation in turn will be able both to renew their own Reformational heritage and to invite their Roman Catholic and Orthodox sister churches to share with them anew the fruits of both Reformation and renewal. We could conclude that the Christian Church as a whole must develop further its Catholic substance and its Protestant calling.

The Conversion of Self and the Conversion of the Christian Community

In spite of the problems, ambiguities, and paradoxes that characterize the current search for identity, the longing for more authentic discipleship and renewal must be taken seriously by Christian churches and theologies. If we accept that Christian identity means more than a yearning for yesterday’s church or for the untroubled continuity the old church offered, or, indeed, the promise of comfort in confusing times, then our attention will be sharpened for a deeper reflection upon the church’s primary calling to become God’s sacrament in and for the world. Perhaps even my own attention will be freed to embrace my longing to transcend the postmodern relational paralysis and loneliness and to become myself (ipse) in community with God and God’s ekklesia. In the process, I may rediscover that I am invited to more than just transient, arbitrary, and functional relationships that reflect some passing need or temporary desire. Instead, I may learn to appreciate anew the true nature of all genuine ecclesial relationships, namely, to be gathered by the Holy Spirit to worship our Creator and Redeemer and to be transformed in this very process into a member of the body of Christ.
In this process, any project aspiring to total personal autonomy will be unmasked as frustrating and paralyzing. However, an understanding of personal autonomy that is accompanied by a longing to contribute to other people's development will prove to be an excellent starting point on the journey toward authentic forms of Christian relationship.

This process of transformation requires a large measure of self-critique. It also demands that I am willing to face the truth of all of my relationships—with God, other people, nature and the universe, tradition, the future, and even my emerging self. The insight into the true state of my own relational praxis will free me to transcend my own needs and to discover true relationship and true community in those places where God is truly worshipped. This means, however, that the church will be transformed by every member that submits her or his story to the judgment of the living God. And whenever the church as the body of Christ opens itself to a judgment of its own overall forms and structures of responding to God's call, its individual members will find it easier to engage in the process of self-critique and conversion. Thus, the process for the conversion of the church requires that the personal and the corporate dimensions of critical and self-critical reflection upon the demands of true discipleship be closely linked.

The Christian vocation in today's postmodern Western context is not to construct identities. Rather, it is to take the current longing for an identity seriously as a first step on the journey to rediscovering the true nature of Christian discipleship. Moreover, Christian faith knows that the discipleship of the individual and the community are intimately linked. However, at times one forgets that the same holds true for the link between individual and communal conversion. The present, unstable state of the world, especially in light of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provides all Christians, not only those in Europe, with a renewed urgency to rediscover their true vocation in this world and to become able to worship the triune God in the midst of a wounded world, hoping for that ultimate transformation of the world that can only originate from God's creative and redemptive action. This twofold divine action, however, claims our personal and communal discipleship here and now.

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Endnotes

1. Parts of this article are based on my Swedish book Gudstro: Teologiska reflexioner II (Lund: Arcus, 2001), 164-71.

2. Zygmunt Bauman, Globalization: The Human Consequences (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 60: "Globalization is not about what we all, or at least the most resourceful and enterprising among us, wish or hope to do. It is about what is happening to us all." (Italics in original.)


6. For a more detailed treatment of the different dimensions of God's coming reign, see Werner G. Jeanrond, Call and Response: The Challenge of Christian Life (New York: Continuum, 1995), 1-44.


What form or forms should Christian community take in the present and the foreseeable future? That is not the same as asking what form or forms the church should take. The ideas of church and Christian community overlap, but they are not the same. An institution in which people gather for worship may be a church without being a community. I follow the Reformers' idea that the church is marked primarily by its act of keeping alive the memory of the Christ event. It does so normally by reading and interpreting the Scriptures and by reenacting the Lord's Supper. That the people who gather for this event constitute a community is very desirable, but their failure to do so does not destroy its character as church. For example, I may attend a church as a visitor and hope to remain anonymous. I want to be reminded of who I am as a baptized child of God, but on that occasion I am not looking for human fellowship. On other occasions, of course, I would be keenly disappointed not to find fellowship with a community of believers.

On the other side, not every Christian community is a church. Even monasteries are not, as such, churches. The church's colleges and hospitals are not churches. Christian men's groups and women's societies are not churches. The list goes on and on.

Even so, developing good images of Christian community is important for the future of the church. It is surely the nature of the gospel to promote community among believers and to promote community between believers and others as well. Although the church should rejoice in there being many Christian communities that are not churches, it should also seek to be a particular kind of community itself. Even if being a community is not essential to being a church, it is certainly a very strong desideratum!

Forms of Community in American Church History
In traditional Christian society, community was a given. The village was often more like an extended family than like a contemporary city. The
church existed to perform certain important roles in village life. It was not needed to provide a distinct community.

Patterns of this kind emerged also to some extent in the United States. In a Puritan New England town, the church could express the community that was already present. It did not need to become a separate community in its own right.

But two other patterns were more common. The United States is a nation of immigrants, and on first arrival new immigrants often did not experience themselves as part of any preexisting community. They were alienated from that to which they came by culture and, often, by language. Members of new ethnic groups clung to one another for support. For minority ethnic groups, the church expressed and strengthened a community that was defined in part over against the dominant society. The churches served as communities for their varied ethnic constituencies.

On the frontier, the situation was different. Sometimes the people were so scattered that there was little community among them. A revival was an occasion to create a measure of community. On the other hand, the revival separated out those who were converted. They gathered in an intense community, constituted by their shared experience of conversion and by patterns of behavior they understood to be called for by their new status as believers.

Since revivalists came from several traditions with diverse doctrines and notions of church order, the converts from different revivals constituted different churches. Thus, the pluralism of the immigrant churches was matched by a different pluralism of the revival churches. Precisely because of this denominational pluralism, churches naturally constituted communities. When important divisions of opinion occurred in the revivalist churches, these were prone to divide further. This made it possible for these churches to maintain the sense of common belief and practice that was important to them as communities.

The history of the black churches is quite different. Initially, many blacks worshipped as slaves in the balconies of white churches. They found their Christian communities more in the slave quarters, where they had the freedom to develop their own music and stories and their own interpretation of the gospel. When they found that even free blacks would not be accepted as equal members of white churches, they created their own, carrying over the divisions of their former masters, chiefly Baptist and
Methodist. Their disagreements among themselves brought into being new denominations. Black churches functioned like other ethnic churches as places where an ethnic minority could maintain and strengthen its community life. They also had many of the characteristics of the revivalist churches from which they came.

During the twentieth century, similar patterns of church formation continued. New ethnic churches developed, especially among Asian immigrants. Evangelism in secularized urban and suburban areas brought new churches into being. Meanwhile the black churches continued to function as communities of the oppressed and places where that oppression could be resisted.

But for the older white churches, both ethnic and revivalist, the situation changed. As ethnic groups were assimilated, their need for the church as a place for separate community diminished. As new generations grew up in the revivalist churches, the issues that were important in distinguishing those churches no long interested them. In the vast new suburbs, some wanted to find like-minded people with whom to associate. Sometimes they found these in churches belonging to different denominations. This mattered less and less. Some wanted practical help, especially in bringing up their children—and for this purpose denominational affiliation mattered even less. Most pastors, eager to attract new members, deemphasized denominational distinctives. For the laity, a new entity emerged—the mainline church.

For a minority of the membership of mainline churches, these churches constituted their primary community. But for most members, this was one community among others, and rarely the most important. A new kind of pluralism emerged—a pluralism of groups offering community in limited ways, sometimes mutually supplementary, sometimes competitive. People shopped around for what met their needs. The church had been sucked into the consumer society. Rather than being the source of norms for all of life, the church was becoming the provider of specialized services, which "customers" may or may not want.

Meanwhile traditional Christian ideas and ideals were losing their hold on the people as a whole. For the weakening of some ideas that had been identified with Christianity, we can be grateful. But there were serious losses. By the end of the century, Christian values had been replaced in the culture as a whole by the worship of wealth, against which Jesus had so
explicitly warned us. The purpose of life was no longer to serve society but to get a well-paying job and purchase the good things that American prosperity had made available. The good life was depicted in terms of a fine home with all the conveniences, several expensive cars, plenty of money for recreation, sending one's children to the best schools, and retiring in luxury. A close second to wealth was a satisfying, even ecstatic, sex life. The values brought by many to the church pew reflect those of society as a whole more than those of the gospel.

Serious Christians have responded to this situation in various ways. One way is to welcome all who come to church for whatever reason and then seek to lead them into genuine faith. This involves creating small communities within the congregation. The United Methodist Church offers Disciple Bible Study and the Walk to Emmaus as means to this end. Much more is needed, but the success of these methods encourages the belief that even in this mammon-worshipping consumer society, it is possible to introduce the initially lukewarm to a fuller understanding of the meaning of the gospel and to evoke from them more faithful commitment.

Another way is to create congregations that have a definite Christian identity, where one who joins knows what is meant by membership and where membership has its costs. The Church of Our Savior in Washington, D.C., is a widely admired example. It shows what a fairly small congregation of fully committed Christians can do. Denominations such as The United Methodist Church should experiment more with this model.

Still another way is to create Christian communities somewhat separate from the church, accepting the fact that the church has limited functions but desiring fellowship with other Christians who want their whole lives to be centered in their faith. These Christians may all be members of a single congregation, or they may draw from several. Koinonia Farms is an impressive example of this kind of Christian community separate from the church. The Grail is another. There are hundreds of less visible examples.

All of these strategies seem valid, and they may play an enlarged role. Fully committed Christians are crucial to the future of the Christian movement. Given the lack of support in the culture for basic Christian values and orientation, the task of the church to bring its own members to faith is immense. There is also a need for an equivalent to the monastic movement that was so important to the church for so long in channeling whole-hearted devotion. In its old form based on celibacy, it was rejected by...
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Protestants long ago and has lost most of its support among Catholics as well. It assumed views of sexuality that few accept today. But there is still a need, both for the sake of the whole Christian movement and for the sake of the church, to have communities of Christians who embody together the total commitment for which the gospel calls.

Christian Community in a Pluralistic Century

Other forms of community may better fit the climate of the new century without surrendering to the idolatries that reign in the culture. Perhaps the pluralism of our time can be accepted and affirmed without losing the personal unity provided by faith in God through Jesus Christ. Perhaps there is a better chance of developing needed communities if we recognize and accept this pluralism.

Of course, most of us have long since done this. I will speak confessionally as a Christian. I once longed to be part of a community of dedicated people with whom I could work together and share my whole life. I still feel a certain envy for those who have found that possible. But I doubt that it is possible or desirable for most Christians. It was not my calling. Instead I have found my support in, and divided my efforts among, several communities. This model is more common than any other, and it is equally valid with the others. I will describe it in the form in which I have experienced it. I believe that many other serious Christians will recognize it as their model as well.

I take my participation in my local church quite seriously, but I do not expect it to be the channel of all expressions of my Christian calling. I had the good fortune of being part of a theological school faculty, through which I could express part of my vocation. I shared in founding several organizations designed to bring people together around particular concerns. I am a casual member of many others. This may sound like fragmentation, but in my own faith all of this coheres. My faith calls me to respond as I can to many kinds of needs. No one community can do that. A plurality of organizations is required, and each of them constitutes a community, albeit a limited one.

Community with Other Christians

This leads to consideration of another kind of plurality. The United States has always been a religiously diverse society. In such a society, and for the
sake of the society, we need to be in community not only with members of one community but also with many others. As a Methodist, I need to be in community with Baptists and Presbyterians. As a member of a mainline church, I need to be in community with conservative evangelicals and Pentecostals. As a Protestant, I need to be in community with Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox. As a Christian, I need to be in community with Jews. For the most part, this has been true for Americans throughout our history; and, fortunately, John Wesley encouraged us in this direction.

We can be in community with these others in two ways. One is through the church to which we belong. My local congregation is a member of the Pomona Inland Valley Council of Churches; and The United Methodist Church is a member of the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. My local congregation and The United Methodist Church have fine statements repudiating the historic anti-Judaism of the church. A few people working intimately in the World Council of Churches can have personal experience of the community of representatives of many traditions. I cannot, but I am part of a community that is in community with other communities and thus makes up the community of communities that is the World Council of Churches. In a pluralistic world, the goal cannot be personal participation in community with all. It must be participation in communities that are members of such communities of communities. I rejoice in being part of a church that expresses the ecumenical spirit.

Community across Faith Traditions
But today there are new dimensions to religious pluralism that have not yet been dealt with adequately by the church. We need to establish community with Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, for example, as well as with many persons of good will who do not identify with any one tradition. Our need here is derived from our faith in God through Jesus Christ. The question is how to respond.

Many Christians are responding in positive ways. One way of doing this is to establish communities of dialogue. I have been privileged to be in such communities with Jews and Muslims, but I have worked especially with Buddhists. Our dialogue group constitutes a strong community. My community with Buddhists through that group is stronger and more meaningful to me than most of my community relations with other Christians.
Religious difference is no barrier to community. Once we have recognized that Christian vocation in our day will normally express itself in and through many communities, there is no reason to expect community with most other Christians to be stronger than community with Buddhists.

The same is true of communities formed around specific tasks. I may be called to that task by Jesus Christ; another, by humanistic ideals; another, by Islamic law. In the process of working together, we establish the bonds of community. As a Christian I can rejoice in that.

Where there is rich community there is the desire to celebrate that community. At that point, problems arise. Each tradition has its own way of celebrating. Christians like to have Holy Communion together, but that is meaningless, or even offensive, to our partners in the other traditions. We often need to devise new rituals. Sometimes these seem deeply meaningful, more meaningful than the rituals that have become routine for us in our own congregations.

As this becomes more and more common, and as Christians recognize the truth and wisdom to be found in other traditions, the already wide interest in crossing current lines in our personal religious life will express itself more and more as a desire to get beyond our separate traditions and draw together in a more inclusive way. There can be little doubt that there will be increasing experiments in new religious movements that draw on multiple religious traditions without identifying themselves specifically within any one. There will be pressure on liberal churches to move in this direction.

Some Unitarian congregations already define themselves in this way. Some liberal Protestant churches regularly include elements from multiple traditions in their worship and practice. I am not persuaded that we should support these experiments. Perhaps their time will come, but for now I want to maintain the central role of the church as keeping alive the memory of Jesus Christ in the context of the history of Israel. The danger that this will be lost in our increasingly ahistorical culture disturbs me deeply.

But that does not mean that the church should fail to support the establishment of communities that cross these lines and seek ways of celebrating what they find they share. In the process, we learn much about one another and about ourselves. We learn much also, I believe, about God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ. Much of what we learn leads us to emphasize our difference from others but not in such a way as to diminish our appreciation and respect.
There is a risk here. Some will find a richer community with their new partners than they find in their own church. They may cease to think of themselves as Christians, favoring a new hyphenated or neutral identity. Some may even cross over to the other form of religious life.

But there is a greater risk if we fail to do this. Many thoughtful and sensitive people, whom the church badly needs, have turned their backs on their Christian identity, thinking that it is inherently exclusivistic. They do not believe that only Christians have a valid way, and they no longer want to bear a label that implies that belief. People living in a religiously plural world, often with relatives and close friends who are members of another religious tradition, need to know that the church strongly supports their appreciation of these other traditions and their forming bonds with members of them. To do that is in no way to be less faithful to Jesus Christ.

The church also needs to learn from the many dialogues with other traditions and to share what it learns with the congregation. It can model the process of learning and assimilating from others out of and because of Christian faith. Those who understand that their openness to learning the wisdom of other religious traditions is an expression of their faith will be far less likely to think they must choose between traditions and, so often, choose against the Christian form of faith.

I have opposed experiments with syncretism in the church, holding instead that the church's task is to keep alive the memory of Jesus Christ. But this does not mean that I ask for doctrinal rigidity. Some believers have a psychological need to believe that all is permanently fixed and settled; so preachers and churches that have a clear doctrine, dogmatically proclaimed as certain, will have a hearing almost regardless of the exact content. But those who participate more fully in the spirit of the new century will be repelled. A caricature of Christianity that has driven many away will tend to be confirmed. This cannot be the Wesleyan role.

On the contrary, to keep alive the memory of Jesus Christ through Word and Sacrament leaves a great deal open. It leaves open choices among the many different ways that the church can relate to community. It leaves us open to learning much that is new about Israel and Jesus. It leaves us open to many interpretations of his work and nature. It leaves us open both to defenses of the creeds and critiques of them. It leaves us open to diverse interpretations of the relevance of this whole history for us today. What it excludes is changing the subject. The church must take seriously its
task of lifting up just this history in a time when it is largely forgotten by the secular world.

I have tried to make clear that taking this task as central does not preclude learning from other communities. Today, we are learning especially from the Jews more about our own Scriptures. From others we learn quite new and different things, which may help us in our task of working for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. If so, we can teach these things with confidence. But the reasons for teaching what we learn from others must be found in our faithfulness to Jesus Christ. And we must learn how to make that clear.

Community amidst Ethnic Pluralism
There is still another form of pluralism with which the church has been struggling recently. This is ethnic pluralism within the church. Many of our American churches, we saw, began as ethnic churches; and they served an important role. Black churches continue to play an important role in the struggle of African Americans for justice. Asian churches serve new immigrants well. One now-assimilated recent—perhaps postmodern—development has been the rejection of the older model of integration in favor of affirming cultural diversity. Hence, there is no reason to think that ethnically defined churches will, or should, disappear.

On the other hand, we also believe that our life in the church should express our unity in Christ. We Christians from all the corners of the world should be able to worship together. There are many experiments in modeling this. In some cases, the multicultural congregation constitutes a single community. In other cases, the ethnic groups maintain their identity as communities that share together with one another major parts of the church’s life. The local church as a whole is then a community of communities. Where ethnic congregations continue to need their full autonomy, churches are devising ways to bring congregations together from time to time for fellowship. In all cases, the intention is that the inclusive whole be a synthesis of many cultural contributions rather than the old Anglo-American model.

Community and the Need for a “Sense of Place”
There is another form of community to which the church should give attention. It is the form that was once predominant but has now receded. It is geographical community.
Before the time that reading and writing were common, one’s geographical neighbors constituted the only significant community for most people. When literacy became common, some people began to feel more commonality of interests and more mutual responsibility with congenial people at a distance with whom they shared concerns. A scientist would become part of a community of scientists who would communicate with one another by mail; and these relationships might become more important than those with the people who lived nearby. Today, television makes us vividly aware of what is occurring elsewhere, and we may feel more kinship with the people we encounter there than with our physical neighbors. Email and the Internet destroy the relevance of distance for communication. More and more of our communities are nongeographical.

Of the communities discussed thus far, the local church is as close as any to being geographical. But, at least in the Protestant case, it is rarely really so. Most of the people living near the church do not belong to it, and many members come from considerable distances. More important, the church usually takes responsibility for its members, not for the people living in the place in which it is located.

We have reason to be grateful for the widespread availability of nongeographical communities. They enrich our lives greatly. I have already said that I believe it to be good that we can take part in multiple communities. But when this comes at the expense of geographical community, much is lost. We have no other way to organize our political life than by geographical areas; and as people lose a sense of rootedness in any area, they lose interest in the political process. Popular participation in governance has greatly declined. To be a part of a community is to take some responsibility for its well-being and for the well-being of all of its members. With most of our communities, the extent of the responsibility to other members is limited to their relationships with the community.

But with political community it is possible to go far beyond that. A healthy political community will be sure that none of its members is in really serious want. To be a member of such a community does not entail personally taking care of all its other members, but it does entail supporting ways in which they are cared for. The loss of concern for those in need, expressed in so much of our politics today, is a sign of the decay of geographical community.

Geographical community also brings to consciousness the landscape
and the plants and animals with which we share it. Much has been written about the positive value of a sense of place and the tragic consequences of its loss. Most of us know very little about the place where we live—its history, flora, fauna, and human inhabitants. Because we do not know, we do not care. We tolerate ecological decay and the continuing loss of species just as we tolerate the lack of care for those human beings who are rejected by the economic system. In the twenty-first century, postmodernists and others call for a recovery of place and its traditions so that we may again be rooted in the world. For the sake of our psychic health and of the health of the planet, we need to become inhabitants of place.

Catholics respond to this need much better than Protestants because of their organization into parishes. A priest has primary responsibility for his own flock, but he is likely also to want to understand the place where they live and to which he has been assigned. Protestants need to move in this direction.

Councils of churches sometimes do this. They are defined by their location rather than by the membership of the congregations they represent. They are more likely to take some responsibility for what is happening in their areas. This should be deepened. Either councils of churches or some other ecumenical clusterings of churches need to accept responsibility to know their areas and to respond to the needs they find. The particular needs of their geographical areas should define much about their mission.

This will be significant, however, only if the member churches are in real community with one another. If the local congregations turn over the responsibility to the council as to another agent, knowledge of the area by most church members will not in fact be encouraged. Few will take much responsibility for what takes place. If, on the other hand, congregations want to become responsible for their spatial neighbors, and if they seek to accomplish their goal cooperatively with others through the council, then real change will take place. The congregants will gain knowledge of their area. They will understand the real issues that arise through the political process. They will seek to respond to the problems both through political action and through nongovernmental organizations, including the churches. This whole process will heighten the consciousness of other residents in the area. Geographical community will become much more of a reality.
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Endnotes


2. I have engaged in deeper analysis of our recent history and made more developed proposals in John B. Cobb, Jr., Reclaiming the Church (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

3. Charles H. Bayer spells out the changed context and need for new forms of church life in A Resurrected Church: Christianity after the Death of Christendom (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001).

4. First Baptist Church of Los Angeles integrates diverse linguistic groups in a single service of worship using earphones and simultaneous translation. Wilshire United Methodist Church is a cluster of ethnic congregations with mutual responsibility and shared activities.

The "Wicked Problem" of The United Methodist Church

ROBERT J. PHILLIPS

The United Methodist Church has a wicked problem, not in the sense of "naughtiness" but rather in light of an emerging understanding of the types of problems institutions face. As expressed by Nancy Roberts and others, institutional problems can come in three forms. A simple problem involves agreement on the definition of the problem and the solution, with disagreement on the best way to implement the solution. A complex problem involves agreement on the definition of the problem but disagreement on possible solutions and their implementation. A wicked problem is one where disagreement exists among affected parties as to what precisely the problem is. Disagreement as to the best solution inevitably follows. The solution process is complicated by changing or unpredictable political, economic, and social factors. Finally, issues are muddied by the number of interested parties, known as "stakeholders," who ebb and flow, change their minds, communicate erratically, and otherwise create the proverbial hate and discontent through accident or design.

The United Methodist Church is a poster child for wicked problems. What is the problem? Some argue it is one of theology or vision. The church has "drifted astray," suffering from "doctrinal amnesia" that has blurred its theological identity. Good News and The Confessing Movement insist this is the problem. A "liberal, compromised" faith threatens to gut the integrity of the church.

To others, the conservatives are the problem. The Methodist Federation for Social Action, the Reconciling Movement, and some bishops and leaders within certain general boards and agencies share concern that a shift to the theological right bodes ill for the future of ministry to the disenfranchised. "Unsophisticated" and "literalistic" interpretations of the Bible discredit informed and forward-thinking faith.

Others argue that the problem is structural. An outmoded ecclesiastical policy that worked wonders on the American frontier in its innovative
infancy has lost touch with twenty-first-century realities. The institution has become encrusted with overlays of bureaucracy and numerous requirements in the *Discipline* for structure that many local churches don't want or need. The nature of denominational infrastructure is questioned as a roadblock to the innovative spirit required for the new century.4

Others argue that the problem is human nature. Low morale among clergy and laity has created discouragement within the church. Past issues of *Circuit Rider* and countless clergy conversations over caffeine unpack the specifics. Perceptions of a "good old boy" system for appointments that rewards the politically efficient rather than the pastorally effective sap clergy trust. Laity scan a sea of gray hair in the pews and despair for the future. Bishops see clergy tethered by property or spousal-income concerns to a small geographic region for appointability. Women and minority clergy sense a stained-glass ceiling, limiting pastoral viability.5 Conservative clergy feel marginalized and belittled, while liberals feel disdained by peers. The list goes on.

If one characteristic of a wicked problem is in defining the nature of the problem, then The United Methodist Church fits the bill. Arising from conflicting diagnoses, proposed solutions collide. If the problem is theological, then is the solution to loosen up or tighten up, to enforce traditional theology or to bump the boundaries of belief as fresh revelation?

If the problem is outdated structures that inhibit ministry, who is best qualified to make that call, to adopt wise changes and, most difficult of all, select the right paradigm for evaluating and making changes? In a denomination where authority is diffused among the General Conference, annual conferences, bishops, the Judicial Council, and sundry boards and agencies, how can any comprehensive restructuring occur, except at a glacial pace? If the problem is human nature, how does one go about sifting perception from reality in an institution of over eight million members and 43,000 clergy? Who is positioned to bring grace and healing where so many have justifiable grievance? How can any institution respond to so many contradictory complaints?

Finances and demographics further complicate the picture. The historically rural nature of United Methodism (heritage of unprecedented frontier success) has left the majority of existing congregations geographically isolated—a legacy of planting new congregations within buggy distance of one another. Meanwhile, 20 percent of established congregations contain 80...
percent of denominational membership, many with a serious case of "attitude" about church policy and showing a growing willingness to use financial and political clout as leverage to express their dissatisfaction with the system.6

The final characteristic of a wicked problem is the shifting identity and relationships among stakeholders. Is The Mission Society for United Methodists a stakeholder or a threat? Are the general boards and agencies of the church stakeholders? Who is talking to and for the seminaries of the church regarding the preparation of future clergy for various ministry settings? Who are the "liberal" stakeholders? Who are the "conservative" stakeholders? How does one identify the stakeholders where issues of structural renewal are concerned? Who is authorized to speak for the "innovative" lobby and by what definition? When does restructuring cross the line from an episcopal system to a congregational system, with all that such a shift implies theologically about the nature of a church "in connection"?

**Coping with Wicked Problems**

The three primary strategies for coping with wicked problems are authoritative, competitive, and collaborative in nature, respectively. These options do not exhaust possible responses, but they do provide a starting point for discussion. The first is authoritative strategies. This involves a person or group who has sufficient legal, moral, or institutional clout to define the problem and implement changes. This strategy is useful if power is confined to a relatively small number of stakeholders. The strategy turns the issue over to a small circle of those with expertise and power and eliminates a paralyzing welter of competing voices. Obvious conflict is minimized, as is the risk of paying unhealthy heed to those whose main credential is the ability to yell louder than others. Coherence returns to the system sooner rather than later, thanks to the firm hand of an informed authority empowered to enact change.

The downside of turning to authority is that experts can be wrong. Institutions are tempted to label as "expert" those best able to color inside institutional lines rather than those showing fresh vision. Organizations of a voluntary nature maintain health by sharing the sense of ownership for decisions and directions affecting the whole, while top-down responses risk alienating vast segments of the organization who feel no ownership over the process. When stakeholders start walking away from the institution in any number, this strategy has run aground.
Authoritative strategies theoretically are the way to go. The church is episcopal in nature, with clearly defined lines of authority, reaching from General Conference and bishops through annual conferences to local congregations. The denomination owns local church property. Bishops assign clergy to places of service and have the authority to order them to move. In theory, the response to the wicked problem of the church is for the firm hand of authority to announce what the problem is and what the solution will be.

In practice, this strategy will not work. Church membership is voluntary. Laity may give the benefit of the doubt to spiritual leaders, but not uncritically and not forever. Official authority embodied in offices such as bishop has dramatically diminished. Laity are well aware of numerous ecclesiastical alternatives in other churches if the status quo no longer satisfies. Laity can view appeals to organizational loyalty as a cop-out approach by those incapable of effective leadership.\(^7\)

The absolute autocrat symbolized in Bishop Francis Asbury, hero of frontier Methodism, has no modern counterpart, for which virtually all stakeholders are grateful. The denomination has no "Big Bish" and no \textit{primus inter pares}. Bishops have no say beyond their own geographical boundaries. Even the power to appoint clergy rests on a consensual basis of trust among local congregations, the clergy pool, and the bishop.\(^8\)

The General Conference has become the predictable flashpoint for airing doctrinal and institutional disagreements. In theory, the General Conference is the best official source for authoritative response to denominational problems. It is sufficiently representative and organizationally empowered to declare what the problems are and to announce the solutions.\(^9\)

In practice, the General Conference suffers numerous limitations that undercut its usefulness in resolving the wicked problem of the church. Nearly all voting members have long track records of investment within traditional paradigms. Expectations that 1,000 insiders will produce profound innovations are unrealistic. Veterans of various General Conference caucuses and special interest groups are adept at procedural wars that leave the uninitiated befuddled and can make stalemate on contested issues more likely.\(^10\)

The Judicial Council, the Supreme Court of the church, has authority to resolve specific legal and procedural issues. It can and has told the General Conference that certain decisions are invalid regarding matters of church polity and belief. The Judicial Council relies on its moral authority as much
as on its legal placement within church structure to enforce its decisions. If a bishop, with the support of his or her annual conference or the unified leadership of a jurisdiction, decides not to obey a controversial Judicial Council decision, little can be done to compel compliance short of declaring legal civil war in secular courts—an invitation for ecclesiastical meltdown.

A second strategy is competition. This is employed when a tug-of-war develops over power within the system, especially when that power is spread fairly evenly among numerous stakeholders. The essence of competition is win-lose, arising from the effort to acquire the power needed to define and resolve the problem. Whoever achieves that level of power, triumphs. The winner calls the shots and the losers are just shot, or at least neutralized. Once power is consolidated, the competitive winner can shift to a less turbulent, authoritative approach to problems.

Competition has positive elements. It pushes the contestants toward creativity and innovation while inhibiting dictators. When no one group rules, the temptations of concentrating power within a church bureaucracy diminish. Competition helps prevent unhealthy dependency on the system by challenging traditional United Methodist wisdom that one becomes pastor of a larger congregation by being appointed to a larger congregation. Competitive strategies that offer practical vision for growing a larger and more vibrant congregation can infuse new life and morale into pastor and congregation.

But competitive strategies have a downside. Hostility can develop among the competitors—warfare that will become followers of "The Prince of Peace." Competition demands much energy, talent, and time that could find constructive uses in positive ministry. The great sucking sound recently heard in several annual conferences and the 2000 General Conference was energy drained in legal and policy battles over homosexuality. When competitors are relatively equal in power, the most effective use of that power can be the creation of logjams, with progress redefined in negative terms, i.e., "We succeeded in stopping this or that."

Collaborative strategies comprise a third way of coping with wicked problems. "Collaboration is premised on the principle that by joining forces parties can accomplish more as a collective than they can achieve by acting as independent agents." The underlying assumption is that a win-win approach offers the best chance to deal with pressing, ambiguous problems. More key players leave the field with a sense of accomplishment.
Wasteful battles are avoided. Healthy loyalty to the system is nurtured by stakeholders who feel they are vital to the process of change and believe they have become full players with real ownership in the outcome.

Collaboration has downsides, too. It can fall flat. Some may prefer to see a corrupt system burn. The collaborative process also demands time and energy. Those who are better at schmoozing may develop unfair leverage in collaborative processes. Stakeholders may come to see collaboration as a lose-lose proposition and shift to battle stations, confident that they are strong enough to go it alone, if required. The outcome of a healthy collaborative process may be a consensus that competition is better!

A modest positive example is the creation of A Foundation for Theological Education (AFTE), the product of the efforts of the late Albert Outler of Perkins School of Theology and conservative evangelist Ed Robb. Outler had protested Robb's statements about prejudice against conservatives in church seminaries but also recalled the refusal of the Perkins faculty to hire Harvard-trained historian Timothy Smith, due to discomfort with his membership in the Church of the Nazarene. Robb likewise publicly rethought his absolutist language in conceding that church seminaries did include many scholars who hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

Arising from dialogue, AFTE was established in 1977. This organization has provided scholarships for United Methodist doctoral candidates with an evangelical outlook who are studying in ranked universities, in hopes that official church seminaries eventually would be willing to hire some of them. More than 75 doctoral students with evangelical leanings have received over $2 million in scholarship assistance. While the number of the participants actually hired by United Methodist seminaries remains small, consensus exists on the benefits coming from this cooperative effort.12

Dialogues involving national church leaders and movements such as Good News, the Methodist Federation for Social Action, Reconciling Congregations, Transforming Congregations, and the Confessing Movement have gained wide publicity. Issues such as the authority of Scripture, the ordination of practicing homosexuals, and the identity and significance of Jesus have brought to the table those representing groups normally known for talking about one another rather than talking to one another. Similar dialogues have begun within a number of annual conferences.

The dark cloud looming over traditional definitions of collaboration is
the recognition in wicked-problem theory that stakeholders "fail into collaboration." That is, collaboration enters the picture when all the key players recognize that no other approach can succeed and that failure to deal with the problem will leave everyone in a worse situation. The curve ball in this equation is that a number of stakeholders do not necessarily believe they will be worse off if competition is formalized through division.

For example, consider the hypothetical scenario of two well-known "Memorial" United Methodist churches. Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco contains roughly 8 percent of the members and has 8 percent of the average weekly attendance for the entire California-Nevada Annual Conference. Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, has the same relative percentages of membership and attendance within its annual conference. When membership and attendance at Glide collapsed in the 1950s and early 1960s for a community in transition, pastoral leadership of a distinctly nonconservative type produced a bona fide megachurch. Frazer plays a significant positive role as an evangelical United Methodist presence, both in Montgomery and within the region. Many visitors from within and outside the denomination flow to Frazer, as they do to Glide, to see "how it's done" and leave convinced it is being done right.

Collaboration on a denominational level that requires liberal Glide Memorial to embrace conservative positions would meet with a dubious welcome. Collaboration that requires Frazer Memorial to identify itself as part of a denomination that officially accepts liberal beliefs and practices would be collaboration on the way to collapse.

I emphasize that in using these two congregations as an example of opposites within The United Methodist Church I am not uncovering a conspiracy by pastoral leadership in either church to bolt the denomination or to sabotage dialogue. But when a single congregation has a larger weekly attendance than whole districts, attention must be paid. A megachurch is a self-licking lollipop that will not casually surrender autonomy or embrace national church policies it finds repugnant. When huge congregations are involved, opposites can snap or explode any denominational structure that theoretically exists to hold them in balance. Bipolar personalities, whether in individuals or in denominational theology and practice, are not signs of a happy future.
Facing the Future

In wicked-problem theory, collaborating stakeholders agree to seek meaningful common ground for a larger good that exceeds benefits derived from competition. The paradox for The United Methodist Church is that historical precedent is on the side of competition as the default solution for the wicked problem. Nazarenes, Free Methodists, the Wesleyan Church, the Salvation Army, and numerous other theological cousins began within the fold but split when issues of theology, social practice, and structure proved resistant to collaboration. The 1844 split over slavery is the most significant example but not the only one.15

Against this background, the stage is set for an eventual split should collaboration fail. Several factors point toward this conclusion. The first is numbers. Thomas Oden of Drew University has commented that the number of evangelical United Methodist congregations and members amount to roughly 25 percent of current denominational membership. If the evangelicals bolt in a group, this would produce a denomination as large as the United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ denominations combined and comparable in size to the mainline Presbyterian Church.16

Finance concerns are eased by the knowledge that 80 percent of Americans who tithe their income to charity are evangelical Protestants. There is little likelihood that the parent denomination would insist on retaining property in the event of a mass exodus. Such action would bring hundreds of millions of dollars of mortgages and property upkeep for which the remnant membership would be legally responsible.17

A third factor influencing future division is the concept that “geography is destiny.” As discussed by Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman, various regions of the country tend to be more clearly defined in political, ethical, and social frames of reference. While every area of the country contains virtually every type of belief, the preponderance of certain viewpoints can be tracked in broad geographic terms. The Western Jurisdiction and the New England and Northeast regions of The United Methodist Church have produced statements of support for certain sexual practices that would empty out a church or whole districts in Texas, southern Illinois, or Georgia. The breakup of the denomination into two geographical denominations, with satellite congregations diffusing each region nationally, becomes a real possibility.18
The downsides of a competitive split are daunting. If evangelical flagship churches and leaders leave the denomination, hundreds of smaller congregations would seek to leave also. Not all conservative churches are healthy, and not all conservative pastors are effective. Establishing a new evangelical Methodist denomination rooted in Darwinian “survival-of-the-fittest” polity would be most ironic.

A second adverse impact of a conservative split would be the blurred nature of what constitutes an ‘evangelical’ within the United Methodist tradition. No clear definition exists. Some United Methodist evangelicals downplay Wesley’s emphasis on Christian Perfection. Other evangelical United Methodist churches are reluctant to baptize infants or insist that new members affirm the inerrancy of Scripture. A subscription to Christianity Today may be circumstantial evidence that one is an evangelical but suggests nothing about an embrace of Wesleyan evangelical distinctives.¹⁹

The most devastating result of competition arising from a split would be what it could do to the majority of United Methodists who occupy the theological middle ground. Neither is every member of a conservative United Methodist congregation conservative nor are all liberal congregations uniformly composed of liberal members. One may sniff that the middle of the road is where the “yellow stripe” is found, but it also is where the majority of United Methodists are found—part of the theological heritage of Wesley’s “catholic spirit,” embodied in his slogan “At all opinions that do not strike at the heart of Christianity, we think and let think.” A split that divides the national Methodist church into distinctly conservative and liberal groups may attract or disaffect a substantial percentage of laity. Middle of the road is not a pejorative term for most United Methodist laity; rather, it reflects the overall make-up of American society in general.²⁰

Competition leading to schism would do little to help and much to harm other dimensions of the wicked problem affecting the church. No cogent argument has surfaced for how the division of the denomination would enhance morale, improve the appointive process, address stained-glass ceiling issues, or hearten the laity. A division might offer occasion to revise denominational structure and to incorporate some contemporary insights on systemic renewal, but nothing is certain.

There is no evidence that any group, whether liberal or conservative, has engaged in coherent and sustained reflection on restructuring a new denomination in ways that would be consistent with Wesleyan ecclesiology.
THE "WICKED PROBLEM" OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The practical needs of congregations widely divergent in membership, location, and financial resources call for a pattern of restructuring that cannot just "happen," unless the denomination effectively renounces an episcopal and connection-based ecclesiology for an entrepreneur-based church.

Collaboration: Pitfalls and Promise

Collaboration holds the best hope for responding to the wicked problem of the church. Notice, I did not say solving the problem. Collaboration in this context is not singing "Kumbaya" around an inclusive campfire. It requires constructive engagement at all levels of the life and soul of the church. Giving everyone a seat at the table is risky, especially when kinfolk are angry and are carrying some very long knives. Collaboration theory assumes that linear thinking, traditionally rooted in a neat "problem-solution" paradigm, is unable to make sense of the chaos one finds in a wicked-problem world. The classic notion is that a problem is anything that upsets stability, regularity, predictability, and efficiency in the institution. Top-down leaders respond with actions designed to restore these qualities to the system. Structure exists to implement the decisions of authority, normally by growing the bureaucracy necessary to do the job.

In a diverse society, institutions that hold to static definitions are destined to be blindsided by events and marginalized in impact. The default setting of these institutions is to "fix" the problem by taking steps to banish disruption or disorder, either by appointing "Reverend Problem" elsewhere or by referring the "problem" to a conference committee where the issue is quietly strangled or starved with neglect. A nonlinear, dynamic approach that takes seriously the constantly changing dimensions of the problem and the erratic nature and demands of stakeholders is best addressed by collaborative means. "Solving a wicked problem is fundamentally a social process" that authority or the walls built by competitive strategies cannot resolve.

A second assumption in collaborative response is that some chaos is inevitable and can be beneficial. I define chaos as "a period of inherent unpredictability in a system." That chaos is inevitable is obvious to any veteran of church meetings. Institutionally, chaos arises in the same manner as it does in any living organism, in which some chaos is vital to the continued health of the organism. As Phyllis Kirk has pointed out, "In nature, a system that thrives on chaos is dynamic and vital. On the other hand, a stable system is closest to entropy, which is closest to death."
In religious institutions, the same concept can apply. Meaningful boundaries, such as those provided by a crisp theological tradition and beliefs, provide definition and focus to the church. Apart from such boundaries, a chaotic gush of conflicting opinions and practices can literally "swamp" the institution. A healthy response need not imply an embrace of rigidity or static beliefs poured and set with walls of traditionalism.

For example, a printed denominational hymnal is dated from the day of publication, outdated in five years, and a certifiable antiquity in a decade. Arguments by Marva Dawn and others that warn against exchanging the "faith once delivered" for a "spiritual 'high' instantly delivered" have some merit but also risk assuming that a dramatic shift in the style of worship must imply a surrender of the substance of the gospel. One can agree that "contemporary" drivel is still drivel and yet argue that the current ecclesiastical system is changing just slowly enough in response to evolving cultural trends to ensure a certain death at the hands of impatient younger adults.  

Aspects of the collaborative process relevant to the church include identifying, evaluating, and affirming the stakeholders; establishing consensus on ground rules for dialogue; building a strong social network for various players to speak and listen; and avoiding starting the process with any specific goal in mind. Though these are not all the factors involved in effective collaboration, they illustrate a potential approach.

Stakeholders must be identified, evaluated, and affirmed. The Schaller-Easum-Callahan-Church Growth-Alban Institute wonks are examples of those who can speak to concerns of structure and process. Various "types" of pastors and laity can be identified and empowered to speak for morale issues. Good News, Confessing Movement, Mission Society for United Methodists, and AFTE are sample key groups to address evangelical concerns. Other groups factor into the mix. Assessment questions could sort who among the groups have clear constituencies, who has stand-alone ability, and whose authority is derived from an administrative position that lacks clear volitional constituency.

Ground rules for dialogue are vital. These could include identifying who is authorized to speak for a particular stakeholder; agreeing to avoid speaking about other stakeholders until one had spoken to that stakeholder;
renouncing practices such as concealment of information, delay as a tactic, or impugning the motives of others; and perhaps inviting trained and objective facilitators from outside the denomination to coordinate certain key dialogues. The Council of Bishops could propose a consistent framework for the ground rules, to be affirmed or tweaked by each annual conference.

Building a strong social network, or developing what Robert Putnam calls "social capital," is part of the process and can be an indicator of collaborative success. This involves fostering a deepening sense of trust for others in the process, rooted in good-faith involvement that justifies trust. It reaffirms essential, shared identity and agreement without stifling disagreement or debate. A church theologically and socially big enough for a Hillary Clinton and a George W. Bush may be healthy as in Wesley's "catholic spirit"—an attitude hard to find in a polarized American Protestant setting.

Starting the process without a specific goal in mind sounds crazy, akin to booking an airline flight to "wherever." This aspect of the collaborative process is vital to enable the process itself to get off the ground. Where stakeholders with wide disagreement on issues sit at the same table, an announced specific goal inherently creates insiders and outsiders, undercutting constructive conversation. Announced goals often are incognito solutions, which may address the concerns of some stakeholders but not others. No one's theology or convictions need be laid aside. Entering the process with clear agendas of what one would like to see happen can be helpful in bringing long-range coherence to that process. Goals will emerge, but with a greater sense of shared ownership than those predetermined before the process has begun.

The United Methodist Church is a human institution, with all the strengths and frailties one finds in any human organization. The wicked problem besetting the church can be tackled by people of faith and good will who desire to see "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" played out in this slice of the church militant. The United Methodist Church also is a divine organization, part of the body of Christ. No institutional tinkering can restore any church over which the Spirit of God has hung the sign, "Ichabod" (see 1 Sam. 4:19-21). Restructuring without spiritual renewal is buying an upscale ventilator for a dead patient. I have met very few United Methodist clergy or laity who are not convinced the church faces a wicked problem. But none I have met claim to have seen the Ichabod sign swinging on the gate. Hope rests in action, and in prayer.
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Endnotes


2. William J. Abraham, Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). Abraham argues that the denomination has blurred clear doctrinal standards that are inherent to the church's integrity and mission and that such a theological core in fact does exist.

3. An example is found in the New England Declaration, signed in June 2000 by numerous members of the New England Annual Conference. The Declaration states in part, "We have watched for the past two decades as General Conference actions have added increasingly condemnatory and exclusionary language to the Book of Discipline concerning the full participation of gay and lesbian persons in our denomination." The Declaration goes on to advocate for the inclusion of practicing homosexuals, bisexuals, transgendered persons, and lesbians at all levels of church life.

4. Lyle Schaller and William Easum are two advocates for the serious rethinking and restructuring of the denomination to give it viability in the twenty-first century. See, for example, William Easum, Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) and Lyle Schaller, 21 Bridges to the 21st Century (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

5. As of the jurisdictional elections of 2000, roughly 30 percent of all bishops of the church in the United States are African American, though the percentage of overall black membership is closer to 6 percent. Appointments of effective non-white clergy to larger, primarily white, congregations have been relatively rare.

6. The impact of demographics and the cultural shift from sect to church have been discussed by a variety of authors. An example is Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, The Churching of America: 1776–1990 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
THE "WICKED PROBLEM" OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH


10. In a commentary for the United Methodist News Service, Ezra Earl Jones underscored concern that, as currently structured, the General Conference is "incapable of substantive change," and suffers from "a highly politicized tug-of-war that belies our character as a church." The veteran churchman proposes the following solution: "Maybe we will just have to wait together for Light, turn it over, and prayerfully listen for God's guidance." See Jones, "Waiting on the Lord at General Conference," *United Methodist News Service* (31 July 2000).


12. For a background article on the development of AFTE, see Steven Harper, "They Did Something about It," *Good News Magazine* (March/April 1983).


14. Jon Ed Mathison, under whose pastoral leadership Fraser Memorial has experienced explosive growth, also is a leader in the Confessing Movement, a major evangelical theological renewal effort within the denomination.

15. Jones, 121-42.


17. An illuminating discussion of current trends in stewardship and giving by evangelicals is offered by Wesleyan historian Michael Hamilton. "We're in the

18. Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman, One Nation under God (New York: Random House, 1993), 49-114. The authors do not argue that church splits must happen on the basis of geography but make a strong case for the descriptive reality of geographical influences on the nature and expression of religious and political belief.


20. Numerous studies underscore both the existence and vitality of specifically conservative and liberal religious movements in U.S. society and the large pool of citizens who clearly avoid such labels in their own beliefs and religious affiliation. See Finke and Stark, 271-75; Kosmin and Lachman, 249-50; and Robert Wuthnow, Christianity in the 21st Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 42-54.


22. Conklin and Weill, 3-10.


Balkan Methodism on the Margins:
Witnessing amid Volatility and Pluralism

W. HARRISON DANIEL

Paul Mojzes, the distinguished observer of Eastern European religious practice once quipped that the Balkans "is the despair of tidy minds." With those words, Mojzes highlights the region's unique combination of closely intertwined ethnic histories and intractable political vendettas, coupled with its religious and cultural vitality. These are the realities confronting religionists across the Balkan region, including a set of small but steadily growing United Methodist congregations operating effectively in the midst of much violence and instability. The United Methodist Church in the Balkans comprises congregations with long histories in Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria. Recent initiatives have also resulted in the spread of Methodism to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia, and Albania. Methodism has largely resurfaced, after living through sustained suppression at the hands of Communism, to rejoin other European Methodists in the administrative unit known as the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe. Despite its minority status in relation to the region's dominant Eastern Orthodox churches, Methodism in the Balkans has become one of the more rapidly growing parts of the worldwide Methodist connection. This vitality has emerged, paradoxically, in the face of brutal violence, sweeping civil unrest, ethnic cleansing, and deteriorating economic conditions. Moreover, Methodism has renewed its work in the Balkans during a period when governments and churches are still struggling to understand the relationship between evolving democratic institutions and national identities.

This article examines Methodism's missional stance in the midst of the rapidly changing economic, religious, political, and cultural alignments in the Balkans since 1989. I argue, based on the reflections of Heinrich Bolte (Bishop of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe), that the United Methodist response to the tragic ethnoreligious conflicts of the Balkans represents a test case for how Wesleyan theology and missional prac-
tice can be applied in highly volatile environments. This study, then, aims to demonstrate how enduring Wesleyan stances such as connectionalism and ecumenism can help sharpen our witness as Methodists on the margins of culture—wherever in the world we do ministry.

The United Methodist Church in the Balkans Today

The United Methodist Church in the Balkans is a subsection of the larger administrative unit called the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, which embraces seven annual conferences and covers 15 different nations in Europe and North Africa. The Central Conference is under the episcopal leadership of the relatively young Heinrich Bolleter, whose episcopal residence is in Zürich, Switzerland. He needs to be young and dynamic, for he must supervise the church across vast geographical distances and cultural divides, conducting the annual conferences in 19 different languages. For the sake of this article, we focus on the mission of The United Methodist Church in three countries concentrated in Eastern Europe: Macedonia (a separate district but united within the same annual conference with Yugoslavian Methodists), The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (comprising the “rump” remainders of the former united Yugoslavia—Serbia and Montenegro), and Bulgaria. The histories of Yugoslavian and Macedonian Methodism are closely intertwined at points, particularly due to the transfer of the Congregational mission churches of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Macedonia to the Methodist Mission Board working in Yugoslavia, creating a unified Methodist Yugoslavian Mission Conference in 1922. Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, with only modest new Methodist communities, are also a part of the Central Conference.

The Provisional Annual Conference of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consists of 18 congregations in the Vojvodina (former Yugoslavia) and 12 congregations in the Republic of Macedonia, for a constituency of approximately 4,000 and 25 full-time workers. The Provisional Annual Conference of Bulgaria has 30 congregations, for a constituency of about 2,000 and 32 full-time workers (pastors and lay pastors).2

Analyzing Missional Churches on the Margins in the Balkans

All of us have observed a conflicting set of images about the Balkans filtering to us through the media—images of war, ethnic cleansing, and reli-
gious intolerance. On the other hand, we note the paradox of resurging religious vitality emerging like living ghosts from the history of the Balkans. Despite close media attention focused upon violence in the region and regular contact between Methodists in Europe and the United States for the first time since the end of World War II, analysis of Methodism in the Balkans remains challenging due to the sometimes conflicting perspectives of our sources. To analyze the missional stance of Methodists on the margins, we need to both specify what forces are driving events in the region and demonstrate what constitutes the institutional “center” in these societies. Some historical and contextual background is thus in order.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as the economic and political power of the Soviet Bloc in Eastern Europe increasingly deteriorated, old multicultural political arrangements, held together under the iron-clad ideologies of Communism, quickly and in some cases violently gave way to a new series of independent Balkan nations aligned around ethnicity and religion. These smaller “Balkanized” countries are still struggling to establish transparent multiparty democracies and to fully integrate into emerging global information networks and markets. Along with rapid transformation away from Communism, most of these countries have sought to offset the uncertainties of entering global markets with attempts to achieve local security through homogenizing their culture and people. This process, in its most violent form, is described euphemistically by a term we have all come to understand: ethnic cleansing. Balkan states—particularly Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and to a slightly lesser extent Bulgaria—have reasserted traditional links between Orthodox religion and nationalist identity to stabilize the nation around ethnoreligious purity. The result of such tactics has been to privilege those aligned with traditional religion and to discriminate (and often mount open attacks) against minority religious traditions in society—whether they be Muslim, mainline Protestant, or Pentecostal. In such a way, the “free exercise” of religious conscience—a fundamental human right central to constitutional democracies supporting pluralism—was denied to large blocs of peoples in the newly independent Balkan nations. Ethnic cleansing and the “retotalizing” of the historic state-supported churches proceeded at times with the tacit or open approval of religious leaders as the perceived precondition for “nation building.” Genocide, terrorism, and even civil war were often the means chosen by the majority ethnoreligious groups to establish national dominance, owing to their fear that minorities
might gain access to sacred land or more political power. By employing established religious expression as the litmus test of political orthodoxy, Catholics fought against Orthodox to “cleanse” and create Slovenia and Croatia. Orthodox Serbs fought against Muslims to reestablish their power in Bosnia and Kosovo. Protestant minorities, such as Methodists, were caught in the middle of most of these larger tensions. Where tensions gave way to genocide, it provoked massive European and American intervention in the form of United Nations peacemaking operations. These operations commenced in Bosnia in 1995, and from 1998–1999 NATO launched air attacks against Serbia. At present (August 2001), NATO forces are entering Macedonia to establish a truce between armed refugee Kosovar Albanian groups and mainly Slavic government forces.

The recent prominence, then, of the historic state churches in the Balkans has been driven by the attempt to reestablish power in the post-Communist “nation building” phase—based on efforts to reclaim the historic connections between perceived sacred territory, political power, and ethnic purity. Against the backdrop of these ethnoreligious tensions, vast numbers of new foreign missionary groups are arriving in the region, spreading globalist, democratic, and competitive brands of religion. Perceived by the Orthodox Church and by state officials as “stealing souls” and upsetting the stability of ethnoreligiously pure communities, the Balkans contain all the ingredients for ethnoreligious intolerance and explosive violence. In such a context, proselytism is rarely viewed as a neutral religious act but rather as a threat to the ethnoreligious purity of certain communities and a destabilizing force in the delicate balance of church–state establishment. If, as many scholars do, we view religious change and development in the context of the larger forces of nation building around ethnoreligious purity, then we can understand how the revival of traditional state churches is seen as crucial to reclaiming historical, political, and religious identities. On this view, proselytism on the part of Western missionary churches brings with it the notions of democracy, pluralism, and human rights—all necessary to support choice and the free exercise of religion. These are legitimate threats to the old church–state alliances, which promoted a corresponding link between ethnoreligious purity and patriotic nationalism. The validity of mission in the Balkans thus remains tied to this question: Do state churches have the historical precedent and the inviolable right to exclusively represent the church universal in any given region.
while proscribing all missionary initiatives as hostile threats to local ethnoreligious arrangements? If one questions the legitimacy of building small, "balkanized," and ethnically pure nations and regions, by what logic or scriptural warrant could state churches argue the right to religious uniformity based on a type of "religious cleansing"? Clearly, insensitive missionary proselytism from the West, which does not respect the historic relationship of state churches to local culture, can damage local cultural and religious traditions. Yet, conversely, uncritical relationships between established state churches and nationalistic attempts to create zones of ethnoreligious purity can do great violence to diversity and the human rights of minority ethnic groups. John Witte, Jr., has labeled these colliding religious interests in the region as a "war of souls"—an undeclared war between traditional historic state churches and the new Protestant missionary movements often labeled as "sects."

The competition between the rights of state churches and missionary agencies in the Balkans should not be analyzed in isolation from the larger dynamics unleashed in the region since "The Great Transformation"—the dismantling of Communism during the 1990s. Methodists and other religionists in the area find themselves caught between "Balkanization" and "Globalization," between the local and the global aspects of their faith expression. The New York Times correspondent Thomas Friedman called attention to these global-local tensions in his book on globalization entitled *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Friedman takes the Lexus automobile and the olive tree as metaphors for the global and local tendencies facing communities all over the world in this era. He argues that global markets do not global communities make. In this new global environment, as economics and information drive worldwide connections, global politics and ideology matter less. New commercial and information networks emerge among the commercial and cyber-elites. In the face of these rapid cultural and economic realignments, people are searching for new ways to build communities locally. Historic ethnoreligious ties often become the most convenient way to renew community locally. As Friedman maintains, while globalization promises to create the networks to provide a Lexus in every driveway around the globe, there is a corresponding need for reconnection to vital communities at the local level. This desire to reconnect to traditional ethnoreligious identities is what Friedman describes as the human longing to remain known "under the Olive Tree." Thus, in
Friedman’s view, globalization has the paradoxical tendency of promoting balkanization and a closed tribal identification along ethnoreligious lines as a sort of competing referendum concerning the values that communities will select to organize their common identity.

In the context of such identity tensions, Methodism and religionists of all persuasions in the Balkans also find themselves at a point of referendum. Around which competing values (global or local) will they organize their self-identity as minorities? Balkan Methodists face the choice of having to select from the cultural menu those values that best contribute to stability in their church, country, region, and the world. Put simply, at both local and Central Conference levels, Methodists in the Balkans (and elsewhere) are deciding the distinctive role that Wesleyan theology and polity can play in relation to the following creative tensions in the region:

Balkanization
Nation building
Church-State alliance
State-enforced religious/political uniformity
Cultural coherence/protecting group,nation
Local norms/nationalism
“Olive Tree”
Contextualization of faith
“Golden Rule” (right to be left alone)

Globalization
Multicultural tolerance
Disestablishment/Pluralism
State-protected rights to free political/religious expression
Protecting individual
International human rights
“Lexis”
Universal faith
Great Commission–Conversion

The above continuum shows clearly how individual and group rights are colliding mightily in the Balkans. These collisions of values derive from competing international and local notions of human rights. The Methodists in Eastern Europe, along with all other churches, must decide how to represent their message in the public realm in the face of competing visions of the common good. Moreover, the question facing Free Protestant churches and minority churches everywhere in the world is this: “What positive contributions can minority religious movements make in societies where the state church dominates, thereby controlling the values that shape patriotic identity?” This is the context in which leaders in The United Methodist Church in the Balkans must work today.
To these creative tensions in the Balkans, Methodism brings a historic stress on *ecumenicity* and *connectionalism*. The Methodist mission in Europe since World War I has been based on the missiological pillars of transnational connectionalism and an ecumenical sensitivity that recognizes the historic contributions of state churches to the contextualization of the gospel. Let us now examine how Bishop Heinrich Bolleter has reaffirmed these historic Wesleyan distinctives as he seeks to guide the missional stance of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe. As a primary source, I use Bishop Bolleter’s most recent episcopal address, delivered to the Central Conference in Bülach, Switzerland, which met on March 14-18, 2001.

### Methodism’s Missional Role in a Pluralistic, Changing Europe

Bolleter is dynamic and direct about which theological principles are guiding Methodism’s historic resurgence in the public square of the rapidly changing Balkan region. In his word of welcome on the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe’s Internet home page, Bolleter writes:

> What is strengthening the ties of the Methodist connection across all the differences of nationality, language and mentality? It is the commissioning by the risen Lord Jesus Christ to reconcile and to be a reconciling people. To this call we are responding together with other denominations. We welcome an ecumenical partnership in evangelization, in diaconal work, in the questions of church and society as well as in the call for the defense of the creation.

In this succinct statement, Bolleter has laid out in summary fashion the missional logic of Methodism’s public witness from the margin as a minority church (*Minderheitskirche*). The missional frontiers for Methodism do not consist of “planting churches” and capturing the public square, thus displacing the dominant religion and culture in each context. For Bolleter, the focus shifts to collaborative and intentional engagement across the frontiers of interconfessional, interfaith, and intercultural lines within the diverse and unstable societies in order to create new networks that contribute to social stability and the renewal of the creation.

Bolleter’s direct reformulation of Wesleyan themes for his annual conference is appropriately entitled “Joy for the Gospel: Reconciling Humanity to Life.” In his introduction, Bolleter defines the Methodists’ commissioned work (*Auftrag*) in the region as a missional task: daily to
detect and renew the grace of God in Christ and to discover afresh the joy of the gospel at work within humanity as the foundational basis of the church’s existence. This concept indicates the role that Methodists as members of a minority free church have to play in concert with other churches in the region: to help renew and rediscover “the joy of the gospel”—or to use Miroslav Volf’s memorable phrase, to “wash[ing] the face of Jesus” together in the region.

The Commission and Task of Mission
In the first section of his episcopal address, Bolleter cites the apostle John’s letter to the seven churches in Asia to point to the difficulty of addressing a theology of mission to seven vastly different conferences. Despite various contextual challenges and the Ungleichzeitigkeit (“unequal historical development”) facing the seven very different annual conferences of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, Bolleter focuses on their common task and motives. Basing his thoughts on Gal. 5:6 (a verse quoted often in German-speaking Methodism), Bolleter affirms, “What motivates and unites us as minority Methodists (in Europe) is our common joy in the gospel. This joy in the gospel is the motor (motive) of our service and mission.”

Bolleter clearly bases the Methodist witness and work in Europe on the commission to joyously spread the message of Jesus held in common by Christians. Implicit in this view is the assumption that no state church can claim unquestionable authorization by God for a monopoly on the gospel message in a particular territory. The work of God goes on in all places. Thus, the church’s response to God’s ubiquitous presence and initiatives becomes a common task of the whole people of God. Through many forms and cultural expressions, the global church bears witness together to God’s new creation dawning through Christ. Bolleter uses foundational statements like these to show how the Balkan Methodist churches have caught the missional vision of common witness in the joy of the gospel.

To highlight the Central Conference’s reformulation of such classic Wesleyan missiological motives, Bolleter reminds us to ask the same question Wesley repeatedly put to his preachers: “What should we teach and preach, and how?” The sheer diversity and instability of the Methodist churches in the Balkans have pushed Bolleter to focus on enduring missional motivations and strategies. Thus, he concludes that Methodism’s contribution to peace and reconciliation in the Balkans will not come through power strategies or
better management. Rather, people and societies will find the energy to align
with the work of reconciliation and peace only through the joy of what God
has done and will do in Christ to liberate and renew all creation—hence the
church's primary commitment to spreading the joy of the gospel.

The church cannot be programmed into becoming an embodiment of
"lived grace" (gelebte Gnade). The only thing disciples can do is to graciously
pass on the gift of love once received. Bolleter bases this thought on
Wesley's sermon "The Causes of Inefficient Christianity," preached shortly
before his death. In this sermon, Wesley argues that clear teaching, order
and unity in connection, and, most important, the attitude that desires to
pass on all good gifts received (justification, sanctification, even money) are
at the heart of a missional church that joins God in renewing society and
reforming "inefficient Christianity." In view of this Wesleyan vision, Bolleter
urges his churches to give priority to the enduring task of joining in God's
renewing mission. He affirms that this joyous calling should shape the
Methodist identity and witness in the region. According to the bishop, in
those places where this missional identity and task are emerging, stronger
emphasis is placed on the content of the gospel in relation to local issues
than on flawless preaching. The bishop urges quite clearly, then, that the key
to the Wesleyan mission in the Central Conference is substance over style.
Indeed, this affirmation is particularly important in the Balkan region, since
the interests of the great powers there have created embargoes, inequities,
and scarcities that place burdens disproportionately on various communi-
ties. Such unequal distribution of goods and services promotes excessive
competition and a tendency to commodify everything, including religion. In
such a context, the church advocates an ethic of giving and serving in a
substantive way for the common good. At the heart of this ethic is a chal-
lenge that runs counter to societies locked in globalization—which rapidly
seek capital investment, information, and the international exchange of
goods and services in markets that benefit a few elite.

Bolleter's vision is a prophetic no to the effects of globalization. He
places The United Methodist Church in the region on the side of the kind
of development God envisions: the reconciliation of people and the
renewal of creation through Christ. His work offers guideposts to all of us
in the Wesleyan connection, regardless of the inequities and instabilities
our churches face or the extent to which our commodifying of the gospel
has created an anemic witness.
Community and Connectionalism

As important as missional motivations are for Methodists in the Balkans, in typical Wesleyan fashion Bolleter urges his churches to translate these motivations into concrete action. In light of the almost catastrophic changes in the region over the past ten years, Bolleter argues, the time has come to rethink the role of Methodism's institutional forms. Thus, Bolleter charges pastors to subordinate ecclesiology to mission. He then highlights a number of historic Wesleyan structures that would, if adapted properly to local conditions, assist in building better community in the fractured, ethnically divided, Balkans. These consist of classic Wesleyan practices such as class meetings, with strong lay leadership and a focus on testimonies and the love feast; common singing; and intercessory prayer. These forms were effective during the Wesleyan revival in spurring Christians on to holiness and so to building community across social divides in highly stratified eighteenth-century Britain. Such "face-to-face" structures help create the kind of identity-forming communities that are crucial in societies where the institutional structures that shape identity are rapidly eroding. Likewise, the development of quarterly and annual conferences contributed greatly to the unity and mission of the Wesleyan movement, not only in Britain but also among the highly multicultural ethnic populations of North America. All these institutional forms arose in response to missional need.

Thus, Bolleter points to connectionalism as a key component of the multicultural mission of Methodists in a European context that is experiencing increasing immigration from the non-Western world. However, the conditions particular to the Balkans (but also present throughout Central and even Western Europe) will promote changes in the institutional forms through which connectionalism is expressed. This is readily seen in the increased power and ecclesiastical independence of the rapidly growing international, immigrant, and predominately English-speaking Methodist churches in the region. Moreover, Bolleter urges the European Central Conferences to continue to adapt the Book of Discipline to accommodate regional issues. (One example of such adaptation is the refusal by European Methodists to adopt the new permanent deacon's order due to the need for continuity in mission and perceived scarcities in leadership.)

Unity does not imply that Methodists need to be uniform about their ecclesiology or mission. As Bolleter rightly observes, except for the redacted images of apostolic community and teaching in Acts 2, there is no normative
form of church mandated in the New Testament. Thus, Bolleter argues for ecclesiastical flexibility in the face of enduring mission. If, in a globalized information age, the church is always “on the way” (a phrase Bolleter uses with echoes of ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda—“the church reformed, always to be reformed”), then the Christian church in mission must be marked as a learning and changing community. In pragmatic terms, this means the church must be open to structural change and a sense that ecclesiastical boundaries are permeable. Bolleter and the Balkan Methodists are learning that, if mission is to be an authentic and enduring reality, then ecclesiology and polity must be shaped by the priorities of mission. This is a historic Wesleyan stance. Yet it remains an important lesson for the Wesleyan connection worldwide, lest we try to pour new wine into old wineskins.

Ecumenical Partnerships

Perhaps no other free church in Europe in the twentieth century has made more attempts at rapprochement with the historic state churches than The United Methodist Church. Following both world wars, Methodists partnered with many other churches in spearheading significant aid programs and resettlement for refugees. The results include the establishment of permanent Methodist work in hospitals and the founding of new churches. More recently, Methodism has played a key role in organizing the second Ecumenical Assembly of the European Council of Churches, held in Graz, Austria, in 1997. Austrian Methodism provided key leadership for this event, which included consultations from major international representatives of European Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Methodist pastors from the Austrian Provisional Annual Conference provided key personnel and financed office space to host the ongoing committees that planned this continent-wide ecumenical meeting. Other promising signs consist of highly coordinated activity between Methodists and the Reformed churches in Poland and Hungary. Attempts at official relations with the Catholic and Orthodox churches—in settings where they are the official state churches—remain difficult. Results range from polite disinterest to active tension, particularly in Macedonia and Bulgaria. There are more opportunities for collaboration at the local level and through informal relationships between pastors and priests, wherever local interests converge and distance from institutional leadership structures allows for more trust to develop. Where either Catholics or the Orthodox churches comprise only a minority and
are not state supported, Methodists find more readiness from these partners for coordinated action.

Despite Methodism's historic stance and record as an ecumenical catalyst in Europe, Bolleter still finds it necessary to remind his Central Conference of the gospel's call for unity. Considering the growing resistance of the Orthodox state churches in the Balkans to the increased militancy and insensitivity of some Protestant groups sweeping through the post-Communist lands, Bolleter will need to press the case for ecumenicity even more vigorously in the future. Methodism will need to continue its ecumenical mission stance, if it wishes to avoid the charge of proselytism, and to continue to play a catalytic role in the Balkans during these difficult days of nation building amid increasing ethnic tension.

While advocating for ecumenism yields important practical benefits, Bolleter seeks to align the common ecumenical task with proactive missional purposes. That is to say, for Bolleter, ecumenical partnerships provide the stimulus and accountability for overcoming the inevitable lethargy that can afflict any church that is closely identified with national culture and citizenship. When a denomination becomes closed off from others, theological vocabularies and church work can become stale and lifeless. An ecumenical partner, says Bolleter, can refresh the church's language and work. Moreover, all parties in the ecumenical relationship will make important new discoveries through common conversations and action. Only in this manner will the joy of the gospel be experienced afresh.25

Humanity amid Death and Destruction

In the last section of his episcopal address, Bolleter raises an important social issue that challenges not only Methodists in Europe but also all Christians in societies that experience rapid transition toward global information and market economies and that are therefore faced with immigration issues and refugee movements. According to Bolleter's report, more than a half-million refugees were set in motion by the Balkan wars and the United Nations embargoes of Serbia during the 1990s. The cumulative effect of the bombing campaign in Yugoslavia to oust Slobodan Milosovic, along with the NATO troop intervention in Kosovo and the resulting ethnic revenge and economic degradation, set in motion masses of refugees seeking safer and more economically hopeful lives. In addition, many parts of Europe (including Russia and Austria) have instituted
tougher laws on religious freedom as a result of immigration and proliferating religious diversity. Taken together, these factors have created exclusionary government policies dangerous to human rights in the economic and religious sphere. Bolleter calls attention to these trends and calls his conference to teach and implement the church's Social Principles afresh—principles that seek to apply our faith to works of concrete love. In other words, Bolleter restates the historic Wesleyan emphasis on "going on to perfection" as a call for individuals and societies to conform to the wholeness God intends through the coming Kingdom.

Bolleter believes that the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe is a test case for the effectiveness of Methodism as a missionary movement. To the degree that these Methodists apply their theological legacy from the margins in often unstable and rapidly changing societies, they offer hope to all Methodists that the mission of the Wesleyan movement around the globe can continue to be vital. Balkan Methodism, in particular, is demonstrating that small, marginal, and overlooked free churches can point to the scandal of grace. Moreover, marginal churches actually have the advantage of demonstrating that God's new creation is not "produced" by wealthy churches or by globalization but rather is discovered by pointing to places where societies need to grow toward God's abundant life for all. Indeed, small, marginal, "irrelevant"—even declining—churches may be effective missionary agents of the message of God's reign, which seeks to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Bolleter and the Methodists of Europe argue that even as Methodists find themselves increasingly marginalized in their cultures, they may very well find themselves again at the center of God's missional calling—and find their true voice and vitality again.

Bolleter's vision is a courageous reformulation of classic Wesleyan theology and polity in light of the missional realities of the Balkans. It is a vision tailored to promote a public witness for churches on the margin, experiencing the uncertainty of rapid social change and violence. Through updating and reapplying Wesleyan principles, the Methodists of Central and Southern Europe have survived for well over one-hundred years. And upon these affirmations they are ready to stake their future. Dare the Wesleyans who live in the volatile and pluralistic cultures of the West also stake their future on a public witness by drawing on such enduring principles? Claiming the joy of the gospel in the midst of pain, the people called
Methodists in the Balkans and in the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe are taking their stand. This reminds us all that, if properly contextualized, Wesleyan theology neither is marginal nor is an antiquated tool merely for mission enthusiasts. Rather, the enduring principles underlying Wesleyan theology drive us again toward the center of the gospel and of our task, namely, to herald "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King." May Methodists all over the world ever join "Heaven and Nature" as we sing together of God's new creation emerging in Christ.

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Endnotes


5. Mojzes, Yugoslavian Inferno, ch. 7.

6. Witte, "Preface," in Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia, xii.

7. In analyzing the political and religious change in the Balkans, I apply aspects of Thomas Friedman's work on globalization. See Thomas L. Friedman, The
**BALKAN METHODISM ON THE MARGINS**

**Witnessing Amid Volatility and Pluralism**


9. Such principles derive from the legacy of Bishop John L. Nuelson’s missional vision as the last American bishop to preside over most of European Methodism, from 1912–1940. Nuelson stressed the need for the Methodist mission throughout Europe to be based on the historic Wesleyan tenets of connectionalism and ecumenicity. As twin foci shape an ellipse, so these two principles, working together in creative tension, have shaped the Methodist stance in Europe since World War I. See W. Harrison Daniel, “To Strengthen the Ties that Bind: Bishop John L. Nuelson and German-American Connectionalism in the Methodist Episcopal Church Mission in Europe, 1912–1940,” *Methodist History* XXXVIII/3 (April 2000).


15. Bolleter reports that he has recently invited more bishops and leaders of other denominations to attend his annual conferences. He notes that he is seeing more response from the Protestant leaders at this time than ever before. On the difficult question of proselytism, Bolleter advocates a moratorium on all Protestant-Orthodox public criticism and insults. During the break in public criticism, Bolleter hopes the various churches will converse with respect and thereby discover deeper appreciation for the unique mission and gifts of each.
Community with the Poor: Pauline Reflections

THEODORE W. JENNINGS, JR.

After years of reflection and engagement, the United Methodist Council of Bishops issued a new document related to its Initiative on Children and Poverty. This new document, titled "Community with Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative," seeks to move the initial discussion forward by concentrating on the question of building community that bridges the great divide between the prosperous and the impoverished—a divide often replicated within United Methodism itself. The new document points to some of the biblical and especially Pauline bases for this work. This biblical reflection is based to a significant degree on the study that I initially prepared for this purpose. I have decided to publish this study here in hopes of offering further biblical foundations for the work of the Initiative on Children and Poverty as it moves into the crucial second phase of its work.

Galatians

Paul referred to the Christian community as the body of Christ; that is, as the way in which the crucified and risen Christ would be tangibly, visibly, and dramatically present in the world. That this body truly be the body of Christ depends, as Paul recalls (Gal. 2:10), on the remembrance of the poor. It is this that demonstrates the continuity of gentile Christianity with the Jewish Christianity of Jerusalem, established by Jesus' first companions. This point is often overlooked in the reading of Galatians; so it is important for us to pay particular attention to what Paul says here. He writes in 2:9-10:

"[A]nd when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles..."
and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we should remember the poor, which was actually what I had been eager to do.” Note that Paul’s account of the first main conference of the apostles differs considerably from the account we have in Acts (15:6-29). In the latter account, a number of conditions for the mission to the Gentiles are laid down, particularly conditions having to do with food and sex (15:20, 29; see also 21:25). But Paul largely ignores the food rules and seems to have his own reasons for worrying about sex. In Paul’s view, the only condition that is binding for the mission to the Gentiles was that the poor should always and everywhere be brought to mind.

In the same passage, Paul goes to great lengths to assure the reader that he knows nothing and wants to know nothing of the traditions concerning the words and deeds of Jesus according to the flesh. It is not, therefore, because of what Jesus said and did that Paul regards the obligation to remember the poor as utterly binding upon the mission to the nations. Rather, remembering the poor is the self-evident basis of any gospel that derives from the God of Israel—the God who, according to the gospel, has come to us in the mission and ministry, the execution and resurrection, of Jesus of Nazareth. The true measure of any divine word and work is not by any of the ways by which we socially or religiously separate ourselves from others but by the way in which God consistently and forever reaches out to the vulnerable and the humiliated.

Thus, Paul, even before he met the executed and risen One, had been committed to this God and so to this way. But now his commitment to the One who never forgets the impoverished, the humiliated, and the violated had taken on even greater clarity and force; as a result, he could now address this claim and call to all nations, regardless of their culture or religion—the claim and call of the God of all nations and religions, the God embodied in the violated and humiliated Jesus.

The condition for the legitimacy of this extension of the call and claim, the promise and blessing, of the God of Israel to all the peoples of the earth is precisely this: remember the poor. For the forgetfulness of the poor is the forgetfulness of God, as the law and the prophets as well as the mission and ministry of Jesus have made inescapably clear.

It is critically important for us to recall, Gentiles that we are, that the legitimacy of the gospel that comes to us, by which we stand, and in and from which we live, depends upon the fulfillment of a single condition.
nearly, that we remember the poor. Apart from the fulfillment of this condition, the mission to the Gentiles (and so to us) is illegitimate and without authenticity, and our faith is in vain.

Of course, we must admit that we have somehow once more found ways to become oblivious to and distract our attention from the plight of the impoverished. We even use our religion to tranquilize our conscience. Marx said that religion was the opiate of the masses. He was wrong. But it is often enough Prozac for the prosperous. For we have somehow persuaded ourselves that it is possible to be faithful followers of Christ while studiously ignoring the plight of the impoverished in our neighborhoods and our nation and on our planet. Can this be anything but illusion and self-deception?

Having accepted the commission and condition to remember the poor, Paul had to find his own way to make it practicable and effective in his ministry. This he did by encouraging gentile congregations to sacrifice their own material resources to enable the Jewish congregation of Jerusalem to continue its own solidarity with the poor of Jerusalem (see 2 Cor. 8–9). For the Jerusalem church, this solidarity meant that everyone pooled their resources in order to make possible distribution to the poor (Acts 2:43–47). By contributing to the collection for the Jerusalem congregation, the gentile congregations could demonstrate not only their heeding of the claim of the God of Israel but also their solidarity with the people of Israel through the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who had responded to the mission of Jesus.

At the time this was a stroke of genius. But, alas, Paul's words have been used ever since by pastors to extract money from their flocks—not for the poor but for the church, not for the hungry but for the pension fund, not for the homeless but for the building of comfortable sanctuaries for the privileged and prosperous. There is nothing that is safe from the depredations of pious deceit. But there is also no deceit that is safe from the incursion of the word of God, from the invasion of the divine Spirit. For God is not mocked, at least not with impunity—and not forever.

Romans

Space does not permit a detailed examination of all the passages in which Paul implores the gentile congregations that he had founded throughout the Eastern part of the Roman Empire to contribute to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. I draw attention to only one such passage—Romans 15. In this chapter, Paul points to the sharing (koinonia) that makes for commu-

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nity among the gentile congregations and between them and the Jewish-Christian congregation in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-27). Material things have become a dramatic expression of solidarity with the poor—not just with the gentile poor but also with the Jewish poor in the Jerusalem community. Let us examine this with a bit more care.

At the conclusion of his letter to those in Rome, Paul explains his reasons for postponing his urgent plans to come to Rome. What would prompt him to postpone the trip? That the visit to Rome is a high priority is clear from the letter. Paul expects the visit to yield mutual encouragement and strengthening, both for him and for the Roman church (Rom. 1:11-12).

Moreover, Rome is the place from where Paul expects to undertake his mission to the Western part of the Empire. Going on to Spain will enable him to plant churches in the region, thus establishing congregations loyal to Jesus throughout the Empire prior to the coming again of Christ (15:22-24).

But Rome is far more than a way station on Paul's journey to Spain and thus to the fulfillment of his commission to plant congregations throughout the Empire among both Greeks and barbarians. Rome is also the seat of the Empire—the place where the justice of the Empire must be confronted with the justice of God and where the One executed as a criminal against the Empire must be shown to be the justice of God in person (1:16-17).

Yet, Paul postpones this visit to Rome in light of something he judges to be even more pressing than his endtime mission in the Empire and more urgent than the demonstration of the divine justice. What exactly is this "something" that is more urgent than mission and church growth and the clarification of the truth of the gospel in the heart of the Empire?

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. So, when I have completed this . . . I will set out by way of you to Spain (Rom. 15:25-28).

At first this must seem terribly mundane—a work of fund raising, perhaps of charity. But what is this compared to the preparation for the coming of Christ or for the demonstration of the justice of God in the city that has condemned God's own son as a criminal?
Let us suppose that Paul knows what he is doing. Why, then, is he going to Jerusalem instead of Rome? He is first going east in order to carry to the Holy City the “sharing” of the congregations in Europe with the saints in Jerusalem.

Paul does this, in large part, to show the solidarity of the gentile congregations that Paul has established with the congregation of Jews in Jerusalem—a congregation led by Jesus’ own followers and family members.

For Paul, the solidarity of Jews and Gentiles is, in itself, an astonishing testimony to the creative justice of God—to the overcoming of the law of hostility. This is the subject of the Apostle’s reflections in Romans 9–11, where he has shown the marvels of God’s grace whereby the gospel goes from the Jews to the Gentiles in order then to return to Israel, so that all may be included in God’s great plan of salvation. And Paul (or one of his companions) will write in Ephesians of the drawing together of those who are “near” and those who are “far off” as the sign of God’s decisive victory over the forces of division and enmity.

As important as all this is, we may go still deeper into Paul’s meaning. For what is the sign or, if you’d like, the sacrament of this extraordinary solidarity? It is what Paul calls “to share . . . with the poor.”

The word used here for “the poor” is πτωχός. It means “the destitute” or “the impoverished.” That is, the word refers to those who lack what is necessary for a human life: the hungry, the naked, the homeless, those whose lives depend on the kindness of strangers. These are the intended beneficiaries of Paul’s return to Jerusalem.

The poor Paul is referring to are those associated with the “saints in Jerusalem.” It is not that these “saints” or “holy ones” are themselves destitute. But they are somehow intimately related to those who are impoverished. Recall the description of the Jerusalem community in the Book of Acts:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need . . . . Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common . . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34-35).
Twice the life of the Jerusalem community is described as the sharing of possessions with the destitute. It is this act that demonstrates that this community has received the spirit of Jesus.

Accordingly, the collection Paul is carrying to Jerusalem is not intended for the building fund or for pastoral support. It is intended to be entrusted to “the holy ones” of Jerusalem to be distributed to the poor to whom they are related in ministry and mission. In this way, Paul’s own congregations connect themselves with the Jerusalem congregation, the Gentiles with the Jews, in practicing a sharing with the poor. Thus, both Jews and Gentiles are united in loyalty to the way of Jesus—a loyalty concretely demonstrated through their common sharing with the destitute. This loyalty demonstrates both the justice of God that exceeds human righteousness and the inbreaking of the divine reign of justice and mercy.

The word Paul uses for this sharing is koionia. It is sometimes translated “community,” “fellowship,” or “sharing.” Indeed, it often refers to that most intimate of sharing: sexual intercourse. What is at stake here is a giving of one’s own being—one’s livelihood, life, and substance—to another. Moreover, this kind of giving is reciprocal; in giving one’s life to another, one finds one’s life in return. It is giving of this form that is the basis of what we sometimes call “fellowship,” “community,” or “companionship.” Koionia with the poor is the dramatic and concrete sign of and testimony to the divine rule over all the earth—its living practice.

This koionia with the poor who are related to the Jerusalem followers of Jesus is based, according to Paul, not simply upon a kind of legal obligation but upon gratitude. It is gratitude, above all, for the way in which the Jerusalem followers of Jesus have shared the gospel with the Gentiles, with those who had seemed to be excluded from the divine favor. The generosity of God in Christ has been the basis of the generosity of the Jerusalem community’s relation to the poor and then to the Gentiles. And the Gentiles have received the gospel of grace with joy and gratitude and so are committed to keeping faith not only with their own poor but also with the poor who are related to the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. Thus we see an ever-expanding circulation of grace, generosity, and gratitude whereby the divine love becomes manifest in the world.

Finally, Paul calls the response of the Gentiles to the poor related to the saints in Jerusalem their liturgy, their worship (Rom. 15:27). The New Revised Standard Version uses the phrase their service; however, the Greek
word here is not diakonia but rather leitourgia, which means liturgy or worship.

The response of gratitude for the gospel that reaches out to build community with the poor is true worship, the authentic liturgy of the gentile Christians. This may at first seem quite extraordinary. But consider that earlier, in Rom. 12:1-2, Paul maintained that "rational" liturgy or worship involves offering one's body as a "living sacrifice" to the other. By body, Paul always has in view that by means of which one is in concrete relationship to the world and to other people. It is the body that makes one visible, touchable, capable of relationship. The body he has in mind here is that of visible and tangible solidarity with others. It is this solidarity that is offered as rational worship, as a liturgy that corresponds to God's way of being in the world. Wesley called this "reasonable religion"—religion that is not superstitious but that corresponds to the truth of the human being as created in the image of God. Like the prophets, who claimed that God wanted not sacrifice but justice and not ritual but generosity to the vulnerable, so here Paul calls the concrete, material assistance to the poor of Jerusalem true worship and authentic liturgy. Like every other form of renewal, the liturgical renewal of the church depends upon the building of community with the poor and the marginalized.

Eucharist

There is an especially striking way in which the question of the relationship between worship and koinonia with the poor comes to expression in Paul. It is found in 1 Corinthians 11, his only extended discussion of the Eucharist. This supremely important passage is familiar to us mostly because in it we find the earliest form of the words of the institution of the sacrament—words that have become the traditional formula of our liturgical life.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

Paul speaks about the eucharistic meal of the community not simply
because it is something the Corinthians should know about. The fact is, they already know about the meal. They regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper together. The reason Paul felt compelled to refer to the Lord’s Supper is because something has gone terribly wrong. To be sure, the Corinthian Christians have the bread and cup and the words of institution and consecration. Yet, the meal that should serve to recall Jesus until his return and so promote the health of the community as the body of Christ has instead become something quite poisonous. Paul issues an ominous warning: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). This is an ominous warning indeed. If one gets the meaning of the Eucharist wrong, it would be as if one were an executioner of Jesus (“answerable for the body and blood of the Lord”) rather that a follower (“who proclaim[s] the Lord's death until he comes” [v. 26]).

What could have brought about this devastating turn of events? There have been many nervous suggestions about the meaning of 11:27: the lack of proper beliefs on the part of the participants, true repentance before partaking, proper liturgical form, proper decorum, or proper relationship to the one true church. But a close reading of 11:17-18 makes the nature of the problem perfectly clear. “When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.”

The issue of divisions in the fractious community at Corinth has been a preoccupation of Paul’s from the beginning of this long letter. Already in 1:10-11, he noted that he had heard that there was dissension and quarreling among them. But at the Lord’s Supper, the divisions have taken a concrete and specific form: “When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. . . . Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (11:21-22). It is to these practices that Paul refers when he asserts that all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves (11:29).

The issue is not that people don’t have the right ideas about the “real presence” of the Lord’s body and blood; the point is rather that, by excluding or humiliating those who have nothing, the church brings upon itself the curse of God—even though it thinks it is doing something that has the blessing of God. What turns the cup of blessing into a curse is not
the wrong theology or the wrong ritual form but the absence of genuine koinonia with the poor.

Now, the Corinthians may well have been perplexed here. For their way of coming together to share a meal in honor of their Lord was self-evident to them. They simply took over the form of eating and drinking together that was common in the Greco-Roman world.

In his Fifth Satire, the Roman satirist Juvenal, writing within a few years of Paul, describes a typical patronage banquet. A great patron invites all his clients to a banquet and serves them a meal. But a clear demarcation is made during the meal: the privileged eat and drink both heartily and well, while the poorer clients receive bones and crumbs and rot-gut—if they're lucky. The banquet serves to mirror the class stratifications and divisions of Greco-Roman society. The point of the satire is to warn the less-well-off not to expose themselves to the humiliations of this display of class consciousness.

The Corinthians may not be indulging in the kinds of excesses to which Juvenal refers. But they are in their own way mirroring the class divisions of their society in a manner that underlines the relative prosperity of those who have food and wine and the humiliation of the indigent. Some display their prosperity, while others are left with the dregs of their impoverishment: "one goes hungry and another becomes drunk" thus shows contempt for the church of God and humiliates those who have nothing (11:22).

It is because the supper of the Lord represents and reflects the divisions of the world that it becomes a source not of blessing but of curse for those who participate in it. For, as Paul had noted earlier, the bread and wine are a sharing—a koinonia—in Christ's body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16-17). They are a sharing in Jesus' fate at the hands of those who erected and enforced the structures of separation and division. But now the sharing in the blood of the Lord had become a form of solidarity not with him but with the powers that rejected and executed him.

Paul then points to the experience of the community itself to verify his point: "For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (11:30). What should be an anticipation of resurrection life has instead become a participation in the powers of death. Instead of being strengthened, the community is being weakened by its very manner of coming together to worship.

This is a potent parable of the situation of the church we love. Many have remarked upon the loss of vitality in mainline churches, not least in
The United Methodist Church. Can we not say of our own congregations, "Many of you are weak and ill, and some of you have died"? To what extent is this the result of the fact that the church's life has come to mirror the class and race divisions of our own society? To what extent is this because the prosperous separate themselves from the impoverished? Indeed, whole congregations—many of them large—simply exclude the impoverished and marginalized by the display of respectable prosperity in temple and liturgy and program.

And if our coming together separates us from those who are most vulnerable—from those who are impoverished and marginalized—then does it not also separate us from the one we call Lord? And does it not thus separate the body of Christ from its only true source of life? When this happens, is it not true that in our worship we enter into solidarity not with the way of Jesus and the One he called "Abba" but with the principalities and powers, the pillars of the world that are passing away?

In the theology of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the church is defined as a "eucharistic fellowship." It is precisely in and through the liturgy of the Eucharist that the church as the body of Christ is made visible and comes into being.

One of the foremost theologians of the Greek Orthodox Church is John Zizioulas, a bishop of a small parish in Turkey and one of the most important trinitarian theologians in the world today. Zizioulas's contribution to trinitarian theology is to work out in a brilliant way the understanding of the Godhead as constituted of "persons in relationship." For the Christian, God is not simply a single being, not even a "personal being," but rather a fellowship—a communion of persons enacting mutual love. Indeed, in this view, the very meaning of the term person is "mutual relationship," "communion," or "koinonia."

This communion of persons is the ground of the divine love that reaches out to the world to create and redeem and ultimately to include the world in the personal communion of love. That God be all in all means that the whole of creation will be brought into the matrix of the divine koinonia of persons in relationships of mutual self-giving.

For Zizioulas, the church exists as an anticipation in the midst of this world of the divine goal of all-inclusive koinonia and so as an anticipation of the goal of creation and recreation. The church is this anticipation whenever it draws together distinct peoples into one communion in memory of
Jesus and in anticipation of the consummation of the divine goal made manifest in Jesus.

Zizioulas concludes that the very being of the church is dependent upon its inclusivity—its bringing together people of different races, classes, and nations to constitute a single koinonia of diverse persons and peoples in relationships of mutual self-giving. This means that wherever the "church" meets as a gathering of a single race or class or national or cultural identity or generation, we have a reflection not of the divine goal but of the divided world that is passing away. These groups or congregations may celebrate what they call "Eucharist," or the "Lord's Supper" or "Communion," but they do so in a way that essentially rejects the action of God in Christ, repudiates the life of the Trinity, and refuses the goal of the divine consummation.5

This is a profound indictment of the way in which most of our congregations constitute themselves. By separating ourselves from persons of different races, cultures, and classes, we fracture the body of Christ. Consequently, our eucharistic celebration becomes a kind of fun house mirror, reflecting and even distorting the divisions of our society and the world that are passing away rather than reflecting the world that by God's providence is coming into being.

The call, then, to establish community with the poor is urgent if our churches are to be constituted as authentic manifestations and celebrations of the work of God in Christ. The authenticity of our trinitarian confession and our eucharistic practice depends upon this koinonia with the poor.

This was certainly evident to John Wesley. Wesley could no more imagine a week without being in the homes of the poor than he could a week without participation in the Eucharist.6 And he often inquired of those he hoped were sanctified whether they had an inward experience of the triune God. These strong emphases of Wesley's theology have coherence that is only now beginning to emerge with full clarity.

Conclusion
In Eph. 2:11-22, Paul refers to the astonishing community of those who are "near" and those who are "far off" as itself the sign of Christ's victory over the world of domination, division, and death.

In our own world, a similarly dramatic testimony to the victory of the risen Christ is called for. We need a community that transcends divisions of race and class and constitutes a koinonia, or sharing, of life among those
who are otherwise separated from one another by social, economic, and ideological barriers. It is for such a sign that the world waits, mired as it is in hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.

In a world constituted by division, in which the gap between rich and poor widens like a yawning chasm and the impoverished majority of the earth becomes invisible to the prosperous, it is the church that is called to be the visible and tangible presence of the victory of Christ over the powers of domination, division, and death.

This we may yet be, by the power of God through the Spirit of Christ, if we seek obediently and humbly to build community with and among the poor. This will never be easy, for we struggle here against the principalities and powers that seek to rule this planet. And these powers are not only external but also within our hearts as ignorance and fearfulness of the other, the one who is different from ourselves. Yet with God, who raised Jesus from the dead, all things are possible (Mark 10:27).

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Endnotes

1. An earlier essay, "Children and the Poor: Toward the Spiritual Renewal of the United Methodist Church" (Quarterly Review 18/4 [Winter 1998]: 311-34) served a similar function in regard to the "Foundation Document" with which the Council of Bishops launched their Initiative.
2. The most extensive treatment in Paul's letters is in 2 Corinthians 8-9, but we may also have reference to this in Phil. 4:15.
5. Ibid., 253-60.
The so-called "Quadrilateral" of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience is a dead letter in The United Methodist Church. To be sure, there is continued debate about its history and status. Also, folk pay lip service to it, say, in working their way through the ordination process. But as a normative theological proposal, the life has gone out of it. It exists as a hangover from the sixties, and it won't long survive the transitions we must currently negotiate.

It is important to recall exactly how the thesis originally functioned. At one level, it was a historical hypothesis to explain John Wesley's position on the authority of Scripture and on our knowledge of God. At another level, it was a normative vision of these matters for today that had to be accepted if one aspired to be a United Methodist. Its chief architect was the inimitable Albert Outler, a theologian of prodigious wit, who hammered it home in season and out of season with extraordinary rhetoric.

According to "Our Theological Task" in the Book of Discipline, the Quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience constitutes the "criteria" as well as the "sources" guiding United Methodist theological reflection. In the paragraphs that follow, I wish to explore whether this expression of theological method has in the past and can in the future adequately assist us in giving a faithful account of Wesleyan theological identity.

This identity cannot be separated from the issue of the church's mission in the world. The church is specifically admonished that "the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason." It is important to note immediately that there is no small amount of confusion about how this interplay among four distinct criteria works in practice. Perhaps a word of concern is in order with regard to how reason is understood to
ical skill and intellectual panache. Outler was a brilliant historian but a dilettante in philosophy. Despite his vast learning, he had no real feel for issues in theory of knowledge, and this shows up dramatically in the original version of the thesis. Hence he completely missed the extent to which Wesley was a medieval figure in his treatment of Scripture. For Wesley, Scripture mattered because it mediated divine revelation; and, like Aquinas, he was more than ready to come to the aid of revelation with sundry appeals to the tradition of the church, philosophical arguments of one sort or another, and experience—religious and otherwise. This, of course, looks like the Quadrilateral; but the resemblance is entirely superficial. Outler misread both the content—involving as it does an appeal to revelation—and the structure—involving as it does a keen sense of the utter sufficiency of revelation on its own.

The situation is worse once we move to the normative commitment to the Quadrilateral for today. Here, Outler operated with a kind of "flat-earth" vision of theory of knowledge. He was not interested in the real issues that have to be pursued; and he simply ignored the questions about meaning, justification, warrant, knowledge, and the like that erupted in the 1960s and have been pursued with extraordinary flair over the past thirty years. Insofar as people have been captivated by the Quadrilateral, they have either been tone deaf to the literature in the field or have lived in a state of tenacious denial. Both the Reformed and the Anglican traditions have been extraordinarily creative and fecund in the arena, while United Methodist theologians have been smugly ignorant and self-confident. In these circumstances, to insist on commitment to the Quadrilateral as a badge of United Methodist theological identity is to commit intellectual suicide.

No doubt what I've said thus far will come across as unduly harsh and polemical. One has to resort to such language, however, for a very good reason. Commitment to the Quadrilateral has been as much political as theological. Outler was, in fact, a shrewd politician who knew exactly what he was doing when he managed to get General Conference to sign on. Here one cannot but sympathize with him. By the early 1970s, The United Methodist Church was a ragbag of parties and caucuses, held together by the pension fund and the sinews of the connection as a whole. It had lost faith in its own canonical doctrines as given in the Book of Discipline, and it was in great danger of falling into division. The Quadrilateral was one way
to hold it together. In this regard one cannot but be grateful to Providence for Outler and his work. In their own way, liberals and conservatives, special interest groups and mainstream old-timers, radicals and orthodox, all could climb on board by settling into their favored compartment on the train. They could all find a place somewhere in Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, simply because any and every theological argument can, with little ingenuity, be located somewhere within these domains. The Quadrilateral was a political godsend in securing unity.

This is one reason why the most recent and best defense of the Quadrilateral—*Wesley and the Quadrilateral*—is so inadequate. Nowhere in this book do we find any effort to deal with the specific arguments that have been mounted against it. Instead, we are offered an essentially political argument that identifies two extremes: the work of William Abraham and John B. Cobb, Jr. Then, to get us away from these extremists, we are given a rehash of the Quadrilateral as the middle way ahead. Frankly, this sort of move stalls the conversation. Moreover, geometrical analogies are misleading; their use threatens to turn the debate into one of identity and politics. We need serious engagement with objections and alternatives.

To write in this manner is to invoke some of the code words of postmodernism. Yet, we must be careful. The Quadrilateral can relatively easily be accommodated to postmodernism in at least two ways. First, it eschews the appeal to any kind of absolutely certain foundations. Indeed, there is no single foundation to theology; every claim is best supported by a plurality of warrants and sources. Second, references to identity and power can be absorbed under the rubrics of experience, for claims about identity and power relations are essentially appeals to experience. Hence, there is every reason to believe that postmodern United Methodists can rework the Quadrilateral without undue intellectual stress. Of course, postmodernism covers a multitude of complex claims; so, how far every version of postmodernism can be accommodated can be decided only on a case-by-case basis.

Happily, this is not an issue that need be resolved here, for in its own way postmodernism is but one more chapter in a narrative that has long bedeviled Christian theology. Postmodernists and Quadrilateralists share the same intellectual pedigree. Their primary aim is to develop some vision of truth, justification, knowledge, warrant, and the like. To be sure, Quadrilateralists tend to be boring and prosaic, while postmodernists tend to be exotic and exciting; yet both are obsessed with finding an appropriate episte-
mological vision and putting it to work to express the faith of the church. In my view, we need to turn all this on its head. We are first and foremost committed to the gospel and to the canonical faith of the church; the rest is midrash, or contingently appropriate interpretation, or apologetics.

To speak of the "canonical heritage" of the church is to coin a new phrase. What is at stake here is the public, official commitments of the church on such matters as Scripture, doctrine, icons, sacraments, oversight, saints, teachers, and the like. Thus, in the early church there was not just a canon of Scripture but also a canon of doctrine, of saints, of icons, and more. These were not items in some esoteric theory of knowledge. Rather, they functioned in the hands of spiritual directors to bring folk into a robust, living relationship with God. Equally, early Methodism, in becoming a church, worked through its own commitments on such canonical questions. Hence we have the Scriptures, The Articles of Religion, The Confession of Faith, the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, a selection of Wesley's sermons, episcopacy, and the like. There was indeed a drive to develop a theory of knowledge. But it was not the Quadrilateral; it was underdeveloped compared to what might have been, and it was held in check by soteriological concerns.

Coming to terms with this radical reversal is critical for the future of The United Methodist Church. The challenge before us is this: As we come to terms with a world of terrorism, will United Methodists be prepared to die for the great doctrines of the faith? Will they lay down their lives rather than recant the great teachings of the church as given, say, in the Nicene Creed and enshrined in good Protestant fashion in our Articles of Religion and our Confession of Faith (Book of Discipline, ¶ 103)? We can surely hope that the answer to these questions will be in the affirmative. It is, however, intellectual and spiritual madness to ask us to die for the Quadrilateral or even for the very best insights that may emerge from postmodernism.

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Endnotes
function. The wording of the Discipline potentially produces confusion when reason is defined both as a "source" and a "resource." The entire subsection on reason describes its role and function as resource but then closes with the declaration, "These four sources—each making distinctive contributions, yet all finally working together—guide our quest as United Methodists for a vital and appropriate Christian witness." If reason is a source with a potentially distinctive contribution to make, then the potential exists that reason will produce a set of theological alternatives to those that have previously been set out in Scripture and tradition. In this manner, reason functions potentially both as source and resource.

That reason is functioning as both source and resource for the church at the beginning of this new millennium is a given. But, as a historian of doctrine, I wish to indicate that this dual use of reason is not Wesleyan: Wesley would not have used reason in this manner. Under the initial leadership of the late Albert Outler, we have since 1972 tended to attach the modifier Wesleyan to the term quadrilateral. Wesley had a very high opinion of reason, but he also set severe restrictions on reason's abilities. Since 1972, our theological landscape has changed as well; and we are no longer naively confident in reason's "pure" function. We are highly sensitive to the reality that each individual and group that engages in the reasoning process is socially, culturally, economically, and theologically located in very specific ways. This reality should preclude easy inclinations to follow the fanfare around, staking out theological positions for which only tenuous scriptural support can be found and for which there is little credible historic theological tradition.

In the theological school where I work, classes are populated by some brilliant students. One of my teaching methods is to assign imaginative tasks with differing sets of criteria, one of which is to stake out a position based solely on collective or individual experience. Obviously, reason and rational processing are necessary. I am continually amazed at what students conjure in such imaginative activities. One of the restrictions placed upon them is that they are not allowed to consciously use any identifiable scriptural or historic Christian truth claims or assumptions. The rest of the class is assigned the task of keeping the group honest in this regard. The point of the exercise is to gain insight into what the church might call "the secular mind," which is consciously unaware of any Christian theolog-
ical assumptions. Typically, the group decides that it would be schizo­
phrenic if they could consistently succeed in such an endeavor; but they
also see that they can go a very long way in this direction by consciously
marginalizing or playing down the roles of Scripture and tradition.

The groups who engage in this exercise invariably conclude that they
have in fact quite often paid much less attention to Scripture and tradition
than to reason and experience in the practical and functional ways they
theologize. It is a path of lesser resistance to follow the roads of experien­
tial autonomy and individual reason than to do the hard historical and
exegetical work, so that there will truly be multiple, full-fledged conversa­
tion partners in defining our theological identity and mission in and to the
world.

As a theologian of the church with special interests in our Wesleyan
heritage, I am often asked about the viability of the Quadrilateral. Can it
still work for us? Has it ever worked for us as a church? It has worked for us
in the past; and, for the most part, the interplay between Scripture, tradi­
tion, reason, and experience has served us well. When the results have
been less than desirable, it usually has been because we divided the four
into two pairs: Scripture-tradition and reason-experience, typically playing
off one pair against the other. This quickly and easily can become prejudi­
cial when Scripture-tradition are relegated to "the past" and reason-experi­
ence are interpreted as contemporary and relevant. The patent falsity of
this juxtaposition is revealed by the recognition that none of us can actu­
ally separate ourselves from our past; indeed, much less can the church
separate itself from the past without engaging in the degrees of schizo­
phrenia described by my students.

In a sense, the situation is quite simple and straightforward: Scripture,
tradition, reason, and experience are what we have at our disposal to fulfill
the church's task in the world. It is not a question of whether but how we
will utilize them. Perhaps my best statement of the "how" is one I helped
formulate several years ago:

Tradition, reason, and experience form an interpretive or hermeneutical spiral
in which the dialogical relationship among all the components continually
enables the church to understand and apply Scripture more accurately and
effectively. We understand the interrelationship among these four components
to be "quadrilogical"—all are in conversation with each other.
Key to this affirmation is the assertion that three of the components—reason, tradition, and experience—are utilized in faithful explication and application of one—Scripture. This entails an assumption not easily accepted in all quarters, namely, that the Christian Scriptures are our normative canonical accounts of God's self-disclosure in the world. Simply put, God's self-disclosure is revelation, and this revelation is normative.

This absolutely essential emphasis on revelation fundamentally contradicts the ambiguity we mentioned previously—the conflicted language in the Discipline that asserts that reason be both a "source" and a "resource." We cannot have it both ways. If Scripture is a normative account of God's self-revelation, then reason can be a resource for us in the art of interpretation of what this revelation is and means. But the moment reason is seen also as a source of revelation, the danger is imminent that Scripture is no longer normative. The same can be said for experience and tradition. The moment any of these three becomes a normative source for revelation that is not accountable to Scripture, then we have a theological "free-for-all"; and we have seen a few of those in quadrennial gatherings. Unfortunately, it seems the language of the Discipline in the paragraphs explaining the Quadrilateral was the work of a committee: some wanted "source" and some "resource"—and so we got both. The clarifying paragraphs only served to muddy the water. The best words are the most concise words: "The living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture..." None of the other three (tradition, reason, experience) is given revelatory status—not should they be!

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Endnotes
2. Ibid., 77.
3. Ibid., 82.
4. See the essay by Rebekah Miles in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation, ed. by W. Stephen Gunter, et.al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 77-106. See especially our Conclusion, 129-42.
5. Ibid., 142.
Experiencing God’s Spirit in the Psalms

KATHLEEN A. FARMER

In the Septuagint (an early Greek translation of the Old Testament) the word Pentecost is used to describe the Israelite Feast of Weeks (Shavuot)—so named because it was celebrated seven weeks after Passover. This was a time when the people of God were called upon to rejoice in the first fruits of the harvest and to remember when God gave the Torah to Israel (perhaps as a part of the first fruits of God’s plans for humankind). In the Christian tradition, Pentecost has traditionally been thought of as the beginning of a new season, a time for the church to celebrate its empowerment through the Spirit to continue the work of Christ in the world. Each of the psalms suggested for use during this “season” of Pentecost celebrates one or more ways in which the people of God have experienced God’s power as a present and active agent in the world in which they live.

May 19, 2002—Day of Pentecost
Ps. 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; 1 Cor. 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

This portion of Psalm 104 celebrates the power of the breath (or spirit) of God. The lection begins with an exclamation of wonder addressed to God. In effect, the psalmist says to God, “Wow! You’ve made an almost unbelievable number of creatures!” (v. 24). The following verses elaborate on this remarkable fact, mentioning only a few of the innumerable things that depend upon God for their sustenance, indeed for their very being (vv. 25-30). The key theological statement is made in vv. 29-30, when the psalmist reminds us that the LORD has the power to breathe life into anything and everything. Breath is essential to life (Gen. 6:17); and nothing continues to live unless the breath of God is continually breathed into it.
The suggested reading divides naturally into three units of speech:

• In vv. 24-30, the psalmist speaks directly to God ("you have made . . ."); "you open your hand . . ."; "you hide your face . . ."; etc.

• In vv. 31-32, the psalmist makes statements about God rather than to God.

• In vv. 33-35, the psalmist speaks in the first person ("I will sing . . ."); "my meditation . . ."), dedicating this psalm ("meditation") to the LORD.

The lectionary suggests removing the first two lines of v. 35 from the reading, but this bit of censorship seems awkward and unnecessary. The psalmist's wish to see "the wicked" disappear from the face of the earth is one among many ways to describe the life-and-death-dealing power of God's spirit in the realm of human history, as well as in the natural realm.

In the earlier parts of the psalm (not included in this reading) the psalmist uses remarkable metaphors to praise the actions of God in creating and maintaining the world we know today. The speaker says God stretches out the heavens like a "tarp" or "tent" (v. 2); harnesses the winds, the clouds, and the storms (vv. 3-4); makes the earth solid and dependable (v. 5); and keeps the chaotic waters of "the deep" dammed up (vv. 6-9), so that the waters that once threatened to cover the earth now flow as springs and streams that sustain all sorts of wild creatures (vv. 10-13). Instead of relegating God's actions in creation to the past (as modern readers are inclined to do), the psalmist celebrates God's continuous, ever-present creative activity in the world. Thus, in vv. 14-23, the psalmist lists a number of the ways in which God continues to provide food (or at least the means to acquire food) in a timely fashion for animals and humans alike.

In the reading for Pentecost, the psalmist moves from celebrating the many land animals created and sustained by God (vv. 14-23) to considering the many and sometimes mysterious creatures of the sea (vv. 25-26). The psalmist marvels over the denizens of the deep, saying that the sea teems with life, including innumerable "creeping things" and sea monsters (see Gen. 1:20-21). In the popular mythology of the world from which Israel emerged, Leviathan was the name of one of the chaotic aquatic forces that opposed the ordering of creation by the Creator. Here, in Ps. 104:26, Leviathan is reduced to nothing more than one of the creatures the LORD "formed" (the same word is used in Gen. 2:7) to frolic in the sea. The sea also provides a surface for human ships to sail on from port to port; so ships are listed among the many things that all look to God to keep them alive (vv. 26-30). "These all" in v. 27
probably refers back to everything mentioned from vv. 10-26.

In vv. 29-30, the Hebrew word ruach is used twice, but the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates ruach in v. 29 as "breath" and in v. 30 as "spirit." While the literal sense of ruach is "wind" or "breath," modern translators often render the word as "spirit" when it is used with God as the subject. However, there seems to be no real justification for translating the same word differently in these two verses (note Ps. 33:6). When God takes away the creature's ruach, the creature dies. When God sends forth God's own ruach, the creature is created. The psalmist here seems to reflect the same understanding of the connection between "breath" and "life" as that found in the Yahwistic creation accounts in Genesis (see Gen. 2:7; 6:17). The psalmist expects the dead to return to the "dust" from which they came and thus to "renew the face of the ground" (using the same Hebrew words as Gen. 3:19). The "ground" in v. 30 is the substance from which human and other creatures were created (Gen. 2:7, 19) and to which they return at death (Gen. 3:19). The power of God's breath/spirit is the point of the psalmist's praise. If the phrase "these all" in v. 27 refers back to all of the creatures named in the preceding verses, including humankind, then the psalmist claims that we also are nothing but "dust" unless God breathes upon us.

The psalm draws to a close with the speaker's wish that the LORD will derive as much pleasure from this "meditation" (meaning the preceding 33 verses) as the psalmist derives from worshipping the Creator of all. The psalm concludes as it began, with "Bless the LORD, O my soul." In modern Bibles, Psalm 104 seems to end with the phrase "Praise the LORD" (hallelu-yah in Hebrew). But this probably should be taken as the beginning of Psalm 105, which also ends with the identical phrase. "Soul" is the traditional translation of the Hebrew word nefesh—meaning a "living being," a "whole person." It seems particularly appropriate for the psalmist to use nefesh in this context, since the creation stories upon which this meditation draws so heavily frequently use the word to describe both animals (Gen. 1:20, 24, 30; 2:19; 9:12, 15, 16) and people (Gen. 2:7). But the word is also often used to mean "oneself" (as a paraphrase for a personal pronoun, e.g., Job 9:21), and this is probably the way it is used here in v. 1 and v. 35. In a public act of worship, the speaker would have asked others to join in this act of praise. Since this is a meditation (a private act of worship), the speaker calls upon his or her own self ("soul") to bless the LORD.
Psalm 8 celebrates what it means to believe that all human beings are created "in God's image." The affirmation that God created humankind (including both the male and female aspects of humanity) in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) has more to do with function than looks. In the ancient Near East, an image was a portable way of representing the presence and authority of a ruler in all of the far-flung corners of the realm. Images were meant to represent the ruler's interests—to see that the ruler's wishes were carried out in the ruler's absence. Thus, being created to function as "images" of God means (as the speakers in Gen. 1:26 and Ps. 8:6 assert) that humans are created to have "dominion" over the rest of God's realm (Gen. 1:26; Ps. 8:6). In theory (though often not in practice), dominion was understood (in the psalmist's world) to involve taking responsibility for the well-being of all subjects in the realm. Although we know that human beings have often abused their God-given authority—taking it as permission to exploit rather than foster the health and wholeness of their fellow creatures—the psalmist reminds us that God's trust in our innate abilities is both breathtaking and mind boggling. Psalm 8 implies that God's ability to delegate authority is a sign of God's power and that God's willingness to delegate responsibility is a reflection of God's nature.

A comparison of several translations of Psalm 8 demonstrates the degree to which modern interpreters still have to guess at the meanings of many Hebrew words and phrases. Many of the technical, musical, or liturgical terms used in the headings of the psalms must be left untranslated. The scholars' best-educated guess is that the phrase "according to The Gittith" refers either to a type of musical instrument or to the melody to which the psalm was to be sung.

While Psalm 8 begins and ends with the same phrase (as did Psalm 104), there is no universally accepted way to translate the words used by the psalmist to address God. The NRSV translates God's personal name (YHWH) as "LORD" (all uppercase letters) and turns the honorific term 'adonai into "Sovereign." There is also a great deal of uncertainty about how to translate portions of the second verse. What use does the LORD make of the mouths/lips of babes/children and infants? The King James Version (KJV) says God "ordained strength"; the New International Version (NIV)
prefers "ordained praise"; and the NRSV says God "founded a bulwark." The word bulwark conjures up images of defensive walls or ramparts meant to protect those inside from the "foes" mentioned in the next line. However, all of the translations convey a similar concept: the psalmist is amazed to think that God can use the weakest of creatures (infants) to accomplish God's own purposes (i.e., "to silence the enemy").

Psalm 8 starts out much like Ps. 104:24 did, with an exclamation of wonder addressed directly to the LORD. The psalmist says (in effect), "Wow! Your name is so majestic!" The name of God is probably used here (as in later tradition) as a figure of speech, representing the manifestation of God's self or God's nature in human experience. Still using a direct form of address ("you have," "your heavens," "your fingers," etc.), the speaker begins to elaborate on what it is that seems most impressive about the LORD's name or nature. Given the fact that many parts of God's creation are so much larger, more magnificent, and more durable than we are, we have to find it truly amazing to think that God would pay particular attention to us (vv. 3-4). Even more amazing is God's willingness to allow such fragile and imperfect creatures as we humans to have "dominion" over all of the rest of God's precious creatures (vv. 5-8).

The NRSV correctly recognizes that the Hebrew words used in 8:4 to refer to humankind are collective nouns (singular in form but generic plural in meaning, like the English word people). Thus 'emosh (meaning "humanity," with an emphasis on the fragility and limited lifespan of the human species) is translated "human beings" (as opposed to the NIV's "man"). The term ben 'adam (meaning "descendants of humankind," using 'adam with the same meaning as in Gen 1:26-27) is correctly translated "mortals" (as opposed to NIV's "son of man"). The NIV leaves the unwary reader with the unwarranted impression that the psalmist thinks only one individual has been given glory, honor, and dominion (not humankind in general). Since so much of the language and conceptual imagery in Psalm 8 resonate with the creation account in Genesis 1, it is difficult to support the individualized interpretation. Furthermore, readers of the Hebrew texts know that the term ben 'adam is frequently used in Hebrew as an idiom meaning "mortal" or "member of the human species" (as throughout the book of Ezekiel, whenever Ezekiel is addressed by God). When an almost identical phrase is used in Ps. 144:3, it is clear that the mortality (the short lifespan) of humankind is the subject of the discussion.
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While two different Hebrew words lie behind dominion in Gen. 1:26 and Ps. 8:6, they are virtually synonymous. To have dominion means both to have authority over and responsibility for the well-being of all parts of a ruler’s domain. Thus, while v. 5 invites us to enjoy the favored position we occupy in God’s created order (“crowned ... with glory and honor” and only “a little lower than God”), vv. 6-8 remind us of the responsibility that comes with this advanced placement. We are chosen, not for privilege but for service.

June 2, 2002—Second Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 46; Gen. 6:11-22; 7:24; 8:14-19; Rom. 1:16-17; 3:22b-28; Matt. 7:21-29

This psalm celebrates the power of God’s presence in our midst. The psalmist asserts that God is our most dependable source of security and stability in troublesome times. Whatever it is that disturbs our peace—whether it is the chaotic powers of nature (46:2-3) or the hostile forces of humankind (46:6)—God’s presence has the power to cast out fear.

The heading “Of the Korahites” occurs in Psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85 and 87-88. In the period of Israel’s wilderness wanderings, a man named Korah was said to be one of the descendants of Levi who perished in an attempt to seek priestly equality with the descendants of Aaron (Num. 16:31-35). Numbers 26:11 says “the sons of Korah” survived this wilderness experience, and in a much later period the Korahites were said to have led Israel’s armies to victory with their singing (2 Chron. 20:18-22). In Hebrew ‘alamoth means “young women”; so the phrase “According to Alamoth” may mean that the psalm was meant to be sung by soprano voices or to a tune known by that name.

Psalm 46 divides easily into three poetic units, each ending with selah (w. 1-3, 4-7, 8-11). The term selah is used 71 times in the Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, but the meaning of the word is not known. It seems to function as a liturgical direction and may indicate that a musical interlude or a response from the congregation is expected. Also, the second and third poetic units end with the phrase “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (w. 7, 11), which might be taken as the content of the congregation’s response. In the NRSV the word refuge seems to appear also in v. 1; but the Hebrew word used in v. 1 is not the same as the word used in vv. 7 and 11. While the terms are roughly synonymous, the word used in v. 1 connotes the type of shelter one might seek from rain, wind, or
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... sun, while the word used in vv. 7 and 11 suggests a place that is safe from enemy assault because it is inaccessibly high. Both are frequently used in the Hebrew Scriptures as metaphors for God's protection. Martin Luther's musical adaptation of Psalm 46 has been translated into English as "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

In v. 1, the psalmist sets out the statement of confidence on which the rest of the poetic confession is based: God is with us ("a very present help") in times of trouble. The verses that follow draw a conclusion: Since God is with us, we will not be afraid even when the world as we have known it seems to be turned upside down. Two different types of troubles are directly mentioned: natural disasters (vv. 2-3) and political chaos (vv. 6-9). The "sea" and the "waters" in vv. 2-3 may be understood as cosmic as well as natural forces. In the common beliefs of ancient Near Eastern peoples, sea and waters were chaotic powers that the creator of the known world had to subdue before the current, well-ordered universe could be brought into being. The reference in v. 9 to war and its usual weapons of destruction may lead us to conclude that the political "uproar" mentioned in v. 6 involved outright warfare.

The "city of God" (vv. 4-5) stands in between these two types of trouble as an oasis of stability in the midst of tottering mountains and kingdoms. The city mentioned here has sometimes been equated with Zion or Jerusalem, although neither name is actually used in the text. There are a number of echoes between this psalm and Isaiah 7. When the prophet advises King Ahaz to trust God to neutralize the enemies who threaten Judah, he uses similar but not identical terms ("be quiet, do not fear" [Isa. 7:4]). Isaiah refers to Immanuel, meaning "God-with-us," while the psalmist says the "LORD of Hosts" is "with us" (46:7, 11). However, even if the psalm originally grew out of the crises reflected in Isaiah 7 or Isaiah 36-37, the repeated use of "earth" (vv. 2, 6, 8, 9, 10) suggests that the psalmist has moved away from the idea that God's "holy habitation" (v. 4) was fixed in one geographical location.

In the Hebrew text, there is a clear parallel between what happens in the realms of nature and politics and a clear contrast of these with what happens in God's domain. The same Hebrew word is used three times to describe what happens to the mountains (v. 2) and to the kingdoms (v. 6), in contrast to what does not happen in the city of God (v. 5). This repetition is obscured by the NRSV translation (which uses "shake" in v. 2, "totter"
in v. 6, and "moved" in v. 5). In the original language of the psalm, there is a stark and obvious contrast between the instability of earthly powers and the immovability of the divine realm. Similarly, the Hebrew word used in v. 3 to describe the sound of the rebellious waters (NRSV "roar") is the same word used in v. 6 to describe the sound of the rebellious nations (NRSV "uproar"). Both "roars" are shown to be relatively feeble, when the mere sound of the LORD'S voice causes the earth to melt (v. 6).

While this psalm is clearly a confession of the congregation’s confidence in God’s ability to create order in the midst of disorder, it may be helpful to point out to our own congregations what the psalm does and does not say. It does not say that we will escape unharmed from all chaotic situations. It does say that we will not be overly anxious in such settings. It does not say that God is on our side. It does say that God is "with us" wherever we are.

The song does not assume that the faithful will avoid all disruption and pain in their lives. Rather, the psalmist advises us to cease our frantic attempts to guarantee our own safety. In v. 10, the LORD who can calm the raging waters and put an end to war speaks directly to us. God comes to us in the midst of our anxious search for security and tells us, Be still! Relax "and know that I am God!" To know that God is God means to know who has the power to create order out of disorder—and who does not.

June 9, 2002—Third Sunday after Pentecost
Ps. 33:1-12; Gen. 12:1-9; Rom. 4:13-25; Matt. 9:9-13, 18-26

On this occasion, the psalmist urges the congregation to celebrate the trustworthy power of God’s word. The meaning of the Hebrew term dabar (translated "word") includes both word (verbal utterance) and deed, or actions, as well as the plans or intentions that guide them. The psalmist reminds us that God’s powerful word called the universe into being (vv. 6-9) and that God’s powerful "counsel" (advice/intention) continues to guide human history (vv. 10-12). God’s activity in creation is the foundation for God’s role in human history. However, it is the part God plays in human affairs that provides the focal point for the psalmist’s praise. Verses 10-11 contain the pivotal contrast between the undependable, changeable nature of human plans, on the one hand, and the wholly dependable, totally durable plans of God, on the other.

The lectionary suggests reading only the first two poetic units of the
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psalm (vv. 1-7 and vv. 8-12). However, the section left out by the lectionary’s cutting contains information that is essential for understanding what kinds of human plans are sure to be frustrated by God’s overriding plans. Verses 16-17 make it clear that the psalmist is thinking about the kind of human counsel that leads a nation to depend on military forces for security rather than on the “steadfast love” of the Lord. Leaving out the final section disguises the importance of the word translated “steadfast love,” which occurs in vv. 18 and 22, as well as in v. 5. The fact that “the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord” (v. 5) is the basis for the psalmist’s confidence in the ultimate reliability of God’s help in life-threatening situations (vv. 19-20).

The first poetic unit begins with a call to praise (vv. 1-3) that invites the “righteous” to rejoice in the Lord in a variety of ways (v. 2-3). As is typical in many of the hymns (psalms of praise) in the Psalter, the call to praise is followed by a list of reasons explaining why it is so appropriate for the congregation to praise the Lord (vv. 4-7). These reasons begin with God’s essential nature, which is characterized by

- “faithfulness,” meaning trustworthiness or dependability (v. 4),
- “steadfast love” so extensive that it fills the earth (v. 5),
- power so great that only a “breath” from God’s mouth was needed to bring forth the heavens and all their inhabitants (v. 6).

However, the speaker here (like the speaker in Ps. 104:7-9) also links the power of the Lord’s breath with the traditional picture that included the taming of the chaotic waters of the sea or “deeps” (v. 7). The word the NRSV translates “bottle” in v. 7 is translated “heap” in Exod. 15:8, connecting creation to Israel’s liberation from bondage.

The second poetic unit begins with another call to worship (v. 8), followed again by a series of reasons why the earth and all its inhabitants should stand in awe of the Lord (vv. 9-11). What the psalmist finds particularly awe-inspiring is the fact that the very world God brought into being with the mere utterance of a word continues to be governed by God’s purposes or plans. The same Hebrew word is used in vv. 10-11 to refer to the purposes of nations and to the purposes of God, but the NRSV translates this word as “plans” in v. 10 and as “thoughts” in v. 11. The emphasis here is on the durability of God’s “counsel.” No matter how hard a nation tries to guarantee its own security, using human logic, and no matter how far ahead it makes its plans, the Lord’s logic and plans will eventually prevail. The divine plans (those “thoughts” that are closest to God’s heart)
will outlast all human generations (v. 11). The word translated "forever" in v. 11 implies an extension of time going both backward (into the past) and forward (into the future).

Thus, the psalmist concludes that the people of a nation whose God is the Lord can be "happy," because they worship a God whose steadfast love fills the earth, who can command whole worlds into being, and whose plans always win out in the end. Furthermore, we may assume that the people who have been "chosen" by God are in a fortunate position because their nation's very existence is a part of God's plan.

The lectionary's cutting of certain verses from the reading leaves out an important part of the psalm's total message. The people of a nation whose God is the Lord (v. 12) know that the God who created the universe with nothing more than a word continues to keep an eye on all the inhabitants of the earth and their doings (vv. 13-15). The people whose God is the Lord know that military might cannot guarantee their security (vv. 16-17). They know that their only true security lies in the "steadfast love" of God (vv. 18-19).

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Endnotes

In the past, many people grew up knowing what it meant to be Christian. But our society has changed, and we now have persons coming to churches and seminaries with little or no previous experience in the church. We understand that we must be more intentional about Christian faith formation; so in 1996 the General Conference of The United Methodist Church added a crucial statement to the Book of Discipline: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs." This statement reflects the need for the church to be more intentional about "making disciples" for a new day, helping persons learn Christian beliefs, values, attitudes, and lifestyle, so they come to claim this faith and witness as their own.

The Church's Role in Making Disciples

Christian education has played a critical role in Christian faith formation since the beginning of Christianity. The church is informed and shaped by the gospel and attends to the relationship of belief and practice. In my own work, I have proposed that "the ministry of Christian education addresses the tasks of shaping Christian identity and vocation through faith formation by helping persons develop their relationship with God so that they may witness to their love for God by loving their neighbor." The Wesleyan understanding that growth in Christian identity and Christian vocation incorporates both personal holiness (love of God) and social holiness (love of neighbor) informs this definition. James W. Fowler addresses identity and vocation in *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2000) by using his research on faith development to discuss ways the church
nurtures persons in their faith journeys. This book is particularly relevant, given questions of identity and selfhood generated in postmodern thought.

However, the question about the church's role in making disciples hinges on a question of agency. What does God do? What does the church do? If we agree with the Wesleys that everything we have is of God and that God transforms lives of faith, then what is it that the church is to do? Some significant resources help us look at our responsibility as preachers, teachers, and leaders for nurturing faith journeys, always remembering that whatever we accomplish is due to God's gift in us.

Teaching and Learning in Communities of Faith (Jossey-Bass, 1991) by Linda Vogel provides metaphors and models for adult religious education. Vogel emphasizes the importance of sharing individual stories and claiming a shared faith story within the faith community as central to growth in faith and discipleship. Vogel's theoretical understanding, combined with practical ideas, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the ministry of Christian education.

Charles Foster proposes another way for congregations to participate in making disciples. In Educating Congregations (Abingdon, 1994), Foster argues that it is time to rethink traditional ways of Christian education focused on individual growth in faith. He proposes a model of "event-based education" that is organized around formative events: "paradigmatic" events that provide patterns for our lives such as worship; "seasonal" events organized around the church year; "occasional" events like weddings or baptisms; and "unexpected" events such as a tragedy or changing population in the church's neighborhood. Foster's approach to congregational education is community-based and provides a helpful alternative to age-based classes, particularly for small churches.

Soul Stories: African American Christian Education (Abingdon, 1994) by Anne Streaty Wimberly argues that the church's role is to provide ways to link the faith story with people's daily life experiences through a process of shared reflection that culminates in a decision for action. Wimberly proposes a creative and useful method of "story-linking" that includes stories from one's own cultural heritage in the reflection process. Wimberly's model of story-linking can be adapted to many situations and provides an easy process for engaging faith and life.

While the focus has been shifting to more communal forms of Christian education, the care for nurturing individual lives of faith has not
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and should not be lost; so discussion of generational learning continues to be present in the literature. Tom Beaudoin’s book Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X (Jossey-Bass, 1998) addresses the relationship between religion and culture. It provides significant insight into this generation and makes creative proposals about the relationship between the church and Gen Xers. “The Religious Education of Generation X” in Religious Education (94/3 [Summer 1999]) offers helpful insight into the need for Christian education approaches that are relevant to Generation X. It includes articles by Leona M. English on “Informal and Incidental Teaching Strategies in Lay-Led Parishes” and Catherine P. Zepth on “Turning the Kaleidoscope: The Adult Religious Educator as Learning Consultant.” (Religious Education may be ordered from Taylor and Francis, 325 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19106)

Critical Learning and Practical Divinity

An ongoing issue in Christian education over the centuries has been the relationship of Christian knowledge and practice. Disciples need to grow not only in the knowledge of faith (what the Wesleys called “critical learning”) but also in Christian living (what the Wesleys called “practical divinity”). The church needs to instruct persons in the knowledge of faith and nurture persons in the practice of faith, so that they might respond to and be transformed by God’s grace.

In recent years, we have experienced much interest in critical learning about our Wesleyan heritage. My book Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition (Abingdon, 2000) examines faith formation in the early Methodist movement. It explores how John Wesley’s understanding of the Trinity shaped Christian faith formation in the early Methodist movement. It then proposes a Wesleyan ecology of faith formation in which all of the areas of the church’s life work together for the purpose of helping people grow in love of God and neighbor. Making disciples is not the sole property of evangelism or Christian education, but a shared ministry of the whole congregation.

Combining knowledge and practice of faith opens our lives to God’s transforming power. While not written from a Christian perspective, Jack Mezirow’s Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning (Jossey-Bass, 1991) helps us understand transformative learning experiences. Mezirow argues that transformation happens when we are challenged to reexamine our assumptions and then amend or change these assumptions in light of our

**Nurturing Personal Holiness—Loving God**

For the Wesleys, Christian faith formation focuses on growth in love of God (personal holiness) and love of neighbor (social holiness). Personal holiness was nurtured through the means of grace, including Holy Communion, individual and communal prayer, studying Scripture, and spiritual disciplines to transform our lives. Emphasis on spiritual formation is evident in the church and in our society, but there is a distinct lack of clarity about what spiritual formation is. It may be more helpful to talk about “Christian spiritual formation” or “Christian faith formation” in order to identify our particular context; but even then our goals may be very different.

One of the best resources for different perspectives on spirituality is *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* by Gabriel O’Donnell and Robin Maas (Abingdon, 1993). Each chapter addresses a particular spiritual tradition and then offers a *practicum* to help the reader experience something of that tradition. For example, the first chapter discusses “The Spirituality of the Early Church: Patristic Sources,” and the *practicum* provides directions for *Lectio Divina*. Other chapters discuss monastic, Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, Black, and feminine spiritualities. This is an important book for helping us understand the breadth of perspectives on spirituality and for seeing how theory and theology shape spiritual practice.

Another resource providing various perspectives on spiritual formation is *Religious Education* 96/1 (Winter 2001). This issue on “Spiritual Formation” provides insights from both scholarship and practice. For example, in his article on “Leaving Development Behind and Beginning Pilgrimage,” Brett Webb-Mitchell argues that we need to rethink our understanding of growth. Webb-Mitchell proposes that we leave behind the emphasis on developmental stages and focus instead on spiritual pilgrimage, because the latter is more communal in nature and informed by theological understanding. Another issue of this journal, “Spirituality and Schooling” (94/2 [Spring 1999]), addresses the question of the relationship between religious instruction and spiritual formation. (For ordering information, see above.)

Many spiritual formation resources are informed by scholarship but
focus on practice. In *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Jossey-Bass, 1997), Dorothy C. Bass compiled an anthology of writings from well-known scholars to address topics such as “Honoring the Body,” “Hospitality,” “Household Economics,” and “Keeping Sabbath.” Another resource (focused on youth) that combines theory and practice in spiritual formation is *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending in Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998) by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. The authors share thoughtful and creative ideas about mentoring, community, and faithful practice, with guidelines and resources for leaders of youth.

**Encouraging Social Holiness—Loving Neighbor**

In the Wesleyan tradition, God's grace invites us into relationship with God; and then we demonstrate our love for God by loving God's creation. This requires critical reflection on our heritage, celebrating the diversity of creation, and working on behalf of peace and justice in the world. Out of numerous resources for raising global and cultural awareness and for addressing significant social issues, only a few examples are named here.

**Global Diversity.** *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* by Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks (Beacon, 1996) challenges us to welcome diversity into making disciples. The authors propose the creation of a "new commons" where "the diverse parts of a community could come together and hold a conversation within a shared sense of participation and responsibility." This commons would provide a forum for learning in the midst of global diversity. These proposals push the imagination of church leaders to think about creating an environment where diversity thrives and educates within their own communities.

**Environmental Concerns.** In *Ministering with the Earth* (Chalice, 1998) Mary Elizabeth Moore challenges us to consider Christian education's responsibility for ministering with the earth. Using personal narrative, along with biblical, historical, and theological resources, Moore makes the case and demonstrates the way the church can engage in learning about and ministering with the earth. She encourages us to explore new educational models to deepen our relationship with the earth and to image God's new creation through processes of reflection, participation, and political action.

**Multicultural Education.** The ways we do Christian education in a multicultural context, as well as what we learn about Christian education from
different cultural perspectives, is of particular significance as the U.S. population becomes more diverse. Two books that contribute to our reflection in this area are *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* by Charles R. Foster and Theodore Brelsford (Trinity, 1996) and *Multicultural Religious Education* (Religious Education Press, 1997), edited by Barbara Wilkerson. Foster and Brelsford provide case study analyses of three congregations in Atlanta that made a commitment to embrace diversity. Their discussion offers significant insight into the gifts and challenges of diversity on congregational education. Wilkerson's book includes chapters on foundations of multicultural religious education, perspectives of diverse cultural groups, and the practice of multicultural religious education.

Because the discipline of Christian education addresses faith formation across the life span, it is impossible to do justice to the full range of resources that are available for leaders, preachers, and teachers who want to learn more about making disciples. I offer one last resource that addresses the future of religious education. *Forging a Better Religious Education in the Third Millennium*, edited by James Michael Lee (Religious Education Press, 2000), provides provocative reflection by scholars such as Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore ("Sacramental Teaching: Mediating the Holy"), Charles R. Foster ("Why Don't They Remember? Reflections on the Future of Congregational Education"), and Anne Streaty Wimberly ("A Black Christian Pedagogy of Hope: Religious Education in a Black Perspective"). This book provides challenge and direction for our educational ministry in this millennium as we focus on making disciples for a new day.

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**Endnotes**

The Orders of Ministry in The United Methodist Church, by John E. Harnish (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000)

A Deacon's Heart: The New United Methodist Diaconate, by Margaret Ann Crain and Jack L. Seymour (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001)

From John Wesley's ordination of Thomas Coke to the present, the formation of orders, conference membership, and ministerial leadership has followed a pragmatic course in order to meet the evangelical needs of the church. The order of the permanent deacon with full membership in the annual conference (adopted in 1996) is one more practical step.

But why take this step now? And what is its theological significance? These questions lie behind the two important books by John E. Harnish and by Margaret Ann Crain and Jack L. Seymour.

Harnish is thoroughly conversant with the studies and history of ministry in the Methodist, Evangelical, and United Brethren traditions. The book is an excellent summary of where we United Methodists are at the moment. It is also the place to begin one's own serious research on the issues of ministerial leadership in the denomination. A complete bibliography, as well as six appendices of official documents and formative texts, provides the reader with ready reference material.

The new Order of Deacons may be viewed as the natural next step beyond the "commissioned" diaconal minister, which was created in 1976 to replace the "certified" lay worker. The primary question, however, is the theological implications of both this new direction and this new form of ordained ministry. Throughout our history, ordination has been linked to the sacraments. Wesley ordained Coke in an unprecedented step to provide an ordained ministry with authority to preside at the sacraments among the American colonists. He used lay preachers but did not give them authority to preside at the sacraments. With some variation, similar sacramental integrity governed the practice of ordaining clergy in the United Brethren and Evangelical movements. The deacon's ordination was preparatory and limited to "assisting the elder" in the administration of the sacraments.
When, in 1976, local pastors were allowed to conduct the sacraments within their own appointments, the link was broken. For the first time, nonordained persons were given authority to preside at the sacraments. Now, with the Order of Deacons we have, for the first time, withheld such authority from persons who are ordained. The deacon is ordained to Word and Service but not to Sacrament. What does this mean theologically?

Harnish raises the issue with much clarity. He is concerned about other, related issues as well: In the long run, what will it mean for ordained deacons to have full conference membership as clergy along with ordained elders? What will the relationship be between the Order of Deacons and the Order of Elders? Given the blurring of the theological tie of ordination and sacrament and the broadening of conference membership, what does the distinctive ordination of leaders mean in relationship to the lay members of the annual conference and, finally, to the ministry of all Christians?

What are the problems down the road, as we juggle ordination, commissioning, and consecration? These are practical questions with implications we will know only as we live through them. Added to these are the questions involved in our ecumenical relationships.

Harnish points out some dangers he sees in the erosion of the Order of Elders, particularly in light of the denomination-wide decrease in the number of elder candidates and the increase in the number of local pastors. For the most part, however, he is content to let both the theological and the practical issues stand, for the time being. He states them superbly and is confident that the evangelical mission of the church will be served.

_A Deacon’s Heart_ by Crain and Seymour, on the other hand, makes a strong case for the practical and theological wisdom of the Order of Deacons. The book is an example of what Harnish calls for in “living through” the issues.

Crain is an ordained deacon and assistant professor of Christian Education at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Seymour is an ordained elder and dean/vice president for Academic Affairs at the same seminary. Their book comes out of dialogue with 68 students and colleagues who are, or have been, involved in seminary training. Personal testimonies and insights are offered as ways of thinking theologically about the commissioned diaconate and the need for the order of permanent deacon. These are the voices of deacons who wish to help the church “live into this new possibility” (19).
Several of the testimonies of newly ordained deacons express satisfaction that the church is finally "catching up" to the evangelical needs of the world and to the work deacons have been doing. The church is moving rapidly from a hierarchical structure to a shared, servant ministry of all Christians in the world. Deacons in full connection provide the "bridge" that is anchored, on the one hand, in the conference and local church and, on the other hand, in the world and its needs for justice, healing, and mercy.

Elders are given responsibility for ordering the life of the church in Word and Sacrament. The 68 deacons in the book witness to the need to "extend the Table" and live the Word in the world. Because they are authorized by the church's ordination and accountable to the church through conference membership, deacons are strategically placed to enable the ministry of the laity in the world.

It is in the "extension of the Table" that Crain and Seymour formulate a response to Harnish's problem of the relationship between ordination and sacrament. While they point to the need for some deacons in extended ministries to have authority to conduct the sacraments, they see the primary function of the diaconate as extending the body of Christ into the world in ministries of healing, justice, and mercy. The work of the deacon is sacramental in the larger sense of "the church as sacrament to the world."

Crain and Seymour cite the office of the deacon in Acts 7 and the ministry of service through the centuries as the basis for the ministry of the ordained deacon in The United Methodist Church. Their hope is that, as it develops, the Order of Deacons will be of use to other denominations in ecumenical relationships. It is within the ecumenical movement of sacramental theology that Crain and Seymour build their case for the leadership of the permanent deacon in The United Methodist Church. It has its roots in both the Wesleyan sacramental instinct and in the Reformed stance of Otterbein through the priesthood of all believers.

Crain and Seymour are suggesting the sacramental need and value of the permanent deacon in the life of the church. Surely the questions—especially the practical questions raised by Harnish—will need much more thought as we "live through" the meaning of what we have ordered in 1996.

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