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Eating with United Methodists

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

Hendrikus Berkhof observes that the Eucharist is the most comprehensive expression of the Christian understanding of salvation. In its celebration, we simultaneously look backward (to Christ’s saving work on the cross) and forward (to the coming reign of God), upward (to the exalted Lord) and around us (to our family in Christ and to the world for which Christ died). The Supper is the triune God’s gift of salvation to the church and through the church to the world. And so, by feasting together, the church gives thanks, for “it is right to give our thanks and praise.”

As both Don Saliers and Karen Westerfield Tucker point out, United Methodists share with the ecumenical community these central theological affirmations about the Eucharist, due in no small part to the remarkable liturgical renewal that swept across the churches—both Protestant and Catholic—in the past four decades. Yet United Methodists also recognize in the resurgent interest in the theology and practice of the sacraments a deep connection with the “best impulses of the larger Methodist/Wesleyan tradition” (224). These ecumenical and liturgical conversations, coupled with intensive study of United Methodist theology and practice of worship, prompted the denomination “to place into its orders for Lord’s Day worship . . . the expectation of a normative service of Word and Table” (234).

The Services of Word and Table in the United Methodist Hymnal and Book of Worship embody a theology and practice of the Eucharist that are firmly grounded in the ecumenical consensus and that faithfully express the distinctive contribution of the United Methodist tradition. One such contribution, says Westerfield Tucker, is Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace—here the Eucharist—as both obligation and opportunity: obligation because “Christ commanded that we ‘do this’” and opportunity because the holy meal is crucial for Christian life and growth (242).
Indeed, for United Methodists, the Eucharist feeds the soul for discipleship in the world. For Kenneth Waters, the liturgy of Word and Table affirms a distinctive way of being in the world, what he calls “a centrifugal form of Christian practice.” From their spiritual center—their relationship with God—Christians are “propelled into the world into wider orbits of corporate interaction and responsibility” (248). The spiritual center thus becomes the matrix for a social response that finds embodiment in a witness to peace, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness, and service. Inherent in the Eucharist is a profound vision of social transformation that can bring healing to the human family, offering an urgently needed alternative to the violence and hatred that wrack so many communities today.

It is clear, however, that, while the resurgence in the theology and practice of the Eucharist finds powerful embodiment in our denomination’s official worship resources, it has yet to transform the eucharistic practices of many United Methodist congregations. This leads David Tripp to argue that if United Methodists are serious about reasserting the Eucharist as essential to the celebration of the Lord’s Day, they will need to rethink several areas of the church’s self-understanding, particularly the need for nourishing—among clergy and laity alike—of a “confident sacramental spirituality” (281).

Mark Stamm examines the practice of “open Communion” and argues that the open table should be viewed as a Methodist exception to the classical order of Christian initiation. The Methodist exception reminds the church that the Supper is grounded not only in the so-called “institution narratives” but also in the wider meal ministry of Jesus.

In Word and Table, United Methodists now have a rich theology of the Eucharist. May we discover anew the transforming and revitalizing power that comes from faithful and persistent appropriation of this sacrament.

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Hendrik R. Pieterse is editor of Quarterly Review.

Endnotes

“Taste and See”: Sacramental Renewal among United Methodists

DON E. SALIERS

I recall with affectionate memory certain childhood experiences of Holy Communion. My grandmother and aunt who raised me were Methodists who believed in attending church. As a grade schooler, I would sit beside my grandmother, who quietly told me when to sit up, to stand and share the Hymnal (then the 1933 edition), and to go to kneel with her at the altar rail of that small-town Ohio church. Receiving the small square of bread and the small glass of Welch’s grape juice was to come later, after Confirmation (three Saturdays with a book on what Methodists believe).

While the attendance was not always as full as on “regular” Sundays, still, for this child’s perception, the quarterly Communion services held a great solemnity, even a quiet mystery. The tone of participation was that of a solemn funeral service for Jesus who “died for our sins.” The language, the style, the gestures of kneeling—the pastor beside the small table in front of the pulpit—all evoked this tone. The intimacy with my grandmother and a sense of drawing closer to Jesus on those occasions, both remain precious memories for me. But much more about sacraments was to come.

My time in seminary coincided with Vatican II. The impact of ecumenical and liturgical movements was suddenly becoming obvious to Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. A remarkable new but ancient range of images and theological meanings were part of discussions and experimental worship practices. The sacrament of the table was a fellowship meal, a resurrection meal, and a joyful thanksgiving for all God had created and redeemed. Holy Communion had vast social implications that
many Methodists (and others) had yet to conceive. At the same time, these recovered meanings seemed somehow attuned to the best impulses of the larger Methodist/Wesleyan traditions. In sum, Holy Communion was an eschatological meal “for the life of the world,” as Alexander Schmemann was claiming. It was profoundly eucharistic, a “good gift” from God, commanding our wholehearted thanks and praise.

Sacramental Awakenings

The United Methodist Church emerged in 1968, appointing a taskforce (“Word and Table”) for a comprehensive look at our theology and practice of worship. It was a remarkable time of study and ecumenical exchange. Stimulated by the longer history of the “liturgical movement,” whose roots were among the Benedictines of the late-nineteenth century but whose flowering was especially strong at the second Vatican Council (1963–1965), our group, both lay and clergy, set about the resources for reform and renewal of sacramental life. Drawing upon ancient sources, biblical and ecclesial, and keeping a strong eye on the Wesleys, we responded with a reformed set of worship resources. Few of us could have predicted the enormous impact the publication of “The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: An Alternate Service, 1972” was to have on United Methodist practice and, consequently, on the rebirth of sacramental theology among many United Methodists, lay and clergy alike. The “Supplemental Worship Resource Series,” published between 1972 and 1984 under the guidance of the Section on Worship of the General Board of Discipleship, provided us with a remarkable expansion of materials and pastoral/liturgical reflection on all the major services of the church. The response among those local churches that began to use and study these new rites indicated that a true spiritual hunger for more meaningful sacramental celebrations had been tapped. Ecumenical sharing took place in an unprecedented manner, even with bold and controversial experiments in intercommunion. Of course, this also brought theological issues to the forefront, especially those concerning the long, fragmented, and polemical history of differences among traditions, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Not only the sacrament of the table received attention as a result of these developments; the theology and practice of Christian baptism was also heightened. I recall the summer of 1975 in Buckhannon, West Virginia, when over a thousand United Methodists gathered for a worship and music conference. That week featured the first time we used a proposed
service for the renewal and reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant for the whole congregation. This service was officially published in 1976 and has subsequently formed the liturgical rite in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) and in *The Book of Worship* (1992). The service at the conference was strong, loving, and animated, producing good preaching, vigorous hymn singing, gracious presiding, and the use of dancers moving amidst the assembly with generous signs of water for the renewal. I was in the sacristy after the service when a group came through the door. One woman spoke for them, exclaiming, “Was that a sacramental action or a revival? I couldn’t tell the difference!” I thought, *This is Methodism as its worshiping best.* That question and exclamation have remained with me for over twenty-five years as the right response to such a recovery of Word and Sacrament in our tradition. We all sensed that morning that the Holy Spirit had made something intrinsic to the Wesleyan movement come alive in us: the sacraments and evangelical depth of faith are fully compatible.

In the years since the reformed rites of the 1970s, The United Methodist Church and other denominations have witnessed a strong resurgence in the practice and theology of the principal sacraments. Even so, for a large number of United Methodists, including pastors, the significance of this resurgence has not been understood. I contend that, if faithfully and persistently explored in local churches, mature appropriation of the meaning and practice of the sacraments would revolutionize church life and mission. What are some of the theological features of this resurgence and what are the implications for the lives of our congregations and of the larger denominational issues we now face?

The range of issues for which such awareness is relevant is not confined to the sanctuary. Indeed, this is a true renaissance, a rebirth of the heart of the Christian gospel for life and ministry in the world. Baptism and Eucharist, from the beginnings of Christianity, were primal places of identity, grace, hope, and the formation of Christian fruits of the Spirit.

**Themes in United Methodist Baptismal and Eucharistic Rites**

We turn now to the theological features of the United Methodist worship services, which may illuminate the import of this sacramental resurgence. The emerging liturgical and ecumenical thinking that informed these services paid particular attention to biblical sources, the continuity of practices grounded in Jesus’ words and deeds, the experiential connection with
human life, and adequacy to the fullness of divine creation and promise. To make this clear, let us first examine the liturgies of Holy Communion and Baptism in our *Hymnal* and *Book of Worship*. This puts us in position to ask about the theological and pastoral implications for local churches and, more generally, for The United Methodist Church.

Perhaps the first and foremost recovery in the recent worship reforms has to do with reclaiming the *eschatological meaning* of the sacraments. What has God promised to human life and to the whole creation? Nothing less than fulfillment of the divine intention in creation, covenant, and Christ. The “eschatological” reality is found in the transforming grace and justice of God already breaking in and at work in history, though not yet fully consummated. This is found in the services of both *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *The Book of Worship*. We hear this in the references to sharing in Christ’s “final victory,” as well as in the acclamation “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” At the end of the prayer of Great Thanksgiving we pray, “. . . until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.”

Beyond the texts that speak freshly of a future advent of Christ, we find that the baptismal act and the action of the holy meal are both radically dependent upon the claim that the rule and reign of God has already broken into human history. Both baptism and the Lord’s table speak of the tension between the *already* of Christ’s incarnation and the *not yet* of complete historical fulfillment of God’s purposes for creation and for human history. This “active” principle of eschatological reality *already present* can be traced in the major themes in the new rites: we are baptized into Christ’s body, yet we await the full unity of Christ’s church; we receive Christ in the meal, yet we pray for the Kingdom to come on earth. We experience a tension between the Lord’s presence and his absence. Yet, precisely because Christ *has* come, we cry out all the more, “Come, Lord Jesus,” especially during Advent.

In Christian baptism we see marks of this “new creation” that is already here. Forgiveness of sin and reconciliation of human beings make possible participation in Christ’s ongoing life. Union with him means solidarity with all his children, all the needy ones of a broken, suffering world. The very act of incorporating persons into his Body, the church, signs and seals empowerment by the Holy Spirit in continuity with Jesus’ life and mission. The imagery of new birth is prominent in the baptismal rite, yet we pray for the future life of the baptized.
To receive forgiveness is to be called to the sacrament of forgiveness in our social world. Unmistakable accent is placed on God’s acting in and through the church’s faithful celebration. This recovery of the divine agency challenges some of the older attitudes toward baptism as something we do ourselves to “express” faith rather than to receive and be strengthened in the faith community. In the baptismal prayer over the water, we pray that God will “wash away their [those being baptized] sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives.”

Union with Christ’s dying and rising is clearly restored in the baptismal ritual action and explicitly in the text. Jesus Christ calls “disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection.” This means union with the priestly ministry of Jesus; but this union is for all the church, not just the clergy or those laity appointed to special roles. This means that ordination is dependent upon the integrity and power of baptism, not the other way around. The whole church is called in baptism (in this sense, “set apart”) to serve God’s will and way in the world. We are made members of Christ’s body and all are one in Christ. This is a claim of radical equality before God, as seen in texts such as Gal. 3:27-28. The new baptismal texts make it clear that all the baptized become members of Christ’s universal church—that those baptized are “initiated into Christ’s holy Church.”

The baptismal covenant also places renewed emphasis on the reception of the Holy Spirit. The thanksgiving over the water makes this unmistakable, especially with the gesture of laying on of hands: “The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.” The ecumenical implications here are strong and challenge lingering parochialisms, such as holding on to the notion of “preparatory members” or to sectarian impulses focusing on the necessity of certain kinds of personal experience as signs of conversion. That encounter with Christ is necessary for Christian life is clear. And the new baptismal rites reinforce this with the demanding questions asked of those presented for baptism and/or their parents and sponsors.

Of course, these dimensions and themes of the new baptismal services are also subject to controversy, none more clearly than the emphasis on regeneration or “new birth.” But the new United Methodist rites insist that we are “given new birth through water and the Spirit.” The questions of those who are presented for baptism and through sponsors hear the strong connection with accountable discipleship in those questions: “Do you
renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness . . . and repent of your sin? . . . Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression?“ Here the inner connection between living the baptized life and social accountability is made clear.

The primary theme of thanksgiving is intrinsic to the Eucharist itself. It inheres in the very meaning of the Greek New Testament word *eucharisteo*, which means to render or to give thanks. Eucharist calls the church to the continual praise of God. The range of eucharistic prayers in the *Book of Worship* (twenty-four prayers in all [pp. 54-80]) powerfully expresses this call. These eucharistic prayers combine with the recovery of Charles Wesley’s powerful indication of sacramental remembering. Remembering is more than mere “thinking” or a kind of nostalgia for a time that has passed. Rather, remembering is an *anamnesis* of what Jesus said and did not only at the Last Supper but also during his entire life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection. If we ask what is remembered in the Lord’s Supper as we now have it, we should point to the greatest of the biblical themes: creation, covenant, human sinfulness and divine deliverance, exile and return, the prophetic call for justice and righteousness—all culminating in what Jesus Christ accomplished. The reality of *koinonia* or “Communion fellowship” is of the whole assembly in relation to all who have gone before, the living and the dead. The conclusion of the Great Thanksgiving expresses this vividly: “By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world . . .”

All of these are references to the texts that speak what the actions of the water bath and the holy meal realize when faithfully celebrated by the community over time. The “sacrifice” of praise and thanksgiving, which is our whole life open to God’s grace and offered in adoration and service, is conjoined to Christ’s own self-giving for the whole world. The Eucharist, echoing the theme of the Holy Spirit in baptism, is invoked both for the hearing and receiving of the Word and at the table. In the Prayer for Illumination we implore God’s Spirit to enable us to hear and do the Word, just as at the table in the meal prayer we ask God to “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine.”

Taken together, these prayers unfold the comprehensiveness of what it means to celebrate the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper with these recovered biblical and existential themes made alive. Social holiness and justice are enjoined in both Baptism and Eucharist. So at the end of
the holy meal we pray, “Eternal God, . . . you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may . . . give ourselves for others.” Here the link between the grace of Holy Communion and the ministry of service to the world is clear and compelling.

**Some Implications for the Life of the Church**

We are in a new day, with new demands. In recognition of the importance and the relevance of the sacraments to the life and mission of the church, the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church resolved that “there should be a strong sense of the importance of Holy Communion in the life of the church, and that there is at least an equally strong sense of the absence of any understanding of Eucharistic theology and practice.” Acknowledging that the larger church has not had the formation in these developments, a Study Committee on the Eucharist was formed to address these concerns and to make recommendation to be brought to the General Conference in 2004. Gayle Felton’s report to the worship resourcing project team of the General Board of Discipleship in May 1999 registers two major conclusions. First, the laity “feel a deep need for Eucharistic spirituality based upon fuller understanding and more meaningful practice.” Second, “little connection is being made in our congregations between Eucharist and the life of Christian discipleship.”

Sacramental life goes well beyond the two principal Protestant sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist. But for Christians the other sacramental actions of the church in our worship and ministries in the world take their specific identification from these two sacraments. Or, more forcefully, since all sacramental life is rooted and grounded in conversion to and ongoing life in Jesus Christ, we can say that Christian existence itself is grounded in the one incarnate life of God. Thus, what Jesus said and did is now made real in what is said and done in his name and by the power of the animating Spirit of God. Simply put, the primary vocation of the church in the world is to continually join in the liturgy of Jesus Christ. What Jesus proclaimed and enacted, God now desires to enact and bring to spoken witness in and through the community of faith, Christ’s body in human history. This is itself only possible by the lifegiving Spirit’s making the crucified and risen One present within the world of space and time. The church’s calling is to embody this word and action. As Christ preached the kingdom of God, so must we. As Christ reconciled and embodied justice and righteousness, so
must we. As he fed the hungry and gave living water to the thirsty, so must we. As he gave himself in gestures of compassion and hospitality, so must we. As he called human beings into holiness and discipline, so must we.

The specific courses of action this calling requires will always need contextual deliberation and discernment. That we will differ on some matters is clear. But that these actions are compelled by Word and Sacrament—that is, by Christ’s speaking and acting—is undeniable.

It is clear from Christ’s words and actions that the sacraments involve the whole range of our embodied life, including the intellect. To partake of the grace of God in the holy meal and the bath of initiation into Christ is more than rational assent to doctrines about salvation. It is a physical and mystical engagement with Jesus Christ in the Spirit and with one another as church. Thus, the new, emerging theology of sacraments and the more adequate celebrations of these rites open upon formation in Christian affections, attitudes, and holiness over time. This is why the question of how frequently to celebrate the Eucharist, linked with the marks of baptism, is important. We are not simply “remembering Jesus” (that is, having pious thoughts); we are invited to be formed into his image. And in so doing, we allow Word and Sacrament to continually re-shape and re-form us in the very image of God in which we were created.

Some persons find the new emphasis on sacraments in tension with the task of evangelism. Others experience a tension between sacraments and social action. These criticisms are to be taken seriously. But in such debates the problem lies not in the contradictions between sacrament, evangelism, and social action but rather in an inadequate conception of the nature of Christian sacraments. I have tried to clarify and deepen the meaning of Baptism and Eucharist in this article to show that conversion to the way of Christ and to the social transformation of our world actually flows from and back to vital experience of Word and Sacrament, which lie at the heart of the church’s worship. Now is the time to teach and to deepen our experience of the sacramental grace of God so that evangelism and mission will be rooted and empowered by the one true sacrament of God: Jesus Christ in his fullness. This is the work of every congregation and it is the privilege of “being church” together, members of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Our conception of The United Methodist Church itself may be invigorated by a more profound understanding and experience of the sacraments. We have been caught in an opposition between regarding The United
Methodist Church as either “conciliar” or “confessional.” United Methodists do not have the equivalent to a Heidelberg Catechism or an Augsburg Confession. We do not characteristically begin by creating and citing a series of confessional statements of doctrine as in the Presbyterian tradition.

And yet, United Methodists have a way to deal with this issue. If we grasp the fact that at the eucharistic table and at the baptismal pool we are professing a primary theology in prayer and ritual action, then we will realize that United Methodists do stand in doctrinally ordered continuity with the apostolic catholicity of Christian worship, life, and confession of faith. Thus, we have restored the Apostles Creed in our baptismal covenant; and the very shape of the prayers of Great Thanksgiving over the water and the table are fully trinitarian. For United Methodists, doctrine is “prayed” as address to the God for whom we listen and from whom grace is freely bestowed upon those who worship in spirit and in truth.

The implications of this retrieval are enormous. For one thing, it may allow us to avoid the problem of the binary bind mentioned above in terms of which we are either nonconfessional or confessional (in a narrowed sense of polemically formed statements). For another thing, the vision of right praise rendered to the incarnating God of all creation, received in the words and sacramental acts of Christ, is open to the wider work of God’s Spirit in mission and ministry.

**The Task Ahead: Communities Formed in Word and Sacrament**

Our task as United Methodists, then, is at once theological, pastoral, and catechetical. Every local church needs to respond to the question, “What does God in Christ give us in the water bath and invocation of the Spirit, in the Word sung, prayed, and proclaimed in the holy meal, and in the range of the ‘ordinary means of grace’”? The answer will involve us in experiential formation in the saving mystery of Jesus Christ and in the practices of the fruits of the Spirit, within and outside the four walls of our church buildings. “O taste and see that the LORD is good,” says the psalmist (Ps. 34:8). So, in the sacraments we taste and receive the height, depth, and breadth of God’s incarnate compassion for the world.

United Methodists now have splendid worship resources—theological and pastoral—to revitalize a deeper sense of sacramentality. Such a deepening of the means of grace and the receptivity to grace in this world is a profoundly Wesleyan theme. The recovery of a sacramentality that links worship with
social holiness in service to God and neighbor would truly renew the church. The resurgence of the means of grace in their more comprehensive and revelatory sense is also the heartbeat of the divine mission to and within God’s whole created and redeemed order. At the heart of God’s creating and redeeming care for the world is self-incarnating love. Christians confess that created things bear the grace of God. At the heart of life is a deep mystery: how ordinary things become extraordinary as we invoke and sense the divine in and through them. John Wesley was careful to enumerate various lists of the “ordinary means of grace” that continually expand the scope of our sacramental experience of the divine mission.

What would such renewed sacramentality mean for the way congregations approach the sacraments? First, it would require reinvigorated teaching and sacramental formation. With rare exceptions, most United Methodist churches do not promote extensive teaching about Christian worship. Church members long for, but do not have, a clear conception of the basics of worship, much less of the history and theology of the Christian sacraments. This is beginning to change, but there is resistance in places. Some pastors, heavily influenced by strategies for making worship “user-friendly,” simply marginalize the sacraments. This is understandable when a diminished practice and understanding of the Eucharist is already in place.

Second, it would require preaching that roots itself in a sacramental sense of church and world. This means rereading the life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ as the foundation of Word and Sacrament. What has yet to be understood fully is how the whole life of Jesus Christ is expressed in word and actions. Proclamation cannot be content with a one-sided or narrow conception of Christ’s work and person. Rather, the unity of Christ’s life must be continually unfolded in our experience of worship over time. Thus, Christ’s redemptive work, while culminating with the cross and empty tomb, must also include how he lived, what he taught, his healing ministry, table fellowship, and his very incarnate life itself.

Third, it would require more vibrant celebrations of Baptism and Eucharist. Churches should be creative in finding occasions to celebrate Eucharist in the whole range of the church’s life: at retreats, camping events and youth and intergenerational gatherings and in people’s homes. Of course, vibrancy needs to be accompanied by integrity; hence, attention should be paid to the feasts and seasons and the rhythms of congregational life in the world.
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Endnotes

2. During the time that Henri Nouwen and I were teaching at Yale Divinity School, I recall the enormous power of gathering for Eucharist around the table, with a full-orbed eucharistic prayer and new styles of communing because of the alteration of space. We were challenging the issue of Christian intercommunion; but perhaps the more significant consequence was a generation of seminarians and some faculty who could “not go home again” in practice and in theology to our antecedent understandings.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 87.
7. Ibid., 91.
8. Ibid., 88.
9. “Service of Word and Table I,” 38.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 39. See also “A Service of Word and Table I,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 11.
13. Felton’s report is unpublished, and was made available through the office of Daniel T. Benedict, Jr., at the General Board of Discipleship in Nashville. The citations are from pages 2-3.
“Let Us Thy Mercy Prove”:
A United Methodist Understanding of
the Eucharist

KAREN B. WESTERFIELD TUCKER

In 1742, John Wesley published an essay on “The Character of a Methodist” in order to demonstrate to questioners from within and without the new movement that Methodism was “plain old Christianity” and not distinct from the Christianity practiced by “real Christians.” Methodist approaches to worship and to the sacraments were, therefore, not to be substantively different from those of other Christians. Rather than proposing something new, the early Methodists advocated a recovery of practices and understandings that they believed to be in accord with “scriptural Christianity.”

American Methodists, as well as the denominations that came to make up the Evangelical United Brethren Church, always emphasized their commitment to Scripture and, in a “catholic spirit,” to the wider church. Such an affirmation was borne out by a willingness to participate in interdenominational camp meetings and revivals, and from the late-nineteenth century onwards, in broader ecumenical conversations and mutual endeavors. Many of these cooperative ecumenical efforts also took on a liturgical shape: the United Brethren, the Evangelical Church, and several branches of Methodism were involved in the 1930s with the work of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America to promote worship education at all levels and to introduce (or restore) the liturgical year in “free church” congregations. More recently, the participation of The United Methodist Church in the World Council of Churches and in various bilateral and multilateral dialogues has caused the denomination (once again) to measure its theological reflection and liturgical practices against those of other Christian groups. These ecumenical conversations, along with the liturgical renewal that swept across the churches especially in the past forty years, prompted The United Methodist Church to place into its orders for Lord’s Day worship, if not yet into its practice, the expectation of a normative service of Word and Table.
In discussing a “United Methodist” theology of the Eucharist, therefore, one should not expect major theological distinctions from other Christian bodies. For example, it is not surprising to see the strong affirmation by the United Methodist Council of Bishops to the consensus document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, also known as the “Lima Document”), produced in 1982 by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (the final redaction of which was chaired by a British Methodist!). Although they acknowledged some United Methodist peculiarities, on the whole the bishops strove to locate The United Methodist Church firmly within the consensus. Indeed, they noted that in some places where there was divergence *BEM* could serve as a corrective.¹

*BEM* develops the meaning of the Eucharist under five headings: thanksgiving to the Father, *anamnesis* of Christ, invocation of the Spirit, communion of the faithful, and meal of the Kingdom. Although the carefully worded contents under these five headings represent the results of contemporary ecumenical conversations, the subjects addressed are not new: explorations of these themes in third- and fourth-century writings informed modern theologians in their deliberations. Even the early Methodist movement in its sacramental revival identified these and similar issues and spoke to them through sermon and hymn in order to encourage a deeper appreciation of the Lord’s table. Specifically, this meant recognizing a need for the sacrament that could be satisfied by frequent (preferably “constant”) communion, acknowledging Christ’s real presence at the table, celebrating the union of the “saints above” with the “saints below” in anticipation of the heavenly banquet, and actively linking the grace received at the table with acts of mercy toward neighbor and stranger.

To set forth a United Methodist theology of the Eucharist requires familiarity with the theological content of the current and previous official orders of service for Holy Communion (the current rite having affinities with both early Christian and contemporary orders; and the former Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren rites carrying the distinct genetic material of Anglicanism). Official responses to ecumenical documents like *BEM* and the theological texts produced for and by the predecessor denominations of The United Methodist Church should also be taken into account. In particular, John Wesley’s sermons “The Means of Grace” and “On the Duty of Constant Communion,” as well as *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* (1745), consisting of 166 hymn texts, need to be consid-
ered. These texts contain Wesley’s fullest statements on the sacrament (although brother Charles was the principal lyricist for the hymns, John affixed his name as coauthor of the collection). The two sermons were readily studied in North America and, on occasion, read from the pulpit. Although no edition of *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* was ever published in the United States, certain hymns from the collection were put to use on this side of the Atlantic either in official hymnals or in other sources: a book of sermon outlines kept by early Methodist preacher Philip Gatch contained fifteen hand-copied Lord’s Supper hymns. The *Hymns* are an underrecognized United Methodist (and Anglican!) theological treasure, yet serve as an important point of conversation in dialogues, especially with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.

Many of the hymns from the *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* are more suited to private meditation or theological reflection than to singing in a liturgical context. Their very density makes them a valuable resource in delineating the doctrine of the Eucharist held by the Wesleys and the early Methodists. In this respect, hymn number 53 may be drawn upon in order to develop several key points of teaching:

O God of truth and love,  
Let us Thy mercy prove;  
Bless Thine ordinance Divine,  
Let it now effectual be,  
Answer all its great design,  
All its gracious ends in me.

O might the sacred word  
Set forth our dying Lord,  
Point us to Thy sufferings past,  
Present grace and strength impart,  
Give our ravish’d souls a taste,  
Pledge of glory in our heart.

Come in Thy Spirit down,  
Thine institution crown;  
Lamb of God, as slain appear,  
Life of all believers Thou,

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Let us now perceive Thee near,
Come, Thou Hope of glory, now.

**Eucharist: Work of the Triune God**

At the sacrament of the table the triune God is manifest, as is also true at the sacrament of the font. The three-stanza structure of hymn 53 reflects this reality: each stanza corresponds to one Person of the Godhead, with the coinherent work of all Three subtly maintained. Such unity is expressed from the outset in the first line of the first stanza, where “truth” suggests the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and “love” hints at the outpoured Comforter. Yet it is to the First Person that the hymn speaks, for it is because of the Father’s originating work in creation, redemption, and sanctification that communion is both offered and fulfilled. The petitions to the Father throughout the hymn hint at the classic structure for prayers of thanksgiving (at least since St. Basil’s fourth-century treatise *On the Holy Spirit*) by which prayer is addressed to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The threefold sequence corresponds to the tripartite structure of the Great Thanksgiving in the official rite of The United Methodist Church, which was developed in light of ecumenical conversations and of rediscoveries made by the liturgical movement. This Antiochene, or West Syrian, structure for the eucharistic prayer that predominated in much of twentieth-century liturgical revision was not unknown to the Wesleys. Their liturgical interest in matters Patristic and Eastern attracted them to the so-called Clementine Liturgy in the eighth book of the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*, which mostly follows the now-familiar Antiochene pattern. However, in providing a liturgy for the Methodist people in his *Sunday Service of the Methodists* (1784), John opted to depend upon the 1662 Communion service of the Church of England.

Use of the Antiochene structure for the eucharistic prayer has made overt in the liturgical text what United Methodists and their predecessors have always known: the Holy Spirit is present and active at the Lord’s Supper. However, prior to the most recent liturgical revisions, mention of the place and work of the Holy Spirit at the sacrament could be nonexistent in the rites of United Methodism’s ecclesiastical ancestors unless the Collect for Purity was used (“Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open . . . cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit . . . .”) and a
trinitarian reading was given to the Sanctus ("Holy, holy, holy . . ."). An exception was the Evangelical United Brethren rite from 1951 that, echoing the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, asked the Father to “bless and sanctify with thy Word and Holy Spirit these thy gifts of bread and wine.” The singing of hymns that made reference to the work of the Spirit—for example, the line “Come in Thy Spirit down, Thine institution crown” in “O God of truth and love”—thus was essential to convey to those in attendance that the fullness of God was at work in the Eucharist. The use of the tripartite prayer, and particularly the addition of an epiklesis by which we “call down” the Spirit upon the eucharistic gifts and the people, has alerted attentive United Methodist congregations to the eucharistic work—and presence—of each person of the Godhead. Unfortunately, the all-too-common practices of reducing the Great Thanksgiving to the words of institution or the epiklesis alone, or of dividing up the Great Thanksgiving among different readers (with the elder only praying the words of institution, the epiklesis, or both), has fractured the theological wholeness intended by the structure of the prayer.

The Presence of Christ

It is by the power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the gathered community that hearts are gladdened and spirits joined. It is also by the power of the Holy Spirit that the historic words of Jesus become living and effective, thus making present him who was crucified and risen and who now reigns eternally. When sacramental remembrance of his saving work is made according to his own institution (anamnesis), Christ becomes visible to the eyes of faith. To use the text of our standard Great Thanksgiving, “When the Lord Jesus ascended, he promised to be with us always, in the power of your Word and Holy Spirit.” Or in the poetry of hymn 53, the “sacred word set[s] forth our dying Lord,” and by the Spirit the “Lamb of God, as slain appear[s]”; the reader then petitions, “Let us now perceive Thee near; Come, Thou Hope of glory, now.”

Over the centuries, the matter of how Christ is present at the sacrament has been a subject of debate—and schism. Generally, for the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ancestors of United Methodists, Christ’s real presence at the table was never in doubt, because there was the expectation of an encounter with the divine as was intended in the fullest meaning of sacrament; the Lord’s Supper was never just a bare memorial. Real presence certainly was not meant in the sense of transub-
stantiation, which, according to the eighteenth Methodist Article of Religion, “is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.”

Neither was presence defined in terms of consubstantiation, a theological interpretation sometimes connected with Luther. Writing in 1858, Methodist Orceneth Fisher commented that when our Lord says, “This is my body, this is my blood, . . . his words are to be taken, not in a gross and literal, but in a spiritual and heavenly sense.” Christ is really and truly present, but in a manner that defies precise definition.

Eventually, however, the perspective of many of our ecclesiastical ancestors shifted away from a positive understanding of real presence. This shift was brought about by fears that the phrase was indeed associated with transubstantiation (occasioned in part by an increase in the immigration of Roman Catholics) and by the heightened rationalism that permeated all aspects of American life. In 1864, the Methodist Episcopal Church introduced an alteration to the Communion text: the phrase from the Prayer of Consecration, “receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ’s holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion,” was shortened to “receiving these memorials of the sufferings and death of our Saviour Jesus Christ.” This change lasted only one quadrennium, though, before the older form was restored. However, the die was cast: there was a greater tendency to read the Supper as a memorial of the absent one (a position often associated with Anabaptists and the Swiss reformer Huldrich Zwingli), with the bread and wine—and the entire liturgical event—as “mere” (meaning ineffective) symbols. Lord’s Supper hymns selected for official hymnals articulated the memorial aspect, thereby capturing the theological position frequently found in denominational literature. Alterations made to the Communion service by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1932 (and kept, after merger, by the Methodist Church) expressed this change. In the Prayer of Consecration, “a perpetual memory of his precious death” became “this memorial of his precious death”; and, rather than partaking “of his most blessed body and blood,” communicants partook “of the divine nature through him.” In a fashion similar to this latter revision, “eating the flesh” and “drinking his blood” in the Prayer of Humble Access became “these memorials of Thy Son Jesus Christ.”

What United Methodist theological and liturgical reflection on the
sacraments has done, thanks to influences from the liturgical and ecumenical movements, is to invite Christ once again to his own table. Recovery of our own Wesleyan heritage has also assisted us in this matter. In the hymn “O Thou Who This Mysterious Bread,” included in The United Methodist Hymnal (number 613) and originally from Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, we sing using present, active verbs by which we repeat the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “Return, herewith our souls to feed, and to thy followers speak. . . . Open our eyes to see thy face, our hearts to know the Lord. . . . Talk with us, and our hearts shall burn with flames of fervent love.” Christ’s real presence at the sacrament is unmistakably affirmed in the final stanza of the hymn “Victim Divine, Thy Grace We Claim,” also from Hymns on the Lord’s Supper and printed in The Faith We Sing (number 2259): “To every faithful soul appear, and show thy real presence here!” (It is in the first part of this stanza that the text refutes Calvin’s notion of the communicant’s spiritual assent to heaven—“We need not go up to heaven, to bring the long-sought Savior down.”) By recognizing the work of the Spirit—and the entire Godhead—in the celebration at the table, Christ’s presence is acknowledged. Moreover, the full meaning of the sacrament—as an effective sign and a means of grace—may also be recovered. What Christ has promised, through the power of the Holy Spirit, he gives to us at his holy meal.

A Means of Grace

The phrase means of grace is not a distinctively Wesleyan term. John Wesley acknowledges his indebtedness to wider church usage in his sermon on “The Means of Grace”:

By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.

I use this expression, ‘means of grace,’ because I know none better, and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages: in particular by our own church, which directs us to bless God both for the ‘means of grace and hope of glory’; and teaches us that a sacrament is ‘an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.’

Principal among these means, says Wesley, are prayer, searching the
Scriptures (and reading and hearing the Word), and the Lord’s Supper. To this list of “instituted means of grace” are often added public worship, family and private prayer, and fasting.\(^9\)

The impetus for Wesley’s sermon came from the controversy at London’s Fetter Lane Society regarding the use of the means of grace. Under the influence of Philip Henry Molther, some baptized Moravians and Methodists claimed that they should be “quiet” and wait upon the Lord, and thereby abstain from any means of grace until they had experienced full assurance of faith—or, in the terminology of that period, “conversion.” Wesley countered this position by arguing that those persons with some degree of repentance and faith should participate in the means of grace even if they did not yet know full assurance. In fact, he says, the means could supply the grace—preventing, justifying, or sanctifying—specifically needed. Hence, the Lord’s Supper could be a “converting ordinance” to those baptized in infancy, for it could produce in the heart the requisite assurance.\(^10\) Yet Wesley was as much against an understanding of the power of the sacrament as due to its human performance as he was against Fetter Lane spiritualism. The key for Wesley is trusting “that it is God alone who is the giver of every good gift, the author of all grace.”\(^11\) Because of God’s generosity, “is not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us? Let all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God, eat of that bread and drink of that cup.”\(^12\)

Because the Lord’s Supper is an ordinary means of grace, Christians may be confident that grace will be given. Christ’s word is true; therefore, the bread and the wine will convey what is promised. The text of hymn 53 proceeds under this assumption: “Bless Thine ordinance Divine, Let it now effectual be, Answer all its great design, All its gracious ends in me.” Supping at the Lord’s table imparts “present grace and strength” and “give[s] our ravish’d souls a taste.” It is to “believers”—those who have at least a modicum of faith—that such grace is given. The necessity of faith prior to the reception of the sacrament is a theological position set out in United Methodism’s historic documents. According to Methodist Article 18, “to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup
of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ.” Article 6 of the
Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church follows a
similar line: “Those who rightly, worthily and in faith eat the broken bread
and drink the blessed cup partake of the body and blood of Christ in a
spiritual manner until he comes.”

How is the Eucharist efficacious? The Wesleys were hesitant to offer an
explanation and their spiritual descendants have also refrained from theo-
philosophical speculation. But the Wesleys unhesitatingly affirmed that the
sacrament does work, though later Wesleyans seemingly have not been so
confident. The hymn “O the Depth of Love Divine” from Hymns on the
Lord’s Supper and in The United Methodist Hymnal (number 627) emphasizes
that trust in the promise of God on this matter is paramount. “Who shall
say how bread and wine God into us conveys! How the bread his flesh
imparts, how the wine transmits his blood, fills his faithful people’s hearts
with all the life of God!” Even the angels “bow to search it out, in vain.”
Nevertheless, despite the absence of an elaborate explanation, by “the
Father’s wisdom” the “feeble elements bestow a power not theirs to give”;
“these the virtue did convey, yet still remain the same.” The appropriate
human response thus is neither analysis nor despair but simply to “wonder
and adore.”

Although the Eucharist as a means of grace is not a concept unique to
United Methodism, perhaps a Wesleyan contribution to the churches is an
understanding of the means of grace as both obligation and opportunity. In
his sermon on “The Duty of Constant Communion,” John Wesley put these
two points side by side in identifying the reasons why Christians should
frequent the table and the excuses (even the ones used today!) that are
often given for absence. It is the duty of Christians to receive the sacra-
ment, said Wesley, because Christ commanded that we “do this.” But the
Christian should also receive as often as he or she can because the benefits
are so great: “the forgiveness of our past sins, and the present strength-
ening and refreshing of our souls.” This is what we sing in “O Thou Who
This Mysterious Bread”: “Enkindle now the heavenly zeal, and make thy
mercy known, and give our pardoned souls to feel that God and love are
one.” It is precisely because the means of grace do something that their
reception is so important for Christian life and growth. For this reason,
among others, John Wesley in 1784 advised Methodist elders “to admin-
ister the supper of the Lord on every Lord’s day.” In the same vein, our
spiritual ancestors insisted on keeping one another accountable regarding the regular practice of the means of grace. Such accountability was, in certain periods of our history, committed to explicit and firm legislation. The General Rules that stand among the United Methodist doctrinal standards in the Book of Discipline give a glimpse of these previously held convictions. Indeed, the General Rules call United Methodists again to spiritual practices and accountability: “It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation . . . by attending upon all the ordinances of God.”

A Sign of Christian Fellowship

Although the Eucharist is oftentimes construed as simply a private affair between the individual and God, its corporate aspect was a hallmark of the early church and, with the recovery of ancient Christian practices, is so of the churches today. The Wesleyan sacramental revival strongly affirmed the corporate dimension of the Supper alongside the personal. In the hymn “O God of truth and love,” both first-person plural and first-person singular pronouns are used: “Let us Thy mercy prove [meaning “experience”].” “Point us to Thy sufferings past,” and “Let us now perceive Thee near”; but also, “Answer all its great design, All its gracious ends in me.” But because of the stress upon personal piety and individual freedom in our preaching and teaching, it has sometimes been overlooked or even forgotten that communion is with God and with other Christians—the whole church—in every time and place. The pastor praying the Great Thanksgiving reminds us of this connection toward the end of the standard prayer by the words “make us one with Christ [and] one with each other.” The return in many United Methodist churches to use of the common loaf and the common cup serves as a visible reminder of the unity that is to be found in Christ. Yet it also testifies to the reality that the oneness of the church for which Jesus prayed (John 17:20-21) has still to be accomplished.

The pastor celebrating the Supper makes another claim for the corporate dimension of the sacrament immediately before the congregation joins in the Sanctus: “And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven.” The union of “your people on earth” with “all the company of heaven” was a frequent theme in the Wesley hymns, both eucharistic and otherwise (of the latter category, for example, is “Come, Let Us Join Our Friends Above,” number 709 in The United Methodist Hymnal). None of the
hymns in *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* with this theme are found in the current hymnal, though one appeared in its predecessor of 1964\(^1\); the second stanza of “Happy the Souls to Jesus Joined” (number 535) reads, “The Church triumphant in thy love, Their mighty joys we know; They sing the Lamb in hymns above, And we in hymns below.” Another hymn, “How Happy Are Thy Servants, Lord” (number 328 in the 1964 book), emphasizes the earthly fellowship by which “Our hearts and minds and spirits join, And all in Jesus meet.” Holy Communion is precisely that—communion.

The interconnection of believers around the common table and the effectiveness of the sacrament should have the consequence, according to the standard United Methodist Great Thanksgiving, of making us “one in ministry to all the world.”\(^2\) This is one of the “gracious ends” of the “ordination Divine” spoken of in the hymn “O God of truth and love.” Recovery of the ancient link between worship (*leitourgia*) and service (*diakonia*) is a feature of the modern liturgical and ecumenical movements, and in light of this emphasis, the concept is articulated in our official liturgical text. As “imitators of Christ” (cf. Eph. 5:1–f), Christians not only gather to pray “in [his] name” (Matt. 18:20) but also have the example of Christ himself who “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). Yet the framers of the Great Thanksgiving recognized as well that the relationship between worship and service was a central facet of the Methodist revival in the eighteenth century. Indeed, one Wesleyan contribution to the ecumenical conversation was precisely on this point, since in early Methodism, scriptural and primitive Christian models were used that connected liturgical praxis with care of the needy (e.g., the love feast with its collection of alms for the poor). The “work” of worship was to issue forth in works of mercy and charity. Christians are to put into practice what they preach and pray. The ministry that emanates from the strengthening meal at the table is summed up by the General Rules in the *Discipline* in two words: “doing good.” Christians come to the table for pardon and renewal, but they should also come in order to be sent out for discipleship and mission.

**An Anticipation of the Heavenly Banquet**

The Eucharist draws upon the past; it is anamnetic. The benefits of the one-time sacrifice of Jesus—all that he accomplished for the sake of the world and all that he promised—are brought into the present. The sacrament also looks to the future; it is proleptic. It is an anticipation, a foretaste,
of the Lord’s banquet at which the church triumphant and the church militant together will feast (Matt. 26:29; 1 Cor. 11:26). At the Supper, time is collapsed into the present; earth and heaven meet. The redemptive work that God has done and will do is summed up with the bread and the wine. Hence, our response is one of gratitude, joy, and thanksgiving (eucharistia).

In the sequence of benefits petitioned for in the hymn “O God of truth and love,” the final request is for the “pledge of glory in our heart” that is given by the one who himself is the “hope of glory” (cf. Col. 1:27). Those hymns in Hymns on the Lord’s Supper that focus upon “The Sacrament a Pledge of Heaven” often use terms like pledge or earnest or title to speak to the joyous expectation of the heavenly feast which is, nevertheless, a part of present knowledge and experience. In Christ, the Kingdom has come; the Second Coming and the final fulfillment still await. But by faith and hope at the “great Kingdom feast,” the blessings of that future day may be realized now. The Wesley hymns conveyed a rich eschatological understanding of the sacrament that drew heavily upon early Christian literature. Unfortunately, the eschatological emphasis in the hymns never was paralleled in an official text for the Lord’s Supper; only a few of these eschatologically oriented hymns were ever included in an authorized hymnal. Even the current Great Thanksgiving, influenced as it is by the ecumenical rediscovery of the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist, is weak compared to the eschatological perspective expressed in the hymns. The prayer simply announces that we celebrate the sacrament “until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.”

Here is a place where United Methodist reappropriation of its own heritage may assist in the shaping of further ecumenical conversation regarding the Eucharist.

Reclaiming our Heritage

To be true to our ancestral “character,” United Methodists should not expect our theology or practices to distinguish us substantively from other “real” Christians. But there is much from United Methodism’s own distinct and often-forgotten history that is relevant for contemporary conversations about the Eucharist, both within the denomination and across the churches. Certain aspects of early Christian thinking and practice that were recovered by the liturgical and ecumenical movements of the past century were already embraced in early Methodism. For the sake of the Christian unity to which we as a denomination are committed, we should make a
concerted effort to reclaim those things in our more distant past that place us into greater conformity with other Christians. The bishops, in their response to BEM, made a similar observation, noting that “BEM encourages our generation of Methodists to recover our own Wesleyan heritage while experiencing the theological convergence with many other Christians.” The eucharistic action itself may set the pattern: while we anticipate that day when all God’s people are gathered at the one table, we recall how God’s saving mercy has been with us on the journey and how Christ has been present in our midst.

O God of truth and love,  
Let us Thy mercy prove.

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Endnotes

12. Ibid., 389-90 (3.12).
17. “Service of Word and Table I,” 10.
18. Ibid., 9.
20. “Service of Word and Table I,” 10.
21. Ibid.
When we celebrate the Eucharist we also affirm a centrifugal form of Christian practice. We proclaim a way of being in the world that moves out from an expressly spiritual center. We understand this spiritual center as the interior life of the individual—that inward space, that sanctuary of the heart, where persons yield themselves to God. In this space the person commits both to a relationship with God and to the way that relationship unfolds through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and fulfillment of calling. From this spiritual center the worshiper is driven into that wider circle which is life in the church and from there to that even wider circle which is service in the world. Like a spinning centrifuge on the worktable of a high school science lab, the spiritual center propels individuals into wider orbits of corporate interaction and responsibility. We find this centrifugal notion of Christian spirituality expressed in the liturgy of Eucharist.

The Genesis of the Spiritual Center

For Wesley, not only was the idea of the empowering spiritual center expressed in the Eucharist but also the Eucharist itself was empowering for Christian practice. Wesley himself conceived of the Eucharist, which he referred to as the Supper of the Lord, as that “food for the soul” which gives us strength to fulfill our duties and move toward perfection. We guarantee for ourselves power to love and obey God through the doing of good works when we avail ourselves of every opportunity to receive the Lord’s Supper. More than affirming the outward-reaching spiritual life, Wesley understood the Eucharist as the very nourishment for that life. Our discussion, however, focuses more on the Eucharist as a witness to the kind of spiritual praxis that Wesley praised.

We need only review the language of the Service of Word and Table I, as
found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, to discover strong allusion to the prerequisite for this social spirituality, namely, the genesis of the spiritual center within the worshiper. Occurring early in the liturgy, specifically in the Opening Prayer, are the words of invocation, “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.” This is only the first reference to some prerequisite change at the level of the heart. In the Prayer of Illumination, the words “Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit” may express an even more preliminary moment in spiritual transformation. There is a place in the Confession and Pardon where God hears “we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart,” as one more acknowledgement of what is required for spiritual renewal. All of the above is finally reiterated in the Great Thanksgiving, where the appeal “Lift up your hearts” is answered by “We lift them up to the Lord.” What lies behind these various liturgical references to the heart or the inner self? Clearly it is the conviction that all is for nought unless our inner selves are yielded to and then transformed by God into centers of spiritual vitality.

However, we do not pursue a withdrawn, contemplative style of spirituality—an inner discipline that seeks salvation through detachment from others. *Eucharistic language instead affirms the transformed heart as the matrix for social response.*

After everyone has communed and prior to the sending forth, we pray, “Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” Here, and in the liturgist’s dismissal, “Go forth in peace,” the centrifugal nature of Christian spirituality is plainly disclosed (11).

**A Witness to Peace and Justice**

More specifically, the translation of spirituality into social response is attested through four modes of language in the celebration of Eucharist. First is the language of *peace seeking*. “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another” (7). The very structure of this invitation places the practice of peace seeking within the larger framework of Christ-centered devotion and penitence. There is no reason to think that peace seeking is any different from *peacemaking*, an activity of the blessed as Jesus acknowledged in Matt. 5:9. Whether the words are to seek or to make peace, we speak not of a passive waiting for the end of hostilities but rather of an
oftentimes costly exertion of the will. Peace is achieved through God’s support but nevertheless through human effort. Something personal is always sacrificed when peace is the prize.

Second is the language of justice. Ironically, we affirm our commitment to justice in the context of the Confession and Pardon, where we acknowledge the ways we fall short of its achievement. Thus “we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy . . .” (8). Within this same context the work of justice is directly related to loving God with our whole heart and obeying God’s will. Therefore, we speak not of mere distributive justice, where the goal is only to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people and where access to goods and resources is based only on equal treatment. We speak of God’s justice, where the goal is to meet the needs of all individuals even if special treatment or beneficence is required for some. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), God’s justice is a summons to reversing or undoing the victimization of human beings.

A Witness to Reconciliation

Third is the language of reconciliation. The most ostensible expression of this language occurs in the Peace, where we have the directive, “Let us offer one another signs of reconciliation and love,” and in the Offering, where we hear, “As forgiven and reconciled people, let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God” (8). The act of reconciliation is immediately followed by the commitment of self and substance to God. Admittedly, the brevity of these statements may obscure the significance of reconciliation as the core of the eucharistic meal, the pervasive theme of the whole liturgy, and the foundation of life in the community of faith. Biblically, the significance of the theme is undeniable. As the first Evangelist recalls, Jesus required reconciliation with others before one even approaches God (Matt. 5:23-24). In the Didache, a late first- or early second-century compilation of early Christian teaching, persons are barred even from the worship gathering on the Lord’s Day, let alone the Eucharist, until those persons achieve reconciliation with their fellows. So biblically and historically significant is the theme of reconciliation that it needs to be explored more fully than other aspects of the eucharistic language.

On a visit to South Africa shortly after the release of Nelson Mandela, I heard the question raised on more than one occasion, “How can there be
reconciliation without justice?” Usually the question was raised by clergy and others of the Xhosa and Zulu nations in that country; but the question has relevance to us on both sides of the Atlantic, with our separate histories of racial estrangement. If our life in the world is to be fully formed by eucharistic theology, then we certainly cannot authentically celebrate the meal apart from engagement with the larger issues of global justice. This point seemed especially poignant in South Africa, where drinking from the common cup seemed to be more customary in the church than use of individual glasses or even the intinction method. In those rare instances when Black and White did commune together, there was a powerful sense of commitment to social healing as well as meaningful worship. Here it was just as plain as anywhere that there can be no separating of justice and reconciliation around the table of the Lord.

Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Perhaps even more fundamental to reconciliation is its relationship to forgiveness. As the language of the Offering itself suggests, reconciliation is inseparable from forgiveness. Here forgiveness confronts us as yet another requirement for actual reconciliation. At the same time, however, we must clarify that forgiveness can nevertheless occur without reconciliation. This point may be more important than it appears.

Most analysts of our social situation in one way or another acknowledge that progress toward social reconciliation in this country has stalled. In some cases, there exists a still, quiet seething beneath the surface of civility and in others just plain resignation. Memories of past injustices continue to be aggravated by present inequalities and disparities in opportunity. Voices of protest can still be heard and there are certainly more legal and political resources brought to bear on issues requiring redress. In many cases, these resources are employed by former members of marginalized communities who have achieved high office. But among the marginalized masses, both the voices of protest and the efforts of their kin in high office have felt like too little too late.

Many on the margins of society have therefore retreated into a still, silent seething. However, this appearance of resignation is deceptive and dangerous, for in reality this seething is neither still nor silent. Much of the rage generated by social disadvantage is turned away from the real object of anger toward oneself or one’s community. It is a typical pattern that
results when rage intermingles with a perception of powerlessness.\(^6\)

A great deal of the abuse and violence in marginalized communities can therefore be attributed to rage turned inward, either upon the enraged self or upon that person’s community or family. It is certainly not that it would be better if that rage were turned outward to the real cause of social repression. Rather, it is that rage must cease altogether.

It is also not that the structures and strictures of social oppression must be accepted. On the contrary, the economy of social oppression and related ills must be engaged more earnestly than ever before with a view toward their elimination. It is just that rage must not be the \textit{emotional content} of that engagement. This caveat is not so much to spare oppressors and their institutions as it is to spare the oppressed. Rage is ultimately self-defeating and self-destructive, regardless of whether it is directed outward or inward.

Perhaps it is my experience as an inner-city pastor that makes me sensitive to the destructive effects of rage at both the individual and communal levels. Pastoral ministry in an urban context has provided me much opportunity to see the warping effects of rage. To be sure, this is not to deny the warping effects of racism, sexism, and classism in society. The victims are not to be blamed for the misery they experience. However, assigning true blame has so far done very little to alleviate suffering and bring healing. Rage has done even less and has in fact increased suffering and trauma. People in a given situation may perceive themselves as powerless and, as such, their powerlessness is probably an illusion; but rage will make powerlessness a fact. Therefore, rage must cease. Forgiveness must take its place.

No one communicated these ideas more eloquently than Martin Luther King, Jr., whose message of love and forgiveness was designed not to absolve oppressors but to empower the oppressed. With prophetic insight King realized that the power to change society came from within and that it was a spiritual power released by love and forgiveness. King espoused a radical idea, which is also tacitly affirmed in the Eucharist: we must forgive, regardless of whether the act of forgiveness is attended by reconciliation or justice.\(^7\) Along with its theme of reconciliation, the Eucharist makes its greatest promise for social transformation when it bears witness to the power of forgiveness. Herein also lies the significance of the possibility of forgiveness without reconciliation. Forgiveness means the end of rage and the end of rage means the power to transform ourselves and the world in which we live.
Two Kinds of Forgiveness

It is Scripture itself that provides the basis for two kinds of forgiveness: forgiveness with reconciliation and forgiveness without reconciliation. In regard to forgiveness with reconciliation Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” (Matt. 18:15); and again, “Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive” (Luke 17:3-4). The point is not merely that we are obliged to forgive if the one who wronged us repents but also that this very act of repentance creates the opportunity for the restoration of a relationship. What is reconciliation if not the restoration of a relationship? Certainly, the sequence of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is the ideal, and both Scripture and the Eucharist celebrate this sequence as such.

It is seldom acknowledged, however, that forgiveness must still occur in the absence of repentance or the acknowledgement of wrong. The consummate pattern for this is found in the prayer of Jesus from the cross, “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), or the prayer of Stephen, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). A less clear but important example is drawn from Jesus’ mandate to his disciples to “shake off the dust from your feet” against anyone who will not welcome them (Matt. 10:14; cf. Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:11; Acts 13:51). Are we to suppose that the disciples should continue to begrudge those who turned them away? Hardly. In this case, the disciples must forgive those who wronged them. The act of shaking dust off of their feet was also a dramatic way of shaking off ill will toward those who insulted them. Still, there was no opportunity for reconciliation. Where there is no repentance, there can be no reconciliation; but there must still be forgiveness.

Jesus made it clear: we must forgive others if we also want to be forgiven by God (Matt. 6:14-15). There is no suggestion at all that the one who forgives must wait for an expression of repentance or an act of reconciliation from the one who is forgiven. In Matt. 18:21-22, Jesus tells Peter, in response to the disciple’s question that he must forgive the one who sins against him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” It is
striking that Jesus adds nothing like “if that one repents.” It is a blanket mandate to forgive, regardless. Scripture reminds us, then, that we need not become emotional hostages to those who refuse to repent, apologize, or make amends for their wrongful acts toward us. Such refusal does not absolve them, but it empowers us.

An Occasion for Liberation

The goal of fellowship around the table of the Lord is reconciliation; but one who approaches the Lord’s table must make the decision to forgive others even when reconciliation is made impossible by their failure to repent. Let us be clear: to say, “I forgive you,” whether audibly or not, does not necessarily mean to say, “I trust you.” Nor does it mean, “I will give you an opportunity to hurt me like you did before.” It means, instead, “I will not allow you the power to elicit in me feelings of hate, anger, rage, or any other negative emotion.”

In this way, the Eucharist becomes the occasion for spiritual, mental, and emotional liberation, even if the failings of others prevent it from being an occasion for reconciliation. At the same time, those who grant forgiveness must ask if there are any to whom they must go and confess wrongdoing. Are there any to whom I must say, “I am sorry. Please forgive me”? By so doing, the celebrant’s complete inward liberation is assured. One can never be truly liberated if one is not first liberated within.

Our preceding discussion, however, is not in despair of achieving the ideal promised in the celebration of Eucharist. We must realize the transformative power inherent in obeying God’s mandate to forgive and the opportunity Eucharist provides to do just that; but we must also pursue the vision of a reconciled humanity, enacted in the Eucharist.

In recent times, the extent of the racial divide between African Americans and Anglo-Americans has been exposed in the aftermath of verdicts reached in the trials of Rodney King and O.J. Simpson. More recently, the events of September 11, 2001, made it clear that there is a divide separating Arab Americans or Arab-looking Americans from their fellow Americans. Japanese Americans of a certain generation still recall their experience of the racial divide following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Native Americans continue to be largely overlooked in the shade of headline-grabbing events.

There remains an unresolved tension within the fabric of American society and around the globe. This tension worsens as the years go by and
periodically explodes through some pressure-valve event; yet it is never healed or resolved. And it never will be, until there is a collective voice that says, “I repent,” and another collective voice that says in response, “I forgive you.”

In 1990, Lech Walesa, president of Poland, apologized for his country’s role in the persecution of Jews during World War II. It was a significant moment in Polish–Jewish relations. On the other hand, no one doubts that more than an apology—even by a president or national spokesperson—is needed to heal the rift between historically estranged groups. But an apology is a significant beginning. Overtures to conciliation have been made to Native Americans, Japanese Americans, and African Americans in local religious and civil settings; but we continue to wait for any ground-swell movement toward reconciliation between historically estranged groups on a national or global scale.

Anglo-Americans and African Americans, particularly, epitomize the historic dance of guilt and anger that keeps this society spinning in circles and making no progress toward spiritual wholeness. With Anglo-Americans unwilling to do that which will eliminate their guilt and African Americans unwilling to do that which will eliminate their anger, we can only wait until the next pressure-valve event. However, the situation has grown more complex. As September 11 has most tragically demonstrated, there are other communities out there with their own issues of guilt and anger. Suddenly, the summons to reconciliation heard in the Eucharist has become a matter of life and death within the global community. In truth, it has always been. Unless we receive the summons and respond in obedience, we are laying the groundwork for more pressure-valve events. The vision of a reconciled humanity enacted in the Eucharist is more crucial for the human family than ever before.

A Model for Social Healing

The Eucharist, with its themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, offers a model for healing human communities at all levels of interaction. Although the sacrament clearly draws its power and meaning from the presence of Christ in its celebration, its message has significance even for faith communities other than Christian. Forgiveness and reconciliation are themes common to all religious traditions and therefore become common ground for efforts to vanquish hatred and violence. Perhaps our best example of this remains Martin Luther King, Jr., a Christian who found that the best
vehicle for his ethic of love was a philosophy of nonviolent resistance, which he learned from the example of a Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi. We seek only common ground, not a compromise of the Christian message; and, as King showed, the best way to achieve common ground with other families who will work for peace is through our practice. Let the world see our Christianity first, and then the opportunity will present itself for sharing our message. It will be then that we can lift up the message of Eucharist as a witness that has universal relevance for a fragmented world.

John Wesley preached that although we cannot all think alike, we can love alike. Wesley, however, was speaking in the context of diverse Christian fellowships. He held that Christians can retain their differences and yet move forward together in love and good works. Love is the key to Christian unity. Yet this very principle can be extended in practice beyond diverse Christian communities and applied in the work of reconciliation among diverse global communities. In Didache IX, the bread of the Eucharist itself was held up as a symbol of Christian unity. As the broken bread was scattered and then gathered into one, so is the church gathered into one. The image is rather incongruous with what actually occurs in the sacrament, but the meaning is clear. Again, if unity can occur among Christians through the celebration of Eucharist, it can happen in the global community through the practice of what the Eucharist proclaims.

A Witness to Service

We finally come to the language of service, a fourth mode of expression in the Eucharist. Particularly in that part of the Great Thanksgiving known as the epiklesis, we find acknowledgement of the call to service: “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here . . . that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. . . . By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world” (10). The significant observation here is that our act of service is an expression of membership in a Spirit-formed and Spirit-empowered community. It is a community that believes in Christ’s atoning sacrifice and experiences itself as redeemed. As such, our service in and through this community is incarnational, because it represents the body of Christ active in the world. The concern here is not how the world responds to the gospel of Jesus Christ but how we live out the gospel before the eyes of others.

Our emphasis upon service, both in the language of Eucharist and the
general life of the congregation, is a distinctive part of our Wesleyan heritage. Wesley himself chronicled his rejection of the kind of religion that focuses so much on union with God and inward piety that it makes good works seem ignoble. Though at first intrigued with the literature of this perspective, Wesley realized that it was not the spirituality represented by Jesus and his disciples, namely, a religion of comprehensive love. He would eventually characterize this love as “scriptural perfection” and acknowledge its rule over all speech and action. It is not surprising that in the rules for the United Societies, Wesley follows a detailed description of good works with a listing of “the ordinances of God,” which includes the Lord’s Supper, and refers to both sections as “evidence for the desire for salvation.” For Wesley, participation in the life of the church and its sacraments ineluctably issues in social service.\(^{11}\)

In the Eucharist, we therefore see the formation of a spirituality that spirals outward in acts of relational and communal healing. In this sense, eucharistic spirituality is a distinctively centrifugal kind of piety.

You Are Forgiven

At the core of centrifugal spirituality, at the heart of the spiritual center itself, lies a vital inward experience, namely, that of being forgiven and accepted by God. The words of mutual affirmation attest to this experience: “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!” (8). The occurrence of this affirmation in the context of the Confession and Pardon clearly shows that it is God’s forgiveness of us that is being acknowledged, even though forgiveness is received from as well as given to other human beings. Here is an event that is simply fundamental to all that occurs around the table of the Lord: the experience of my own forgiveness. Those who know that they are forgiven and accepted by God are able to forgive and accept themselves, and they are then able to forgive and accept others. Indeed, we could speak in terms of “love” instead of “forgiving and accepting” and make essentially the same point. Love of one’s self is prerequisite to loving others, as implied in the famous commandment (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31). There is no difference in meaning, regardless of which terms we use. Before one can find healing for his or her relationship with others, one must first find healing for his or her relationship with self. The moment this level of healing occurs is surely indistinguishable from the moment in which one is reconciled to God.
Three Dimensions of Human Existence

We see, then, that the Eucharist summons us to wholeness in three areas, or dimensions, of human existence. It is helpful to name them the *vertical*, the *horizontal*, and the *axial* dimensions of life. These metaphors, of course, refer respectively to our relationship to God, to other human beings, and to self. By referring to our relationship with God as the vertical relationship, I am not entering the debate over whether God is “in here” or “out there” or suggesting any particular spatial location for God. I am saying only that there is a dimension of human existence that is accessed only when one acknowledges and seeks a relationship with God. As we will see below, the relationship with God is the indispensable anchor for all other aspects of our lives.

The horizontal dimension is so named because it implies reaching across to one’s fellow human being. As such, one neither reaches down in condescension or paternalism nor reaches up in subservience or humiliation. We begin with the acknowledgement that social advantage or privilege is at best an accident of history or at worst the legacy of injustice, but that it is no more deserved than marginalization or poverty. The horizontal reach is an effort at partnership with others in raising the quality of life for all. We especially seek to defeat violence by eliminating poverty and despair, its root causes.12

A person’s relationship to self is “axial” in the sense that other relationships revolve around it. On the other hand, the relationship to self is affected by relationships to others and also by the relationship to God. It is the relationship to other people that may be a hindrance to a healthy self-relationship, particularly if these others constitute a negative environment. In this case, the one who hears God’s call to wholeness must have the courage to resist the detrimental aspects of his or her environment and, if possible, to relocate to more positive surroundings. God provides a healthy alternative to both the arrogant narcissism that passes for self-love and the self-loathing instilled by the negative messages of one’s environment. God’s offer of love and forgiveness at the table of the Lord is one place to find that alternative.

In his famous sermon on Rev. 21:16 entitled “Dimensions of a Complete Life,” Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of these same aspects of human existence as the length, breadth, and height of life. King observed that although length of life—healthy self-concern—and breadth of life—
concern for others—are indispensable, life is still incomplete as long as people fail to progress beyond these two dimensions. Without the height of life—the relationship with God—life is a dead end. In this way, King disassociated himself from a humanistic altruism. In his perspective, any endeavor not grounded in God lacks power and ultimately fails.\(^{13}\)

If King was correct, as I believe he was, then the witness of the Eucharist is not mere party line or sectarian jargon but the key to the transformation of human society. King’s message that our relationship to self and others must be grounded in our relationship to God is the message of the Eucharist. King’s sermon was focused upon the completeness of the individual life, but his lesson certainly has implications for wholeness in the global community.

### The Cascade Effect

That the Eucharist has more than provincial meaning is significant in light of attempts in postmodern society to dismiss the church and its sacraments as irrelevant. In the wake of September 11, there seemed to be momentary recognition that the message and sacraments of the church are important for the human family. There was at least a sense that the church might be able to interpret the devastating tragedy of that day in theological terms. But one wonders if the greater society really sees the potential for global healing that lies in what the church has to offer. Even the church itself may be guilty of underestimating the power inherent in what it does around the Lord’s table. When Christians all over the world gather at various times for Holy Communion, there is a cascade effect that spreads throughout the global community, effecting change in ways both subtle and not so subtle. It is true that this effect may not always be acknowledged, but that does not stop the effect itself. Perhaps what is needed now is for Christians to pay more attention to how the seeds of hate are bearing fruit in overlooked quarters of the world. September 11 showed us the fruit of hatred when hatred is all that is left. When love and its expressions of forgiveness and reconciliation are absent, this kind of hate is all that will ever be left. It is clear that the world cannot continue on this course, and political entities seem incapable of summoning the right resources. But what about the church? Do we not have a vision of social transformation embodied in the Eucharist? Is not this vision an urgently needed alternative to violence as an expression of sociopolitical grievance? It may be that each of our attempts at love and reconciliation may affect only a small corner of our
world; but events that occur in enough small corners tend to coalesce into
global movements. Therefore, “[a]s forgiven and reconciled people, let us
offer ourselves and our gifts to God” (8).

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Endnotes

1. John Wesley, “Sermon CI,” in John Wesley: A Representative Collection of His
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2. “Service of Word and Table I,” The United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville: The
United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 9. Hereafter, all page citations from
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Donaldson, trans. by M.B. Riddle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), 7:381.
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the problem as “nihilism.”
7. Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and
Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. by James M. Washington (New York:
8. Ibid., 38.
11. See Outler, John Wesley, 47, 179, 293.
12. See Dennis E. Gale, Understanding Urban Unrest: From Reverend King to
13. Martin Luther King, Jr., The Measure of a Man (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988),
35-56.
Open Communion as a United Methodist Exception

MARK W. STAMM

Who should be allowed to receive Communion in The United Methodist Church? In an earlier essay,¹ I began my discussion of that question by pointing to the invitation in “A Service of Word and Table I” in The United Methodist Hymnal. It says,

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him,
who earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.
Therefore, let us confess our sin before God and one another.²

The invitation does not demand that one be a member of any particular denomination. In that ecclesiastical sense, it points to an “open” table. The invitation is, however, not unconditional. It makes demands, implying that those who come for Communion should be disciples of Jesus Christ. To state this demand in sacramental language, Holy Communion is for those living within the grace and disciplines of the baptismal covenant. It is for those who commit themselves to renouncing sin, resisting evil, professing faith, and living in a diverse fellowship—all of it made possible by the Holy Spirit.³

The church’s official teaching on baptism, By Water and the Spirit, allows for an unrestricted table, but only in a provisional sense: "Unbaptized persons who receive communion should be counseled and nurtured toward baptism as soon as possible."⁴ It is implied that Communion of the non-baptized is possible, yet irregular. Doubtless this provision arose out of a generous spirit, yet its unspoken implications can undermine the foundational insight of the whole sacramental system. Baptism witnesses that God’s action makes us part of the body of Christ, where we are then nurtured by the sacramental body (see 1 Corinthians 11–12). An open Communion that includes nonbaptized persons implies that one can effect this transition from world to church by an act of human will, through a simple decision to rise

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and come to the table. Such thinking is like crossing the Red Sea in our own boat, without God’s help. It expresses the voluntaristic individualism that our best sacramental theologians have been arguing against for the past three decades and more. Baptism is God’s action, God’s gift.\(^5\)

This voluntaristic understanding of admission to the table has a potential dark side. If an individual or corporate human decision—mine, or even a decision of the General Conference—can admit people, then an individual or corporate human decision can exclude them as well. Of course, the church has a long history of excluding persons it finds undesirable, and Methodism has participated in that history.\(^6\) To require baptism for admission is to insist that God’s action admits persons of all ages, races, and stations to the one table. In the long run, requiring baptism for admission will protect the theological foundation of an inclusive United Methodist fellowship.\(^7\)

Nevertheless, pastoral realities often make such theological questions more complicated. For instance, in some cultural and religious contexts, families have disowned members who receive Christian baptism. As a bishop of the Mar Thoma Church once asked me quite pointedly, “Should a Hindu man or woman drawn to Christ be forced to choose between family and church?” In order to avoid such problems, should such persons be admitted to the Eucharist without benefit of baptism? One can argue that the choice, difficult as it is, should be made. After all, disciples are called to take up the cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-38). According to Jesus, the disciple who insists on returning home to bury his father is not fit for the kingdom (Luke 9: 59-62). Nevertheless, if the church insists on baptism in such cases, it must become the family of God in specific and practical ways that move beyond mere rhetoric. Otherwise, the demand for baptism has little moral integrity.

On a less urgent plane stands the church’s call to exercise hospitality with seekers that come from secular culture. If we do not invite these people to the table, will they become offended and never return? Once alienated from the church, will they care about our vision of radical inclusivity, regardless of its theological foundation? These issues remind us, yet again, that matters of evangelism and missiology, ethics and theology, are not easily separated from the church’s worship life, nor should they be.

Who should be allowed to receive Communion in The United Methodist Church? Complicating the discussion is the fact that many (if not most) United Methodists have already settled the question—official rites, rubrics, and resolutions notwithstanding. Indeed, the vast majority of
United Methodist parishes practice a completely open table, with no restrictions whatsoever, and they have come to take it for granted. Nevertheless, The United Methodist Church does not exist in a historical and ecumenical vacuum. Thus, we should ask the theological question: Who should be allowed to receive? If United Methodists insist on a completely unrestricted table, can they justify that practice theologically, and if so, on what basis? How should such a practice be understood by the rest of the church catholic? What unintended problems may arise from this practice of the open table?

Corporate Experience as Theological Justification

Since the Methodist tradition values what John Wesley called “experimental religion,” justification for the practice of open Communion begins with the corporate experience of United Methodist people. We will take the “sense of the faithful” seriously. Some may argue that developing a sense of the faithful requires a clear process of corporate discernment, such as a congregation might enter when it is contemplating a radical shift in missional focus. In that deliberative sense, the corporate experience I am describing does not qualify as a sense of the faithful. I would contend, however, that the long evolution of a liturgical praxis is, in fact, such a corporate discernment process. Positions are expressed, feedback is received and arguments occur, practices are adjusted, and something like a consensus emerges. One discovers the boundaries of the consensus by transgressing them. Such an evolutionary process may not use the specialized language of spiritual formation, but it is an intensely spiritual and theological process.

So, how is this consensus on open Communion embodied in The United Methodist Church? Regardless of the words used to invite persons to the table—and they range from the Word and Table I invitation to something like “Everybody present is welcomed”—I know of no United Methodist congregation that actually checks the spiritual and ecclesial credentials of persons who present themselves for Communion. We should take note of the obvious passion with which United Methodists practice and defend their commitment to the open table, especially when their consensus is transgressed. “It is the Lord’s table,” we say, “not a United Methodist table.” Such language is deeply rooted in debates that occurred among and between nineteenth-century Baptists, members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and Methodists. Writing in 1853, Baptist minister Samuel Whitney argued against
the closed Communion practiced by some of his Baptist colleagues by quoting Jesus’ commandment, “Drink ye all of it.” He continued, “[This commandment means] not merely the baptized, but all members of the household of faith who may be present, for it is the Lord’s table, designed for any who are members of his body.” Whitney wrote, “If this were not the Lord’s table, but ours, the case would be different.”

Commenting on Whitney’s book, the Methodist Quarterly Review from the same year said,

“This is an age of progress, and though all progress is not necessarily good, this is an instance in which it is undoubtedly so . . . Let [our Baptist brethren] hold to immersion, let them hold to Calvinism, but do not let them exclude from the Lord’s Supper those who they concede to be the Lord’s people.”

These persons were arguing not for the admission of the unchurched or persons of other religions but for the admission of all who profess Christ. The language of this debate remains with contemporary United Methodists. Indeed, many worship leaders today will say something like, “This is not a United Methodist table; it is an open table. All who wish to receive may come.” Many witness to the formative power of that affirmation, saying that it expresses the essence of The United Methodist Church. Conversely, at Communion services in some denominations, printed notices and/or spoken rubrics will express something like, “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive Communion.” The intent of such statements is hospitable and invitational, yet many United Methodists hear them as exclusionary, responding to them with perplexity, sometimes even with anger. After a seminary chapel service at which the “all baptized Christians” invitation was given, one of my United Methodist students remarked, “The presider said all baptized Christians are invited to the table. In this setting, can’t everyone come?” Such passion among United Methodists seems to reflect a deeply felt commitment—the product of long debate, theological reflection, and discernment—and should be taken seriously.

The Open Table and the Classical Paradigm
Acknowledging such a passionate sense of the faithful does not mean, however, that United Methodists may thereby set aside the classical norms of Scripture and tradition. As the Discipline states, “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by
Methodist tradition is rooted in John Wesley’s encounter with the gospel: that is, it is rooted in his experience of the gospel.

Admitting nonbaptized persons was hardly a question in John Wesley’s context, where state church realities meant that most of the populace were baptized. However, Wesley contended with a related sacramental problem in his dealings with the Moravians and their “stillness” doctrine, also called “quietism.” Although the Moravians practiced infant baptism, they insisted that one refrain from the Lord’s Supper and other means of grace until one had received assurance of justification. Wesley rejected this doctrine, insisting instead that “all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside.”

Thus, one sought God in the midst of faithful reflection on Scripture and faithful worship and prayer, through fasting and receiving the Eucharist. Out of this debate with the Moravians grew the Methodist understanding of Communion as a converting ordinance. This idea was not a new one, but it became particularly important in Methodist praxis. The experience of Susanna Wesley, who received assurance of justification while receiving Communion, helped confirm this understanding of Communion as converting ordinance, as has the testimony of others. Many extend its logic to include the nonbaptized.

Directly related to this emphasis on the Eucharist as a means of grace is the Wesleyan emphasis on prevenient grace—that universal work of God’s Spirit that calls each person toward a saving relationship with Christ and his church. Of course, John Wesley taught that persons might resist such grace though persistent disobedience and lack of faith. In that sense, he was no universalist, but he did believe that no one should be denied the possibility of salvation in Christ. Based on this doctrine of prevenient grace, many Methodists will insist that denying the sacrament to a non-baptized person will hinder God’s work in their life, even to the point of their exclusion from the kingdom of heaven. Who is willing to bear the responsibility of that risk? It is a weighty question.

Standing against this Methodist argument is the normative order for Christian initiation practiced in the ancient church and still affirmed (in principle) by most Christian communions. In this order, catechumenal formation is followed by baptism, which is then followed by first Eucharist. Again, we can assume that this pattern developed in faithfulness to a gospel
that calls the church to make disciples through baptism and teaching. It developed in response to the gospel call to receive the body of Christ for the sake of the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:37-42, 1 Corinthians 10–15).

The commitment to formation embodied in some of the ancient orders is truly impressive. Take, for instance, the description given by Hippolytus of Rome, writing in the third century. He spoke of a clear call to repentance followed by a catechumenate that lasted three years. Then came baptism and first Communion. Infants could be baptized, but one may presume that their sponsors were well-formed disciples. Spanish pilgrim Egeria described a similar pattern as it occurred in late fourth-century Jerusalem. Candidates for baptism were enrolled in the company of sponsors who knew them well and could hold them accountable to the way of discipleship. The candidates would gather around the bishop each weekday during Lent and receive three hours of instruction in the Bible and the Creed. Thus, only after extensive formation were persons admitted for baptism and first Communion. As we engage these ancient orders for making disciples, we should assume that those who formed them were faithful interpreters of the biblical narrative with wise pastoral intentions. We should not, however, assume that they understood all things perfectly. All tradition, regardless of its antiquity, is subject to correction and adjustment under the same biblical witness that first shaped it.

**The Open Table as Methodist Exception**

Due to their belief in the Eucharist as converting ordinance and their focus on prevenient grace, most Methodists will lean toward a radical inclusion. When pressed theologically, they will argue that the ancient order needs an adjustment. How can such an adjustment be defended ecumenically? I argue that the open table should be understood as a Methodist exception to the classical order for Christian initiation. As I explained in a previous essay, an exception is a conscious departure from the accepted norm, yet not for reasons of disobedience or lack of faith. It is prophetic in nature, seeking a higher expression of faith. Such a sacramental exception seeks to highlight meanings of the Eucharist that may be obscured by the normative pattern itself. For example, the Society of Friends does not celebrate the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in the ritualized sense practiced by most Christians. Members of the Society may challenge us, however, were we to accuse them of setting aside Jesus’ commandment “Do this in remembrance...
of me" (1 Cor. 11:24). On the contrary, they may insist that every meal shared is the Lord’s table, not just those meals formally called “the Eucharist.” Every meal is an agape, an occasion for koinonia among Christ and his people. The founder of the Society, George Fox, rejected the idea of sacraments, but he also wrote, “The bread that the saints break is the body of Christ and the cup that they drink is the blood of Christ, this I witness.” What did he mean? With this sacramental exception, the Friends remind the rest of the church that first-generation Christians knew no sharp distinction between agape meals and the Lord’s Supper. Attempts to drive a wedge between them represents our concern more than theirs. The Friends remind contemporary Christians to seek a closer connection between the Eucharist and all of our eating and drinking. Their understanding of all meals as Lord’s table follows a longstanding prophetic tradition that criticizes and even rejects ritual, not in disobedience or impiety, but for the sake of its essential meaning. Prophetic witnesses will say, “I hate, I despise your festivals” (Amos 5:21-24)—even festivals established by God and shaped by the best pastoral wisdom—in order that justice and righteousness may abound and festivals be celebrated aright. The Friends understanding of the table calls us to look closer at the practices of the first century.

The Methodist exception to the normative pattern for Christian initiation calls the church to a similar process, to look beyond the so-called “institution narratives” (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor. 11:23-26) to the wider context of Jesus’ eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors, to his feeding of the crowds, to the many parables and stories relating to meals. All of these biblical texts reflect the insights of first-century churches—that is, of active eucharistic communities—and we can assume that their telling is shaped by the experience of eating and drinking with Jesus in the Eucharist. For instance, the multiplication stories are obviously eucharistic in shape, portraying a Jesus who, when he fed the multitudes, took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17). We can assume that the stories of the Jesus who “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2) reflects the lifestyle of the historical Jesus; yet the Gospel accounts also reflect the eucharistic experience of the church that told the stories. The Risen Christ of their experience welcomed sinners who returned from their sojourn in “a distant country” (Luke 15:13) and made them guests of honor at his great banquet. They experienced such a welcome every Lord’s Day in the sharing of bread.
and cup. By this understanding, the entire gospel is an institution narrative.

United Methodists have embodied this wider sense of the gospel in their eucharistic prayers. Our Great Thanksgiving patterns recall the entirety of Jesus’ life and ministry, not just his death and resurrection. We remember the Christ who “healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners.” As we understand it, the holy meal is rooted not just in a scene from the passion narrative but also in the wider meal ministry of Jesus. When Methodists proclaim their radically open table, they call the church to a fuller anamnesis of the Christ proclaimed in the Gospels—of the Christ who would eat with anybody, anywhere, at any time.

The United Methodist Church has made this gospel insight a particularly integral part of its eucharistic praying through the above-mentioned phrase: “He (Jesus) healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners.” At some point during the shaping of the Great Thanksgiving for a Service of Word and Table I, James F. White heard a seminary chapel sermon delivered by the late New Testament scholar William Farmer. Farmer reminded the congregation about Jesus’ practice of eating with sinners and the scholarly consensus on the historicity of that claim. After the sermon, White returned to his office and added the phrase “ate with sinners” to the proposed text, thus making an important United Methodist contribution to the ecumenical church’s experience of praying at the Lord’s table. This phrase resonates deeply with United Methodists. If Christ was so clearly indiscriminate in his table fellowship, they will argue, then who are we to do otherwise? “The table is not a United Methodist table, it is the Lord’s table.”

Potential Problems?
As I have demonstrated, United Methodists may be able to justify their sacramental exception, but practicing it presents potential problems that should be acknowledged. The ancient orders for Christian initiation embody important, hard-won values. In particular, they embody a commitment to a disciplined formation that initiates persons into a countercultural, eucharistic way of life. If all can partake of the Eucharist, with or without repentance and spiritual formation, then by what right do United Methodists call anyone to such holiness of heart and life? Or, if Methodists do not follow the ancient church in calling persons to radical formation through disciplines related to baptism and admission to the Eucharist, then at what point will they do so? In the past, Methodists did such formational
work in the class meetings. With that system long inactive, its spirit exists mostly in special interest groups like Covenant Discipleship; yet its dynamics are needed by the whole church, not just a select few. If we do not adopt something like a catechumenal prebaptismal discipline, then at what point will we do the work of forming the previously unchurched? Do United Methodists expect such formation to occur spontaneously? What are the negative consequences, albeit unintended, of setting aside all fencing off of the table? If baptism does not come first, then how will we logically insist that God admits people to the table?

Its positive witness of generosity notwithstanding, the open table must not contradict the biblical expectation that those who eat and drink with Jesus will repent, opening their hearts to new life. As I have insisted in Sacraments and Discipleship, Methodist ecclesiology and its attendant sacramental praxis should be marked not simply by an open invitation, as important and compelling as that may be, but also by an open invitation to a disciplined life. To take this point to its deeper level, we should recall the most scandalous implications of eating and drinking with Jesus. As with baptism, those who eat with Jesus enter into the dynamics of his death. That is, they enter the depths of the Paschal mystery itself. Many eucharistic hymns written during the twentieth century, and particularly those included in The United Methodist Hymnal, have focused on banquet and fellowship imagery. Not unlike the previously mentioned trend in eucharistic praying, which has included aspects of Christ’s life beyond his suffering and death, this expansion of imagery was necessary to make a more complete exposition of New Testament themes. Eucharist is banquet and feast—the joyful marriage supper of the Lamb—yet it is not that alone. If emphasized to the exclusion of other themes, focus on banquet and feast can become a new form of docetism, a denial of the Paschal character of the Christian life. The eucharistic mystery is far deeper than the conviviality shared at a church coffee hour. Again, those who eat with Jesus enter into the dynamics of his death.

In that light, those who would eat and drink with Jesus may well be warned as well as invited. They should hear the question he posed to his often uncomprehending disciples: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38). They should also hear his plea in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). Like the other texts about eating
and drinking with Jesus, these also should be heard in light of the early church’s eucharistic experience. Indeed, only God’s grace makes us able to drink the eucharistic cup, but the grace that we receive does not excuse us from the dynamics of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. The Wesleys spoke eloquently about the Eucharist as means of grace and foretaste of the celestial banquet; so we are right to do the same. They also understood the Eucharist as identification with Christ’s death, and so they expressed this idea in their Communion hymns. Charles Wesley wrote,

Would the Savior of mankind
   Without His people die?
No, to Him we all are join’d
   As more than standers by.
Freely as the Victim came
   To the altar of His cross,
We attend the slaughter’d Lamb,
   And suffer for His cause.

Indeed, participation in the Eucharist is potentially dangerous, like the rest of Christian life. The Eucharist is a means of grace, but grace is not a freefloating, abstract concept that we may define any way we please. The meaning of grace is rooted in the biblical narrative, where the grace proclaimed moves us toward life and resurrection, but only by way of Good Friday and the Cross. If United Methodists insist on a radically open table, then they should (at least) proclaim this Paschal dynamic as part of their invitation. At the very least, those who eat and drink with Jesus are entering a realm where costly love is demanded, where they will be called to repent and to love the unlovable. Again, the classic invitation may say it best:

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him,
   who earnestly repent of their sin
   and seek to live in peace with one another.

Conclusion

John Wesley was quite suspicious of Christians who thought they could do without God’s appointed means of grace. Against advocates of the “still-
ness” doctrine, he wrote, “[A]ll who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which [God] hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside.”24 This conviction leads us to our practice of the open table. Ironically, the open table can undermine the sacramental dynamic it seeks to magnify.

While the open table as practiced by many United Methodists is not the classical norm proclaimed by the wider church, it can, nonetheless, help the church catholic come to a deeper understanding of the Eucharist, one shaped by the entire meal ministry of Jesus. In all likelihood, United Methodists will continue practicing the open table. Even so, they should affirm the formational values of the classic initiatory order, heeding the wisdom expressed in By Water and the Spirit. Methodists may continue to invite all persons to the Lord’s table, as long as they understand that non-baptized seekers should be urged to enter the baptismal covenant and be taught the full truth about its costly dynamics.

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Endnotes


3. All of these values are expressed in “The Baptismal Covenant I,” The United Methodist Hymnal, 33-39.


7. I make a similar argument in my doctoral dissertation. See Mark W. Stamm,
OPEN COMMUNION AS A UNITED METHODIST EXCEPTION

8. Samuel Worcester Whitney, Open Communion, or the principles of restricted communion examined and proved to be unscriptural and false in a series of letters to a friend (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1853), 78, 81.
17. The United Methodist Hymnal, 9 (my emphasis).
23. The United Methodist Hymnal, 7.
How Often Should United Methodists Commune?

DAVID TRIPP

How often should United Methodists commune? Either this question does not matter at all; and the simple answer is that every congregation, every pastor, should simply follow instinct, inclination, fashion, or the majority vote. Or it matters desperately, because it goes to the root of our church’s authenticity as a Christian church, a witnessing church—and then the answers will not be simple.

Perhaps the question is not about United (or other kinds of) Methodists but about Christians and Christian churches in general. To make one limited tradition the self-contained basis for a confrontation with this issue is stultifying and forecloses the discussion before it begins. This particular tradition has its history, and the present results of that history are well known. Historical explanations are valuable; and they may suggest how intractable present issues will be, how deeply entrenched present feelings are, and how far we may seem to have departed from original visions. But the history will not give the power to change the present results. At the same time, we have to face this limited tradition as it is, accepting responsibility for its current state.

Perhaps the question is oddly phrased, because it is not simply a matter of communing—receiving Communion—which is only part of the service. There is indeed a pressing moral question for each communicant: how often ought I to receive Holy Communion? But that does not exhaust, let alone predetermine, the wider issue: how often, in each of our congregations, ought we to spread the table of the Lord, celebrate the Eucharist, observe the Lord’s Supper? Whatever the preferred name, the question is the same.

A further question suggests itself: is it really a matter of how often we do, or ought to do, this? Are we in fact the agents here? Here, at once, we dive into deep water. Here also, if my argument is sound, is the fundamental decision point. The sacraments are not, in the first place, our—the
church’s—acts. We are allowed to take part in them, and in grace we are given the awe-ful responsibility of being their necessary instruments, whether as members of the celebrating body of Christ, or, within that Body, as ordained officiants. But the agent is the triune God. Of the sacraments, our church says that “they are certain signs of grace and God’s good will towards us, in which he doth work invisibly in us,” and that “they are means of grace by which God works invisibly in us.” Further, we assert that sacraments, as means of grace, are “outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to . . . [us] preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”

In the words of one of the few Methodist treatises on sacramental theology that has proved to be durable: sacraments are God’s self-giving.

A Sacramental Church in a Sacramental Universe

The implications of this are remarkable. Let us state them here with the minimum of reservation. The Logos, in whom the fullness of Deity dwells (that is, in whose presence and action, according to the principle of coinherence, is the presence and action of the divine totality), is the governing principle of the universe: the entirety of things has at its heart, and throughout the extent of all events, the personal principle of self-giving, of self-oblation, of self-communicating. When we speak (or sing) of grace, we are contemplating the impact of the divine, not merely upon individual personalities or human groups, or even society as a whole, but upon and through the entire extent of matter and mind and space and time. There is more than a poetic conceit in the desperate cry of Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe’s climactic scene: “See, see, where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament . . .” Thus, what we do or omit to do in what happens in church conveys and instills an understanding of all reality, all relationships.

In the midst of his church, at every moment, is Christ, the Incarnate Logos. At every moment he is holding out his gospel, his announcement of the reality of the Kingdom and his invitation into it, his invitation to enter it through faith by water and the Spirit and to abide and mature in that kingdom by feasting at his table. Every moment, therefore, Christ is holding out the gift of himself in bread and wine. In the Spirit, he manifests this presence—his summons, his offering—in and through his church’s ministries of love and witness and, most explicitly, in its sacramental acts.
This places a staggering burden upon us, the Christian church. If we silence or muffle the preaching of Christ’s gospel, it is Christ’s own voice that we are trying to mute—and, even though he will find ways to make himself heard in spite of us, our failure as his representatives is reprehensible. When we are not spreading the table of the Lord, it is Christ’s own offering of himself that we are withholding.

**Word and Table**

When we divide the Word, we have not finished until we have broken the bread. The once overly familiar dichotomy between preaching and sacraments, which was alleged to be integral to Protestantism, may still be asserted, but it is no longer tenable. Even when this view was still taken for granted, it was beginning to show signs of disintegration. Paul Tillich, writing in 1926, commented:

> Protestantism rests upon the preaching, the proclamation of the otherworldly (jenseitigen) God, who transcends all human implementation (Verwirklichung). Protestantism has none of the sacrament which was rejected by the message of the prophets, and therefore it has no priesthood and no real worship. And yet even the sermon, when it is something more than grace-bestowed prophecy, presupposes a stance which is both priestly and cultic. Preaching, by its very essence, is the very nullification of priesthood and worship, and yet at the same time a new foundation for both.6

One important reason why we cannot be content now with formulations such as this is that sacraments (like preaching, when it is truly so called), are precisely not “human implementation”: they are realized and manifested through human acts and words, but they are done by God. “For the sake of Christ, and on Christ’s behalf, we appeal, as ambassadors of God who, as it were, is beseeching through us: we entreat you on behalf of Christ—be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20, my translation). What Paul says of apostolic ministry is true not only of preaching but also of the entire ministry of reconciliation, and an essential part of reconciliation is that the errant children are seated again at the Father’s table.

One of the most far-reaching of all liturgical decisions, possibly the most vital, is the allocation of time. It is frustrating to many that we cannot trace in detail how Christians came, instead of making the Sabbath rest the
first rule, to defining their week with the Lord’s day, the day of celebration. The reason for this decision is, of course, obvious: This first day of the week is the day of triumph, the feast of resurrection, and therefore also a foretaste of the world to come. From the Emmaus encounter onward, the Christian Kyriake has been a day for meeting the Risen One in the breaking of the bread. In our present situation in the Western world, where, although many people have to go to work on Sunday, the day is still privileged in many ways, the plans a church makes for this day constitute its definitive manifesto. This is the day of days, and what we set forth this day says what we are, what we mean to be, what we invite everyone to be, today and eternally. This makes the choice of liturgical program for Sunday a crucial decision.

Our Road So Far

If we put together all these considerations set out so far, the implication is obvious: the Eucharist should be celebrated, the table of the Lord spread, on every Lord’s Day. This was certainly John Wesley’s counsel for the nascent denomination that was to be the Methodist Episcopal Church in the newly independent United States: “I . . . advise the elders to administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord’s day . . .”; and on this and other aspects of his liturgical program: “If any one will point out a more rational and scriptural way, of feeding and guiding those poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it.” His unambiguous counsel for individual communicants, in his sermon on “constant Communion,” was this:

It is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he [or she] can . . . because it is a plain command of Christ, . . . because the benefits of doing it are so great to all that do it in obedience to him; viz., the forgiveness of our past sins, the present strengthening and refreshing of our souls. . . . This is the food of our souls: This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection.

John Wesley’s own habits matched his professed principles: John Bowmer showed, in his classic study of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in early Methodism, that John Wesley “probably communicated at least from seventy to ninety times a year, that is, an average of once every four or five days.” In the 1745 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, published by John
and Charles Wesley early in their ministry, there is even a hint (hyperbolic though it may have been) of a daily Eucharist, even if this might have been possible for early Methodists or other contemporary Anglicans only during the octaves of Christmas and Easter:

Ye Royal Priests of Jesus, rise,
And join the Daily Sacrifice . . .  

So what happened to change this early vision? It is plain that the various strands of world Methodism did not perpetuate, if indeed they ever really endorsed, the pattern that John Wesley advocated. We must insist again: the subsequent developments neither invalidate what he stood for nor dictate what we ought to do now, but some explanation is needed for the ways things have changed.

We must first note that John Wesley’s summons to constant Communion was neither a call to nor an assumption of frequent Communion. For the pupils in his care around 1733, weekly Communion was a possibility, since they were all in Oxford, where the rubric could be obeyed: “And in Cathedral and Collegiate Churches, and Colleges, where there are many Priests and Deacons, they shall all receive the Communion with the Priest every Sunday at the least, except they have a reasonable cause to the contrary.”

All well and good in Oxford, but the situation in the parishes of eighteenth-century England was very different. In many places, the legal minimum of three Communion services a year was all you could find. The Anglican conditioning of early British Methodists was at least as strong, subliminally, as their reconditioning by the Evangelical Revival and the Wesleyan part of it. We should also keep in mind the general ethos of eighteenth-century England: increasingly sceptical, cautious, fearful of enthusiasm in every sense, fearful of Roman Catholicism, uneasy in the face of symbolism, and readily inclined to describe religion in anthropocentric, rationally (i.e., humanistically) manageable, nonmysterious, and nonsacerdotal ways. Sacramental religion will not, in such a climate, be the obvious thing to go in for. However, when it is engaged in, it will be with measured seriousness, with a fear of unworthiness (although the Eucharist is essentially a feast of grace, not of merit!), and probably as a special and rare observance.

This is exemplified in the spirituality of Francis Asbury, and although the factors determining liturgical development are in almost every case far
more complex than the influence of individual leaders, his place in American Methodism must not be ignored. From his arrival in America in 1771 until the Christmas Conference in 1784, Asbury had to restrain Methodists from administering the ordinances without the benefit of ordination. Encounters from this period, such as the following, are suggestive. Benedict Swope and Asbury had some conversation about the ordinances administered by Mr. Strawbridge. He advanced some reasons to urge the necessity of them, and said Mr. Wesley did not do well to hinder us from the administration of them. I told him they did not appear to me as essential to salvation and that it did not appear to be my duty to administer the ordinances at that time (November 22, 1772); [and on March 11, 1774:] Calling at Dr. Henderson’s, I met with I.R., a Quaker, who said it gave him pain to think that Joseph Pilmoor should go home for ordination, and expressed his disapprobation of our going to the Church for the ordinances, supposing that we might have them amongst ourselves. But this was all a farce. He would rather that we should drop them altogether. And in the course of conversation he laboured to overthrow them entirely. But when I told him it might appear to me as a duty to use them, though I should not suppose that all went to hell who did not use them; he asked, why we use them if they are not essential to salvation? What weak reasoning is this!13

There is, on Asbury’s side, no hint that the sacraments are not of divine institution and permanent obligation; but if they are not necessary to salvation, how binding is the institution and how peremptory the obligation?

Another complicating factor is the setting of eucharistic celebrations in the formative years of American Methodism. They are indeed high seasons—“market days of the soul”—and they occur especially at quarterly meetings, in close association with love feasts. Fervent testimonies to justifying and sanctifying grace accompanied both celebrations; and it is not clear to which, if either of these types of service, the participants attached more significance. Lester Ruth, in his excellent study, A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings, has warned us against underestimating early Methodists’ appreciation of worship—specifically sacramental worship—with their keen appreciation of the transforming presence of the power of God.14 We have, however, yet to discover (if, indeed, we ever can) where the emphasis lay in their interpretation of what was
happening in the worship at these gatherings. Back in England, the issue was raised in a controversial setting. The Tractarian leader Edward Bouverie Pusey accused the Wesleyan Methodists (and I use the expression “accused” quite literally) of preferring their humanly invented Methodist peculiarity, the love feast, to the divinely instituted Supper of the Lord. Thomas Jackson vigorously defended the Methodists against the charge.\textsuperscript{15} However, there is some evidence that Pusey had the facts on his side. In some Methodist Societies, at least, the collection for the Poor Fund was consistently larger at the quarterly love feast than at Communion.\textsuperscript{16} Of course, the love feast has faded, among white Methodist-descended churches, while the Eucharist has survived. So, we must face this question: Is there indeed a tendency in the Methodist tradition to prefer rites of our own invention to those of dominical origin? Further, do we tend to shy away from the symbolic and the visual? And do we fear to look too similar to other Christians?

This complex of historical meanderings does not give us clear direction for the future. However, it does leave us with issues that we must resolve on grounds other than precedent.

On both sides of the Atlantic, there is still the calendrical dimension: if the Lord’s Supper, however special and numinous and potent, is a quarterly event, can it be seen as the norm, or even part of the norm, of Christian celebration on the Lord’s Day? The present pattern of United Methodist celebration seems to vary principally between monthly and quarterly observance, with rare instances of a weekly celebration; and there are churches where the members tell me that the Lord’s Supper takes place when the pastor decides it will, but they cannot identify the pattern of these choices (and they do not seem to know how to ask). Whatever our future policy is to be, decisions will best be made openly and corporately, with reasons given and misgivings admitted and gently considered. And both clergy and laity will have to live with compromise and bear one another’s burdens.

**Rethinking—and Not Just about the Eucharist**

If we are to think of pursuing a collective reassertion of the Eucharist as essential to the celebration of the Lord’s Day, several areas of rethinking are involved.

One area is the entire strategy of the provision of ministry to churches...
of various sizes. How many congregations can be offered only a “supply pastor,” who cannot, of course, be given a license to perform sacramental ministry? How many churches in such a situation are denied the sacraments for many weeks, even months, because no elder is available (or willing?) to travel out to them? The answers to these questions (which I cannot give, and do not wish to seek) might be embarrassing. Leaving such a situation a moment longer than is inevitable, and thereby effectively denying such a congregation the heart of Christian worship and witness, would surely be unthinkable. A glance at the wider problem of the provision of ministry tells us at once that, in the long term, the assumption that individual congregations and clergy must function in isolation must be questioned. (This is what has, in effect, come to be accepted as the norm, though it makes the “connectional” principle a pious fiction.) There are resources to meet this challenge in our traditional, however much neglected, Methodist ecclesiology, according to which, in the language of Scripture, “none of us lives for herself or himself, and none dies for herself or himself” (cf. Rom. 14:7). Further, any thorough commitment to provision of authenticated sacramental ministry will, if the implications of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry are adequately noted, involve us in reconsidering the ordination of “local” pastors and the abandonment of the absurd notion that ordination (which is not a piece of denominational private property) is significantly linked with itinerancy.

Structural or polity adaptations are not insignificant, but they can achieve little without a continued revitalization of ministry and membership. As to the ministry, do we, the ordained or otherwise appointed, in fact see the Eucharist as one of the indispensable areas of our ministry? (Yes, we all know what the ordination rites and the Discipline say, but where are we emotionally?) And how do we perceive the interlocking of liturgy and the rest of ministry and the interlocking of preaching with presidency at the table of the Lord? There are, of course, some (United) Methodist materials to support us in this rethinking, which is in itself an overhauling of our ministerial discipleship and spirituality. But, as an act of faith, we need to look beyond our anxious borders to see how colleagues in other traditions have been led to set side by side the service of the Word and the service of the Table. A personal choice is to read (in any order) two works by members of the other “order of preachers,” Paul on Preaching by Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, O.P., and Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God by
Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. Or, staying with the Protestants, consider Jean-Jacques von Allmen’s *Preaching and Congregation*, together with Donald M. Baillie’s *The Theology of the Sacraments and Other Papers*. (If it seems an un-Methodist thing to do to look over the garden fence, we recall that the standard *Notes on the New Testament* leaned heavily, and admittedly, on Bible commentators from other churches!)

**Underlying Spirituality for Ministry and Membership**

One foundation stone of a ministerial spirituality to which the sacraments are central is a proper understanding of the *ex opere operato* principle. This is not to revert to magic but to insist that the authenticity of the sacraments does not rest on us, the ministers—on the *opus operantis*—but on the act obediently done; for it is to that act which God’s gracious covenant has made the divine pledge to needy humankind. Behind that act, according to the wise interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas, is the act above all acts, the work of love done once for all and with universal efficacy on the cross, by the suffering Savior in person.

Equally urgent is the discovery by all church members, lay and ordained, of a confident sacramental spirituality. The answer will no doubt include some preaching on the sacraments, but, as James White has cogently shown, specialized Communion meditations are not the indicated forward move. Preaching of Christ will, *by its very nature*, call us into incorporation into Christ, and will naturally deepen a hunger for receiving the body and blood as the missionary Body. Both lay and clergy will have to unlearn a consumerist, self-serving approach to ritual. It may be true, on a phenomenological level, that “prayer, ritual, and dogma . . . all are means of focusing the religious intention during a definite period of time”; that prayer may, but does not essentially, require a God to respond; and that group rituals and symbols develop because “the expressive symbols aid the individual by eliciting intentions that would otherwise lie mostly dormant.” This may be true, but, if so, what it shows is that the religious instinct is both an avenue for the divine self-giving of revelation and an area where healing and transformation are desperately needed. When we take part in the Eucharist, our individuality is affirmed but also lifted into a corporate richness in which the individual is saved progressively from individualism. The model for this manifold transformation, and the power that enables and bestows it, is the life of the triune God, in whom “person” is
not a closed and self-defending private world but an openness that knows no limit to giving and a shared life that reaches out in shared sacrifice.\textsuperscript{25} Growing into trinitarian life includes a new vision of hope for the whole human community, as well as for the church.

Another continuous need of the church is catechesis on the nature, structure, movement, and implications of the Eucharist, addressing a variety of personalities and using varied media. Methodists can do this, as we see in the work of Herchel H. Sheets and, most recently, Byron Anderson.\textsuperscript{26} One such resource may be a booklet of hymns, for reading more than singing, illustrating the successive phases of the liturgy.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Behold the Lamb of God: Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Table}

Congregations, as missionary congregations, also require catechesis in their missionary role, especially when they are tempted to limit Sunday events to ostensibly evangelistic presentations that offer song and motivational speech but reserve or conceal the altar to which the gospel calls. Even where witness is through TV or the Internet, with the new models of society that are thus emerging,\textsuperscript{28} the Eucharist is indispensable; and a congregation reaching out by this means will need a special form of sacramental catechesis. The key to such catechesis seems to lie not in exhortations just to go in for lots of eucharistic celebration but in rediscovering boldly the missionary nature of the Body, with commitment to the whole range of society, seeing Jesus in every neighbor. Anyone who has been at such a church—the Broadway Christian Parish in South Bend, Indiana, being the most obvious example I know—will attest to this. This congregation, which decided not to run away from a failing neighborhood, sustains a most varied ministry of teaching, giving, and caring, and celebrates the Eucharist every Lord’s Day. During this celebration, which is ordered and regular in format, emotionally disturbed people may do the most unexpected things; yet, there is no comment, just silent acceptance in love, sustained by reverence. But those who have been there and have been part of these events are reminded of the scene in the martyrs’ dreams in third-century Carthage (\textit{Acts of Perpetua and Felicity}), where the Good Shepherd welcomes his lambs into the Garden of Peace with embraces of acceptance and feeds them with his own hand. And when the dream ends, there remains a sweet taste in the mouth.
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Endnotes

1. Many of those responsible in United Methodist congregations for sacramental ministry are not ordained, but nonetheless licensed. Our United Methodist procedure is ecclesiologically odd, although we seldom face up to our ecumenical responsibilities here. In theological terms, licensing is in effect a temporary, localized, and secondary form of ordination.


12. From the rubrics at the end of “The Order of the Administration of the Lord Supper, or Holy Communion,” in the *Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the Use of the Church of England* (various editions from 1662).


16. My data, as yet unpublished, rely upon examination of the Poor Stewards' account books for the Wesleyan Methodist Society at Ancoats, Manchester (England), which are kept at the Methodist Central Hall, Oldham Street, Manchester. To quote Josephine Tey (*The Daughter of Time*), “The truth is not in accounts, but in account books.”


22. See Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*, 100-09; also A.L. Lilley, *Sacraments: A Study of Some Moments in Attempt to Define Their Meaning for Christian Worship* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1928), especially ch. 4. Reference to classic works from the past is an essential element in truly ecumenical theology. This view of the *opus operatum* emphasizes that the essential action is God’s action, an action of grace, to be apprehended in faith. To this extent, Robert W. Goodloe’s placement of the principle “By Grace are ye saved, through Faith” as ch. 2 in his *The Sacraments in Methodism* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1953) is justified. Cf. John Wesley, “Salvation by Faith, Standard Sermon I,” *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1-11.

23. White, *Sacraments as God’s Self-Giving*, 119-34. I have expanded one element of White’s argument.


27. The text of the 1745 *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* will not meet this need. Selected items from that source would combine well with material from other periods and traditions.

Transforming Leadership in The United Methodist Church

ANNE M. DILENSCHNEIDER

In Advent 1997 a startling conversation occurred during a United Methodist clergy gathering that determined the focus of my doctoral research on the spiritual and leadership crises that face The United Methodist Church. As I led my colleagues in reflection on Luke 1:5-38 during our time of worship, I asked, “What new life is coming-to-be in you?” To my surprise, every one of the ten clergy present responded that they had never, at any point in their lives, considered that question. I began to wonder how a person can lead if she or he has no sense of the newness into which God is inviting her or him.

This interaction was followed, in May 1998, by a conversation with a member of the California–Nevada Board of Ordained Ministry, in which I was informed that the board’s primary issue was “clergy effectiveness.” I responded that clergy “aliveness” or “awakeness” seemed to me to be a prior issue. As support, I mentioned a recent conference-wide survey, which indicated that the first two priorities of United Methodist clergy and laity in our conference related to spiritual growth, not to church programs or any kind of effectiveness. The two priorities were, and are, quite clear: “1. Renew our commitment to and support of spiritual growth”; and “2. Develop leadership for spiritual growth.”

In reviewing the questions on the California–Nevada Conference Board of Ordained Ministry’s form titled “Appraisal of an Applicant for Ordination in the UMC,” I did discover an emphasis on effectiveness. It was not until the seventh question (of nine)—and after a series of questions about the candidate’s effectiveness in ministry—that the appraiser was asked, “How are this person’s depth of faith, commitment and hope
demonstrated?” Even then there was no question at all about spiritual practices or passionate call. The remaining questions were about the local church’s vision and mission and about recommendation for ministry.²

However, effectiveness is not the same as aliveness. Ezra Earl Jones, former general secretary of the General Board of Discipleship, notes, “Clergy effectiveness is one way of stating the issue, but it does not go to the depth to deal with the question of ‘aliveness.’”³

As a denomination, we know we are out of balance. The report from the Connectional Process Team, titled “Transforming: A United Methodist Church for the Twenty-First Century” (presented to the 1996 General Conference), states,

> The United Methodist Church has focused on a model of leadership driven more by programs and structure than by spiritual formation and discipleship. We too often measure the health of a congregation more by the number of programs and committees than by the growth in faith and the fruits of Christian maturity found in its members. While these programs and structures intend to facilitate spiritual growth and witness, we often have little time or space for intentional spiritual growth.⁴

Recognition of the problem is not enough, because management thinking is still in place and effectiveness is its goal. As a result, the development of spiritual leaders becomes one more thing to do in an already crowded agenda:

> In order to build spiritual leadership, current leaders must provide the support that will equip future leaders with a variety of leadership styles and forms of ministry. This means that current leaders must focus not only on programmatic, administrative, and organizational activities, but also on the development of disciples as future spiritual leaders.⁵

This section of the document continues with the assumption that pastors are well versed in this process of spiritual formation: “Pastors, as appointed spiritual leaders, guide the people of faith to be attentive to God and grow in their discipleship.”⁶

However, research consistently shows that most pastors are not well prepared to address the spiritual lives of their congregation members.
“Many church leaders have never seriously considered spirituality as something different from worship or study or programmed ministry.” Pastors quickly discover that what is “highly rewarded are numbers and activities, the increase in church attendance or membership, the increase in moneys given to denominational administration or missions, or service on a denominational board.”

And so, as Eugene Peterson points out:

[The working environment of the pastor erodes patience and rewards impatience. People are uncomfortable with mystery (God) and mess (themselves). They avoid both mystery and mess by devising programs and hiring pastors to manage them. A program provides a defined structure with an achievable goal. Mystery and mess are eliminated at a stroke. This is appealing.]

While it may be appealing, this focus on effectiveness has a high cost in terms of the pastor’s soul. Studies by management consultant Peter Drucker show that pastors represent the “most frustrated profession” in the United States. It is no secret that of all occupations parish clergy have among the highest incidences of physical and emotional breakdowns. . . . Roy Oswald’s research indicates that one of every five clergy is severely burned out. A key contributing factor is the expectation that clergy be competent in all areas of ministry.

Given these statistics, it is no surprise that Rolf Demming’s research at Duke University Divinity School (as part of a Lilly Endowment project titled “United Methodism and American Culture”) shows that “of those ordained up to 1984, 30 to 40 percent from any given year had dropped out of the ministry within ten years.” My research in the California–Nevada Annual Conference indicates that the reason for this may be because it becomes harder and harder for clergy to live God-centered lives as outer pressures from both the local church and the conference increase. The integrity that is present at the outset of ministry seems to decline as the years of service increase, and its decline is evidenced by an increased disparity between spirituality and leadership style indicators and by a decreased overall satisfaction level with one’s spiritual life. This is particularly acute at the ten-year mark. The clergy who leave local church ministry seem to be those who insist on maintaining the integrity of the connection between their inner and outer lives.

The issue of living God-centered lives caused an uproar in the email
lectionary study group to which I belonged when, in October 1998, I registered surprise at the statistic (mentioned by one of my doctoral professors) that the average pastor prays fewer than five minutes each day. I received some very angry responses. One participant wrote, “What counts as prayer? Does God have a stopwatch? It seems to me that the tax collector’s prayer in Luke 18:9-14 was sufficient to save his soul, and its words take about three seconds.”

It is no surprise that the issue of prayer turned out to be a hot issue for these local church clergy; the issue of prayer and solitude is central to our denominational crises. The pastor quoted above was focused on effectiveness. This type of outer-driven response is a symptom of our ingrained patterns of transactional leadership, which is really a form of management.

The pattern of leadership that brings about deep transformation is a different, inner-directed process. Transformational leadership is based on the leader’s and the community’s deep spiritual need for (1) renewal of relationship with God; (2) a sense of belonging; (3) a sense of safety and support; and then, and only then, (4) a sense of significance and meaning.

Biblically, it is the process of transformational leadership, and not management, that God and faithful leaders model for the people in times of great crisis. There are two instances of this process at work in the story of Korach’s rebellion (see Numbers 16–18). Both times, when the community falls into disarray, Moses begins by seeking the renewal of his relationship with God. One rabbi observes that the “telling moment” when Moses falls down in prayer is central to how Moses leads. Moses’ first leadership move in this crisis is to go to God in prayer and to listen for that still, small voice within. He allows time for prayer and he allows time to see what will emerge. His first reaction to Korach is not something from his own preconceived agenda.

In that time of communing, Moses is given instructions that include all the people involved in the crisis. This step of inclusion is followed by directions from God that ensure the safety of the gathered community. And, finally, God provides a detailed plan for something significant that will be a reminder of what has occurred. The purpose of these reminders is to provide the people with a sense of meaning underlying the recent events and to help move them into renewed trust in God’s future.

God also works in a transformational way in one-on-one encounters and in ordinary times. When Jesus meets with the Samaritan woman at the well
(John 4:1-41), rather than addressing the woman’s needs in a transactional, management mode, he models transformational leadership. First, Jesus meets the woman’s need for an experience of and relationship with God. Then he meets her need for belonging and respect by engaging her as an equal in the process of reflection. He provides the information she needs in order to take the risk of witnessing to his presence. And, finally, after these needs have been met, she takes the initiative and does something decisive: she goes back to the city and brings others out to meet Jesus.

A Twentieth-Century Shift

We value pastors who are effective and get things done, because the results of their work can be measured. This emphasis is due to a shift in the perception of ministry that emerged concomitant with the acceptance of assembly lines and the corporate philosophy of “Taylorism” in corporate America.

Richard Niebuhr, in his book *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, writes, “Whenever there has been a clear conception of the [pastoral] office, one of these functions has been regarded as central and the other functions have been ordered to serve” the goal of that primary function. He notes that, in the 1920s, the central function of “pastoral director” emerged. The pastoral director carries on all the traditional functions of ministry—preaching, leading the worshipping community, administering the sacraments, caring for souls, presiding over the church. But as the preacher and priest organized these traditional functions in special ways, so did the pastoral director. His [sic] first function is that of building or “edifying” the church; he is concerned in everything he does to bring into being a people of God who as a church will serve the purpose of the church in the local community and the world.¹⁴

The pastoral director is one who does the administrative task of managing and maintaining a church for the benefit of the denomination. Retired United Methodist Bishop Richard Wilke points out that James Glasse took Niebuhr’s notion of pastoral director a step further in the 1960s. “Glasse,” notes Wilke, “emphasized competency, acquired skills, and professional status. The professional minister came across as a three-piece-suit clergyman who feels comfortable working side by side with a physician or an attorney or the president of a bank.”¹⁵
The result of this emphasis is that, since 1920, there has been an increasing loss of the transformational dynamic of ministry under the weight of the transactional management approach. The shift in the clergyperson’s primary function from that of spiritual leader to that of pastoral director and producer has resulted in the creation of the “ecclesiastical manager.” There has been a marked turn from a focus on care of souls to a focus on control of the organization.16 “[Ministry] has become increasingly divorced in modern times from the role of spiritual mentor to the community and is now largely the work of an office manager or general caretaker.”17

As we consider ministry in the twenty-first century, there is a sense that effectiveness will not cure what ails the church. Wilke writes, “If we are to tackle the world for Christ, the seminaries must be fiery furnaces. The task is not to grant degrees, but to inflame the minds and hearts of a generation of preachers. Boards of Ordained Ministries will have to phrase their questions differently, or we will continue to quench the fires.”18

However, as I learned at the Lilly convocation, “Forming Christian Leaders,” held at Claremont School of Theology in May 1999, many seminaries are not “fiery furnaces.” At that meeting, echoing Jeffrey Hadden’s observation that “liberal Protestant seminaries have become more like the graduate schools of religion at secular universities,”19 the seminary faculty present from Claremont, Union, Iliff, Princeton, Pacific School of Religion, and other schools saw their role as providing the traditional focus on academics, not on spiritual formation. The reason for the continued focus on academics, they noted, was a concern that, if spiritual formation became a priority at seminaries, the seminaries would have to change their focus. As a result, the consensus among the mainline seminary staff present was that spiritual formation was the responsibility of the local church.20

In addition to the concerns about spirituality I noted at the convocation, I also became aware of the additional, and very real, tension between the need for pastors to have a solid academic background and the reality that congregations are, in Jones’s words, “places for programs.” Because seminaries focus on academics and churches focus on programs, most pastors, Jones told me, “haven’t known the church to be a place of spiritual formation.”21

As a result of their own poverty in spiritual disciplines, pastors are not prepared to help people build relationships with God. Jones notes, “My data, largely about United Methodist pastors, confirms . . . that our pastors
in large part are not praying people. They do not practice the historic spiritual disciplines, and therefore it is impossible for them to help those of us who look to them for guidance in the church to be praying people seeking God and love of neighbor.”

He further observes:

When we first began [working with congregations] a decade ago we thought that people were more in touch with their spiritual hungers and that the leadership of the church was better prepared to understand it and therefore do those things in the congregations that would remove the blockages and facilitate the search. We have been astounded at how weak that ability is.

The weakness of our clergy’s ability to be in touch with their own spiritual needs and, therefore, those of their congregation members has everything to do with our current leadership crisis. If neither mainline seminaries, in their current, academic mindset, nor congregations, with their focus on programs, are able to provide training in spiritual formation for pastors and other congregational leaders, how will spiritual formation happen? If ministry “comes alive when spiritual disciplines are nurtured,” what does a lack of spiritual formation mean for the wider church? And what does the absence of a deep spiritual life mean for the souls of pastors?

We are lost. And, because we are lost, we are floundering. Yet, both the saints of our tradition and contemporary transformational leadership theorists say there is a way out of our current morass. Both sets of voices say, Leadership begins with spirituality. It is central to who and how we are in the world.

Transformational Leadership

Leadership is commonly thought to be a four-step process that moves from vision to mission to plan and, then, to people. According to this model, the first step is to formulate a vision. The second step is to set a mission with clear goals, objectives, and measurements. The third step in this process is to draw up a plan, delineating responsibilities, norms, procedures, timelines, and budgets. As a final step, people are asked to “buy in.” This process can be illustrated as follows:
This is a classic transactional approach. Ronald Heifetz of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University observes that we usually define leadership “with respect to organizational effectiveness. Effectiveness means reaching viable decisions that implement the goals of the organization. This definition . . . provides no real guide to determine the nature or formation of those goals.”

Transactional leadership is essentially management. “The root origin of manage is a word meaning ‘hand.’ At its core, managing is about ‘handling’ things, about maintaining order, about organization and control.” Effectiveness is the point, because “the function of management is to cope with complexity.”

Most churches try to lead by following the transactional model but soon discover, to their frustration, that it falters at the point between “plan” and “people”; people don’t “buy in.” This passive resistance is no surprise, because the transactional approach is modeled on consumerism and the marketplace mentality. Congregation members are viewed as customers and spirituality as a commodity. Eugene Peterson observes:

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper’s concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from the competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.

The process of transformational leadership reverses the transactional management flow and is based on deeper, spiritual needs. These needs are renewal, belonging, safety/structure, and significance.
Transformational leadership begins with the renewal of relationship with God for both the individual and the community; therefore, it starts with a sense of radical openness to the Spirit. This means that transformational leadership begins with an adventure into the unknown. Christians know that it is precisely here, in the wilderness, that God encounters those who are willing to let go of the old and venture into the new. Isaiah speaks God’s word to a people lost in the wilderness of exile: “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” (Isa. 42:9).

When an individual renews her or his relationship with God, her or his gifts, values, and call are identified. Then that person is able to see her or himself as an integral part of God’s movement into the future. When this safety is established, the person experiences the freedom to try, fail, and try again. With this kind of support, she or he is free to attempt something significant, knowing that the results are in God’s hands. The person can act, knowing that the call is to be faithful, not “successful” or “effective.”

Likewise, when a community begins its leadership process by renewing its relationship with God, a vision emerges that gives the people a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. As this kind of collaborative effort is given free rein, a structure is established in which it is safe to try, fail, and try again. With this kind of support, it is possible to attempt something significant, which becomes that community’s unique gift to the advancement of the reign of God.30

The word to the churches from corporate America is that a leader must begin in daily solitude, away from the throng of voices that surround her or him in order to hear the small voice that speaks a word of the new. “Leaders have to heed the voice within,” urges a recent Fortune magazine
article, exclaiming that “you need a new skill: reflection.” And John Gardner, former secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, warns, “The future announces itself from afar. But most people are not listening. The noisy clatter of the present drowns out the tentative sound of things to come. The sound of the new does not fit old perceptual patterns and goes unnoticed by most people.”

Where Do We Begin?

“Our spirituality is the nourishment for vision; it is one’s inner self where the conditions are set right to see God, oneself, and the possibilities.” Because of this, Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser insist that “any discussion of vision, then, must begin with our spirituality, and not our work.” Or, as Parker Palmer expresses it, “A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what’s going on inside him or herself, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good.”

This is essential, for a congregation “will not journey beyond the pastor; the congregation will not venture where the pastor is not leading. This is a hard saying. It would be more comfortable to work like the traffic cop—to give a map or a few verbal instructions—but spiritual formation is a case where only those who have eyes to see can lead.”

The witness of church leaders over the centuries is that the leader’s need to “make a difference”—the need for significance—must be set aside in order to be “made different,” because this need for renewed relationship with God is primary. John Wesley wrote of his own spiritual disciplines and his daily time of solitude at 4:30 or 5:00 A.M.: “Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone;—only God is here, in his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.” Eventually, in addition to his morning disciplines, Wesley spent his Saturdays in solitude and self-examination.

In a letter to a pastor, dated 7 August 1760, Wesley clearly states the importance of soul care for pastors: “What has exceedingly hurt you in times past, nay, and I fear, to this day, is, want of reading. . . . Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer.”

I believe that church leaders of the twenty-first century are being called to focus on the care of souls, beginning with their own. This is a return to
an older understanding of the vocation of clergy, which prevailed until a century ago. According to Thomas Moore:

> [f]or hundreds of years the parish priest received into his charge the souls of those who lived within the boundaries of his church. This responsibility . . . was known as *cura animarum*, the cure of souls. *Cure* meant “charge” as well as “care”. . . . The role of the curate, as he was called, was to provide a religious context for the larger turning points of life and also to maintain the affectional ties of family, marriage, and community.\(^{38}\)

The reclaiming of this historic pastoral work “is a determination to work at the center, to concentrate on the essential.”\(^{39}\) That work begins with the pastor’s own spiritual life. As Howard Rice says: “[T]he care of souls, as a model for ministry, means paying close attention to what God is doing in a given life. It requires an attitude of quiet reflection and careful attentiveness to each person but also an attitude of responsiveness to God cultivated by the practice of prayer.”\(^{40}\)

Nurturing one’s soul takes time—necessary, essential time. Peterson writes,

> I know it takes time to develop a life of prayer: set-aside, disciplined, deliberate time. It isn’t accomplished on the run, nor by offering prayers from a pulpit or at a hospital bedside. I know I can’t be busy and pray at the same time. I can be active and pray; I can work and pray; but I cannot be busy and pray. I cannot be inwardly rushed, distracted, or dispersed. In order to pray I have to be paying more attention to God than to what people are saying to me; to God than to my clamoring ego. Usually, for that to happen there must be a deliberate withdrawal from the noise of the day, a disciplined detachment from the insatiable self.\(^{41}\)

If we give up our insistence on administrative and organizational effectiveness as the epitome of leadership, then the foundation for the spiritual practices of solitude and prayer essential to the care of souls and to transformational leadership could be developed in seminaries and strengthened in the early years of ministry. If we begin to support current and future pastors in attending to their own souls, we would be saying that the spiritual, emotional—and, in some cases, even physical—death of
our clergy is no longer an acceptable cost of ministry.

In eighteen years of spiritual direction and eight years as a spiritual director, weekly accountability to my own spiritual director has kept me focused on and growing in my life with God. This was affirmed by the people of Crystal Springs United Methodist Church in San Mateo, California, who insisted that the pastor who followed me in July 2000 also be someone who participated in weekly spiritual direction. The congregation told the district superintendent and bishop that they had learned that “the pastor must care for her/his soul, if s/he is to care for ours.” This is such an important criterion for this church that it created a separate line item in its budget to pay the 50 percent of the cost of spiritual direction that is not covered by our Conference Supportive Services. Might The United Methodist Church not come alive in new ways if all of our churches were to insist that their pastors and lay leadership take at least an hour a day to care for their souls, with weekly accountability?

Finally, a shift in the role of the pastor means a shift in the role of laity. If we begin to see the pastor’s primary role as caring for souls rather than as attending to program and administration, we may begin to discover the leadership competencies in our laity and develop spiritually based “communities of leaders” rather than relying on the pastor to be the “hero leader.” Both our United Methodist tradition and corporate America assure us that, as these leaders live into and lead from their own strengths in the church community, others will be freed to do the same.

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Endnotes

1. Panagraph Report noted by Anne M. Dilenschneider in correspondence with Mark Bollwinkel, Chairperson, Conference Coordinating Team, 3 April, 1997.

5. Ibid., 8.

6. Ibid.


11. Quoted in “Taking the Measure of UMC Clergy,” *The Flyer* (General Commission on the Status and Role of Women in The United Methodist Church, Spring 1997), 2.


18. Wilke, 100.


25. Parrott and Dilenschneider, 1.
30. Parrott and Dilenschneider, 3.
33. Shawchuck and Heuser, 69.
35. Shawchuck and Heuser, 126.
42. “Non-negotiable Values of Crystal Springs UMC,” (Crystal Springs United Methodist Church, February 2000).
LYDIA JACKSON WATERS

I am very concerned with church growth, because of the very nature of the church. I believe the church is in the world to transform the world. I believe people's souls are nourished and preserved in the church. I believe the world is a better place because of the church and that people are restored and healed because of the church. I believe if we are doers of the word of God and are positively reacting to the Great Commission found in Matt. 28:18-20 and to the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ, then we know that the answer to the question whether United Methodist churches should grow is a resounding yes!

Since God is alive and well, the church of God ought be alive and well, too! Indeed, the church must stay alive and well! It is important for us to accept the fact that if a living thing is not growing, it is dying—there is no in-between. I am often bewildered at my own experience of watching this denomination... continued on page 301

MINERVA G. CARCAÑO

The only answer to this question that seems acceptable is an unqualified yes. The question appears simple, but a moment's reflection reveals several layers. What kind of growth are we talking about? Is it numerical growth? spiritual growth? Does moving from being an unhealthy church to a healthy one count as growth? If a congregation has grown in its outreach to others or has "grown" new leadership or a new youth ministry or has grown in its practice of stewardship—will we include it among the growing churches? Unfortunately, it seems that when we speak of "growth" in the church, the prevailing understanding is that the truly important growth is numerical. It is this narrow understanding of church growth that has United Methodists striving to make disciples of Jesus Christ in less than faithful ways.

It pleases me to see the number of persons in local churches who know that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. continued on page 304
die in so many areas. I believe God is grieved at the fact that so many United Methodists are content with small numbers. The world is in such pain; why are we not more concerned with bringing in the “lost sheep”? The world is so confused; why are we not assured that the church has the answer in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Every human being is precious in God’s sight; why are we not concerned with numbers in the church? Numbers represent persons, souls, disciples for Jesus Christ. Numbers are everything when you look at the brokenness of the lives that walk our streets; the precious lives being wasted in our prison systems; the lives addicted to drugs, crime, alcohol, food, sex, fortune, and fame. Why are these people not in the church? Can these social pathologies be seen as a failure of the church? To be whole, people need the church. If the church is not growing, then the world is not being transformed. We cannot sit comfortably and satisfied inside God’s church and condemn the world that the church is in the world to save. Indeed, God did not send Jesus to condemn the world but through Jesus to save it (see John 3:17). As long as there is one human being left outside the church, we have a job to do!

I have encountered United Methodist churches that do not want to grow. New people come in and the old members run them out. Such behavior is sinful and it grieves God; for the church belongs to God, not to its members, regardless of how long they’ve been there. John 3:16 declares, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (my emphasis). Thus, the church exists for the sake of the world.

I have pastored churches that acted as if they would rather die than change. So, as leader, I had to always remind them of the purpose of God’s church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ. I had to keep challenging them to be in tune with God’s Spirit, to move to God’s rhythm, and to long for God’s presence; for, if they did, people would come. After all, Jesus promised, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). It is our mandate to bring people into the house of the Lord and to help them become disciples.

Why is this denomination so often satisfied with “smallness”? If the world were small, I could understand this reasoning; but we are in a big world. Every church needs to be filled to capacity. What is it that makes us justify the fact that we are not growing? Is it that we are not wise enough to choose and respect good leadership? What is it that makes us jealous
and hostile toward churches and pastors who have growing congregations? Have United Methodists accepted incompetence and mediocrity as our norm? Why do we criticize the way growing churches do church? Is it because we do not like what we feel incapable of doing? What is it that keeps some of us comfortable with the state of our decline? Common sense and wisdom would tell us that if you keep doing what you’re doing, you are going to keep getting what you’ve got. If it is broken, fix it! Either we are feeling too inadequate to fix the churches or too arrogant and proud to let somebody else help us.

It seems to me that arrogance and pride are keeping us from moving with what God is doing in this great time of “awakening.” We sing, “The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord; she is his new creation.” God is surely doing a new thing, but do we perceive it? Indeed, God is always doing a new thing, preparing even now a time of new birth and renewal for the church. This is a great time for the church to be the church.

African-American churches that worship in the authentic Black church tradition are among the fastest-growing churches in the United States today. We could learn much from this tradition. Indeed, nondenominational White churches that are borrowing from the Black church tradition are growing, too, and are attracting persons from all races. Is it pride that keeps The United Methodist Church from considering the gifts for renewal that the Black church tradition offers? What would happen if we realized that other groups—other ethnic groups—have traditions that may help bring renewal to the church? And what would happen if we availed ourselves of some of these traditions? Now that would truly be a new thing for the church. The reality is this: God is doing a new thing; we may just have to look at those who we think are at the “bottom” to get the answers we need to stay on top of things.

Should United Methodist churches grow? Yes, we are mandated by God to grow. And where we find churches that are not growing, we need to do everything possible to break that bondage. Where we see churches that have great potential for growth, we need to offer them all the help they need. Where we see churches with leadership unwilling to learn and grow themselves, we need to reevaluate the positions of these leaders.

We are not mandated to grow because the church needs the people; we are mandated to grow because people need the church. People need the church more than ever today. But the reality is this: People will not come to
a church where they do not experience the welcoming presence of God—where they do not feel accepted, loved, and cared for. People will never attend a gathering where they sense no compassion and understanding for those who need help. Finally, and simply, people will not come unless the people of God invite them to come.

The church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual hospital and all human beings (even those of us who have been in the church for a long time) need spiritual healing. This is a forceful reminder that the church does not belong to us; the church belongs to Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, nobody should feel left out of the church.

The world is dying to hear what the Word of God has to say to them. The purpose of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Put together, this amounts to a challenge to be renewed and thus to grow spiritually, numerically, financially, and programmatically.

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But when I ask these same persons about what they understand by “making disciples,” most have difficulty coming up with an answer other than numerical growth. That disappoints me. Occasionally, someone will connect church growth with redemption—but it is rare. To be sure, one way of measuring the church’s growth is to count each new person who surrenders his or her life to Christ. However, it is in the nurturing of persons for discipleship in the midst of life that the church truly grows. This requires that we move beyond a simplistic vision of church growth. Of course we should make disciples of Jesus Christ—and even count them. But we should remember that “making disciples” has several parts:

- Proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ.
- Lead persons to commit their lives to God through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing.
- Send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel.

While these statements reflect the church’s commitment to “church growth,” I am amazed to see how many of us have chosen to claim only parts of it. Some claim only the first two statements and the last, proposing to grow the church by bringing people into the church but with little regard for the world. Then there are those who seek to grow the church through a focus on the third statement—service in the world and the creation of just social orders—but often with little regard for the institutional church. Neither of these approaches will grow the church in ways that truly build up the body of Christ and enable it to be about God’s work in the world. For United Methodists, church growth is holistic: We are called to invite others to a commitment to Christ, nurture those persons in discipleship, and send them out in service to the world in Christ’s name. How might we
nurture such a holistic approach to our task of growing the church?

We begin by recognizing that we need each other. Those who emphasize evangelism need those who stress social justice, for each represents an aspect of the total work of discipleship necessary to faithfully grow the church and build up the body of Christ. We must commit to mending and healing our own relationships within the church if we hope to convince others that we serve the Prince of Peace. In some places in our church, there is truly a spirit of enmity between those with differing perspectives. Needless to say, this is not only unhealthy but also destructive of the very church we are trying to grow. Let us pray for one another and seek ways to be in authentic, transparent conversation with one another. In everything, let us learn together what God is calling us to be and do as a denomination. We need this relational foundation if The United Methodist Church is to grow.

The struggle in the church is not only about the tension between the so-called “conservatives” and “liberals.” There is also the broad concern that, while we are committed to reaching out to all people with the Good News, the church is still primarily white and middle-class. In light of the changing demographics in this country, the growth and ministry of the denomination depend on a church that includes the great diversity of persons living in our communities. Persons spearheading comprehensive plans to reach out to Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans are valiantly leading us in opening up to others; but it is going to take more than they can do on their own. The social activists among us who have faithfully served among the poor in behalf of all of us have much to share with us about reaching out to the poor. And, yes, we must also be open to receiving and nurturing the discipleship of persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered. Christ’s church has a place for everyone.

The church will grow when we surrender it to Christ the Good Shepherd, who does not rest until all have been found and cared for. If we had the heart of Jesus, would anyone be left out or without the basic necessities for life and wholeness? If we had the spirit of Jesus, would reaching out to others who are different from us seem so impossible? If we had the mind of Jesus, would the picture of an inclusive church be so difficult to dream?

How do we grow a diverse and inclusive church that serves others? What if, for one year, every local congregation focused its ministry on reaching out to persons different from those who are already members? What if every church in a demographically changing community received a
pastor who reflected the ethnic character of the community? And what if we shared clergy across annual conference lines to fill this need? What if, for one year, we withheld judgment and worked in ministry and mission side by side with a person who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered? What if, for one year, every lay- and clergyperson gave whatever wage increase he or she received to ministry with the poor? What if membership in our church required a year of service with the poor, followed by a concrete commitment to the ongoing work of justice? What if every church member shared her or his Christian witness with twelve other persons in a twelve-month period? And what if each member then mentored one other person in doing the same? These questions do not involve complicated actions, but they do require focused intention. With God’s help, we can grow a diverse and inclusive church whose spirit is both evangelistic and just.

Finally, we cannot speak of church growth without recommitting ourselves to being ecumenical in spirit and action. We must not view growing Christ’s church in isolation from other Christians. What we do as United Methodists is but one of many contributions to the building of the body of Christ. Moreover, we never have a clear picture of the church’s growth without a view of the whole. Being able to see the whole requires that we be in relationship with other Christians in our local communities and in the world and that we work together in the sharing of the Good News and the building of God’s reign among us.

When was the last time we United Methodists celebrated the growth of Christ’s body because a Lutheran congregation grew in number or because the Catholic Church commissioned new missionaries or because the Baptists planted a new church? We may not agree with everything that is being done in and through these denominations, but we must recognize that they also are members of the body of Christ and that their church growth counts, too. Besides, how can we expect to be able to effectively challenge their shortcomings if we are not in relationship with them? It may be that through genuine Christian relationship with those of other Christian communions, we can learn something about our own shortcomings and be freed from them to grow in spirit, service, and number.

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The Roman god Janus is two-faced, like a door or gate. One face looks backward to the past, the other forward to the future. The first month of the secular calendar, January, received its name from this god.

The first season of the Christian calendar likewise looks backward to the past and forward to the future. It is between what God has done and what God promises to do that Christians seek to live faithfully in the present. This “already-not yet,” backward/forward posture provides the hermeneutical lens through which the Christian interprets experience.

What will the future bring? The Christian believes that the answer lies in the treasure inherited from the past.

What will the future bring? There was a time when they were no people. Then they became God’s people. God gave them a future based on a promise. Their number would be as many as the stars in the night sky. They would have their own land. All this was God’s gift, offered to them without price.

What will the future bring? A pharaoh who no longer remembered Joseph made slaves of Joseph’s descendants, who were becoming as many as the stars in the night sky. Threatened by their strength in numbers, Pharaoh sought to kill the Hebrews’ male babies upon their birth. God’s people were destined to become no people once again because they had no future. Tomorrow promised more oppression, suffering, and death than today.

Moses had been spared from Pharaoh’s infanticide. While tending sheep, a burning bush caught his attention. God spoke to Moses from the bush: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I . . . have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a . . . land flowing with milk and honey . . . (Exod. 3:7-8).

I AM WHO I AM sent Moses to give the chosen people a future. For to be a chosen people is to live by a promise. It entailed Moses’ leading them from where they did not belong to their true home.
What is hope but faith in the promise that we are “predestined” to someday enjoy our true home? To have I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE covenant with us entails our becoming who we will be. Who we are and who we will be is a gift from I AM AND I WILL BE. To receive the covenant is to bet our lives on it. “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa. 40:8).

What will the future bring? In the Diaspora, the memory of their true home was fading for God’s people. Without memory of who they are by virtue of the Covenant-Maker, they are like withering grass and a fading flower against a future of displacement, deprivation, and despair. It hurts too much to sing “Beautiful, Beautiful Zion” in a foreign land. Is it possible to adjust to exile and still be God’s people? When fate replaces faith, have both parties of the covenant died?

The voice of the prophet penetrates through the dense fog of deadening acquiescence. The exile is ending because Israel “has served her term, . . . her penalty is paid, . . . she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:2). Thus, the psalmist declares good news: “God will speak peace to his people . . . to those who turn to him in their hearts . . . that his glory may dwell in our land” (Ps. 85:8-9).

God loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing and will faithfully give God’s people “their recompense.” Yet, God promises to “make an everlasting covenant” with God’s people, prompting all the nations to “acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed” (Isa. 61:8-9).

The Lord God is a covenant-maker and a covenant-keeper. When God’s people are unfaithful to the covenant, there are consequences. When God’s people hate what God loves and love what God hates, God offers mercy and forgiveness. Both are covenantal virtues—and so is judgment. God’s grace is not cheap; it is covenantal. This means the parties involved are justified in holding each other accountable for meeting the expectations each has for the other. To enjoy the covenantal relationship requires the repentance of a contrite heart. It requires loving what God loves and hating what God hates.

What will the future bring? An anointed one, a messiah, will come in the likeness of King David. He will be of David’s lineage. He will rally God’s people against their Roman oppressors. He will restore Israel to its proper place among the nations. He will usher in shalom. No more exploitative taxation. No more having to be Rome’s scapegoats. No more “Caesar is Lord.”
Our thoughts are not God’s thoughts and our ways not God’s ways; yet, we assume we can predict how God will be faithful to the covenant that makes us a people. We assume that because God’s people took a particular expression yesterday, it will take the same expression tomorrow. God’s *hesed*—God’s steadfast love—is constant, to be sure. But constancy is not sameness. God’s promise is to make all things new. The future God gives us can be counted on to surprise us—or it would not be God’s future.

*What will the future bring?* It brought a man whose hometown was Nazareth in Galilee. He was an itinerant Jewish rabbi who identified with the prophet’s call and mission: “The spirit of the Lord *God* is upon me,” he said, “because the *Lord* has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . .” (Isa. 61:1-2a).

Twelve disciples followed this man, who acted and sounded like the herald of Jubilee. Jesus taught his religion’s law, but he emphasized its spirit rather than its letter. It sounded like heresy to those who preferred the letter. He offered forgiveness to persons as though he had the authority of God to do so. He was accused of blasphemy. Those who suffered from disease, infirmity, mental illness, poverty, and exclusion—those who were viewed as having little or no value—were attracted to Jesus because he treated them as precious neighbors. He ate with tax collectors and other sinners. He was known for the company he kept. He proclaimed that God’s reign was in the midst of the least of these and those he blessed knew it was.

Some saw in Jesus the long-expected Messiah. Of course, he was not exactly who they thought the Messiah would be. His “kingdom” didn’t resemble Caesar’s. He resisted the devil’s temptation for such a kingdom.

The kingdom Jesus proclaimed and embodied is governed by an ethic of social reversal. Living in covenant with God means living in covenant with our neighbors. Since God’s covenant with us is based on love and justice, so our covenant must be with one another. The result is that the first will be last and the last will be first. We will wash one another’s feet, regardless of our gender, age, ethnicity, or religion. The high and mighty will vacate their thrones for the lowly. The full will become empty and the empty full. The rich in spirit will be made humble.

Jesus’ way was perceived rightly as a threat to the way the world was constructed. The truth hurts the unholy when its origin is the Holy One. Especially did it hurt those who recognized that if Jesus had his way they
would lose much of what they believed they could not live without. Marching to a different drumbeat, Jesus was out of step with the religious and political powers. If his way of living caught on, as it already had among “the least, the last, and the lost,” the lives of the powerful were doomed. So they crucified him.

What will the future bring? As Jesus died on the cross, his holy light was extinguished. There was darkness. The earth shook. Was it creation’s grief or its wrath? Then, on the third day, those who went to his tomb found it empty. They were told, “He is not here. He is risen.” He had told his disciples to expect it. But their minds dismissed what they could not comprehend. Those who heard the witnesses chalked it up as an idle tale told by some hysterical women.

His disciples went back to business as usual. The future they had glimpsed in Jesus was nice while it lasted. In him they had experienced their true home—the place where they belonged, the place they were created for. But all good things must come to an end. You can’t fight city hall. The good die young. The more things change, the more they stay the same. “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21a). Only a fool would choose faith with its hope over fate and its realism.

What will the future bring? The risen Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene in the garden outside the tomb. He appeared to the disciples who sought safety behind locked doors. He opened the Scriptures about himself for the two forlorn disciples as they walked the road to Emmaus. He ate broiled fish with the disciples. He gave them advice about where to cast their nets. He told Peter to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. He commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations.

Jesus’ way, truth, and life did not die when he died. He lives. So does his way, his truth, and his life. God gave Jesus a future. With Jesus’ resurrection those who believe in him are given a future, too. That future is eternal life, because it is life with God. As Jesus revealed, this life consists of giving our lives away, witnessing to the God who gave life to Jesus, who then gave his life away. When we deny ourselves and take up our cross, Jesus promises to lead us to our true home. We are given hope because we are given a future. Jesus sealed this new covenant with his shed blood.

What will the future bring? Early Christians anticipated their Lord’s imminent return. They remembered his promise not to let their hearts be troubled and they believed that Jesus had gone to prepare an eternal
dwelling place for them and that he would return to take them there with him (John 14:1-3). Thus, we proclaim at the Lord’s table, “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” But when?

When the Christians at Thessalonica asked this question, the apostle Paul replied that the day will come “like a thief in the night,” like a pregnant woman’s labor pains—and no one will escape it (1 Thess. 5:1-3).

The Petrine epistle-writer replies to his community’s concern by offering both a perspective on time and a justification for the Lord’s delayed parousia: “[w]ith the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” The Lord keeps his promises, but he is patient, “not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:8-9).

What will the future bring? It is not a question we Americans are prone to ask. Some of us asked it following the events of September 11, but church attendance quickly returned to pre-September 11 levels. Unlike many in our global village, we are satisfied enough with our lives to go to great lengths to defend and preserve them as they are.

There are those, however, who eagerly await the end of their “world,” so it can be replaced. Their current one is killing them. They are keenly aware of what it is to live in exile, to suffer as fate’s victims, to feel God-forsaken, to be nobody with no future, to hear as good news the reversal of the present social configuration in which they are among the last, to pray for Jesus’ return to judge all who hate what God loves and love what God hates. These don’t need to seek a hermeneutic that will make the Advent Gospel texts meaningful. It is their existential reality.

But few of us who read Quarterly Review and few of those to whom we preach are among these people. We prefer December’s cultural nostalgia to Advent’s harsh wake-up call to a future radically different from our present.

Advent’s Gospel lessons are not easy. They are obtuse. What little we do understand of them tastes like bitter medicine. They are speaking the foreign language of cosmic havoc, of an ascetic preacher urging repentance, of baptism by the Holy Spirit, of social revolution, of reproductive impossibility. It is enough to make a preacher forsake the lectionary for more palatable sentiments. This one has.

If the Gospel lessons are going to engage both the preacher and those in the pew, the preacher must find a way of tapping into the human yearning
for a future that is different from the present. Is there any awareness that where we are is not our true home—that we were meant for more than this? Can the preacher articulate the barely perceptible stirring of discontent with life’s shallowness and self-centeredness so that permission is given to acknowledge it? Can we name the promises—the covenants—by which we live and the gods from which they come? Are they proving to be trustworthy, or can we point to signs of the Deceiver’s deception? What is lost if we dismiss Jesus’ first coming as legend and find his second coming irrelevant?

The challenge of the Advent Gospel lessons is to break up the clay soil of our current worlds of meaning, so that the seeds of these texts can take root and grow. Should it happen, we veteran preachers of Decembers past probably would not believe it. But then we have trouble believing the virgin birth, too.

December 1, 2002—First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37; Isa. 64:1-9; Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Cor. 1:3-9

The Gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Advent consists of what may have been a popular apocalyptic composition that the Gospel writer inserts into his narrative. With it, Christians keep time by beginning with the end. Is the end to be understood as a literal, cosmic event or as the end of every humanly constructed world—the prerequisite for the gathering of the elect under the governance of the Son of Man?

In between the already and the not-yet is the pregnant present. We live in it, aware that, no matter how good our present world may be, it is still destined for the Refiner’s fire. It will not escape purification. We will not escape purification. To forget or to deny this is to live as though we are sleepwalking. It is to live on autopilot, blown and tossed about by every wind. It is to be inspired by spirits that oppose the Holy Spirit.

In every present moment, the world as we know it and by which we have allowed ourselves to be defined is susceptible to destruction. The Son will come and see to it. We can look forward to it or we can stick our heads in the sand of self-delusion.

God the covenant-maker can be trusted to give us a new world to replace the one that the Son judges into oblivion. The prophets were given a vision of that new world with its justice and shalom. It was against that backdrop that they placed a brutally honest depiction of the current order. The discrepancy was evident. For those with eyes to see, it was hard to
deny the crack in the foundation of what had been taken for granted and 
assumed eternal. They could see that their deformed world was destined to 
come apart and to be replaced by a transformed one.

When will it happen? Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this generation will 
not pass away until all these things have taken place” (Mark 13:30). Can it 
be that “this generation” includes every generation? After all, every genera-
tion is in need of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and baptism by the Holy Spirit. 
Every generation’s world, inherited and reinforced, is destined to die on its 
own dark Friday to be resurrected with Jesus to Easter’s abundant and 
eternal life.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away,” 
Jesus assures us. And, what is more, he says, only God knows the day and 
hour of the end. So, live, anticipating that sooner or later it will occur. Hold 
loosely to the present world. Open your hands to receive the one that the 
Son is bringing. Hold tightly to the hope of that promise.

December 8, 2002—Second Sunday of Advent
Mark 1:1-8; Isa. 40:1-11; Ps. 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Pet. 3:8-15a

For Mark, “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of 
God” must be pro-fessional (pro—“before,” fateri—“acknowledgement”), the 
first acknowledgment upon which all other knowledge will be based. That 
foundational acknowledgment is this: In Jesus Christ God’s salvific activity 
has begun. In him, the prophets’ eschatological hope is fulfilled.

Take Malachi, who speaks of a messenger of the covenant who is 
coming, one who is “like a refiner’s fire” (3:1-2). He identifies the 
messenger: He is the prophet Elijah (4:5). In time, John and Jesus both 
would be accused of being Elijah. For Joel, the One for whom John is 
preparing the way will baptize with the Holy Spirit, in contrast to John’s 
baptism with water. God, says Joel, will pour out God’s spirit on all flesh, 
causing young people to prophesy and see visions and old men to dream 
dreams; even male and female slaves will receive the divine spirit “in those 
days” (2:28-29).

Mark can be no neutral biographer. What he is about is to pro-claim 
(cry out before, ahead of), as did the Baptizer, that the One who baptizes 
with the Holy Spirit, the power of God, has come. To receive him, to be 
included in God’s salvific activity, requires repentance—a turning from all 
that we must be saved from toward God. Mark professes: When we turn
away from all that is hostile to God and toward God, we will recognize and acknowledge that God is the One whose story we are about to tell. It is the story of the One who is not merely the messenger of God’s covenant but is God’s covenant actualized in what he says and does. Believe in what he says and does and you will be empowered to live the life he lived.

When this happens, God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as in heaven. And that is good news—at least for those who acknowledge that they are unworthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

**December 15, 2002—Third Sunday of Advent**

**John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isa. 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126; 1 Thess. 5:16-24**

It is as though we can’t get to God’s birth among us without first spending time—much time—with John. This Sunday we get the Johannine version of John the Baptizer.

In his commentary on John, Raymond Brown observes that unlike the Baptizer of the Synoptics (which focus on Jesus’ message and baptism of repentance), the Johannine John is the first witness to the Word and its light as it is put on trial by those who sit and who walk in darkness (cf. Isa. 42:6; 9:2). These people, the Gospel writer adds, actually prefer the darkness (John 3:19-20).

In John’s Prologue a setting is provided for the rest of the Jesus narrative. In God’s logos made flesh, a way out of the darkness that keeps humankind lost and perishing is given. It is given because God loved the world so much (John 3:16).

God chose Israel to be a light to the nations, incarnating the divine covenant through his people. In Jesus, God “enfleshed” the covenant through an act of self-revelation. Just as Israel’s purpose was to open the eyes that are blind and bring out prisoners from the dark dungeons, so will the Word that is made flesh and lives among us full of grace and truth (1:14).

John the Baptizer is interrogated by those sent by the Pharisees to check him out. (Brown wonders if the Johannine writer is here addressing members of his community who are claiming that the Baptizer was the light.) The cause for the Pharisees’ concern is that, as they see things, John is performing an official initiation rite without the proper authority to do so. Just who is he? He confesses he is not the Messiah or Elijah or “the prophet” (1:21). Who he understands himself to be originates with his role.
He is a herald and a forerunner and a testifier to the light.

How does one testify to the light? The Gospel writer mixes auditory and visual metaphors. When God’s Word is made flesh it illumines the dark dungeon prisons. The Baptist himself lives in the light by testifying to who he is not (John 1:19-27) and to who Jesus is (1:29-36). John’s disciples believe his testimony to be true and they follow Jesus (1:37). Then John steps down from the witness stand, because he was not the light but came to testify to the light.

The Pharisees—representing all who think they see but who are, in truth, blind (cf. John 9:39-41)—are unable to figure out John, just as they will not be able to figure out the One whom John heralds. The price of enlightenment will be too great. “Among you stands one whom you do not know” (1:26). John’s initiation rite was not official—the officials were right about this. His initiation rite was to testify to God’s true light, which enlightens everyone (1:9), at least everyone who does not prefer the darkness.

Is finding oneself in the dark dungeon prison into which God’s incarnate light shines similar to closing one’s eyes and falling asleep, as in last week’s Gospel lesson?

December 22, 2002—Fourth Sunday of Advent


The lectionary offers Luke 1:47-55 instead of a psalm for this Sunday. This means the congregation gets both Mary’s call and her magnificent song in response to God’s calling of her, a lowly servant.

As was stated earlier, in between the already and the not-yet is the pregnant present. God has already taken the initiative to redeem creation. God has promised that what has begun will be completed. Living between what God has done and what God will do makes every present moment pregnant. What God has conceived is waiting to be born.

Mary mirrors for us our own situation. As Luke 1:26-38 makes clear, she doesn’t seem to be awake and alert to God’s possibilities and is thus perplexed and frightened by Gabriel’s exuberant greeting. She is certainly not expecting the world as she has known it to be destroyed by God’s future.

Gabriel awakens Mary. He tells her God is going to make her a business partner. Mary’s fear is understandable. God only knows what you’re getting yourself into or, more accurately, what God is getting you into when you team up with “the Mighty One” (Luke 1:49). But become a partner in
God’s business of redeeming the world and nothing will be impossible.

“In the beginning . . . the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:1-2). From God’s Spirit and Word came the original creation. Now the Spirit and Word of God conceive a child in Mary in order to bring about a new, redeemed creation.

Mary heard the promise that her child “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High . . . .” (Luke 1:32). His kingdom will be eternal. The more Gabriel talked the more Mary’s fear and incredulity faded. She is free to receive what she cannot comprehend. She is free to be theotokos, the bearer of God. She answers, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Isn’t that what it means to be awake and alert? We anticipate what God is going to do, because we remember what God has done and promised to do. It is not without trepidation that we wonder what role God will call us to play. When the call comes, will we surrender to it as did Mary?

**Preaching the Light**

The Gospel lessons for Advent invite the preacher to wrestle with “otherworldly” themes. Yet, as we saw, the truths affirmed in these themes aim to shine the divine light in this world—including the many dark places of our world today. Like the Baptizer of old, the preacher today must give testimony to the light so that those in the pew can see by hearing.

We should understand that seeing God’s light—and preaching it—is risky business in our world today. It calls us to a vision of the world and a form of discipleship that are deeply countercultural. To wit, when we become captivated with a vision of the world to come, we will anticipate rather than fear the loss of the current one. Rather than face the future with trepidation, we will live with a sense of promise, for we trust the God who is both covenant-maker and covenant-keeper.

May we be bold and fearless in our witness, knowing that the light that came into the world in the first century indeed enlightens everyone (John 1:9), even in our “enlightened” twenty-first-century world.

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J. Michael Ripski is Senior Pastor at First United Methodist Church in Hendersonville, Tennessee.
Endnotes
2. Ibid., 28.

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Worship has become a hotbed of controversy over the past five years. Some even talk about it as the “worship wars.” It is an exciting and very challenging time to be involved in thinking about, designing, and implementing worship in this new century. There are so many issues that have risen to the forefront. With the decline in membership in many mainline Protestant denominations, worship has become the central focus for keeping current members and evangelizing new converts.

In some congregations, generational cultures (GI generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, etc.) are being studied to better match the design, content, and rhythms of worship to a specific target audience. In other congregations, technology is being used to integrate worship with our technological society. Our multiethnic society is also impacting the church and an increasing number of congregations are trying to figure out what it means to design worship in a multiethnic context. Music styles, rhythms, and lyrics are a crucial component of this conversation. What music is appropriate for the worship of God? What is the purpose of worship? What theology or theologies of worship are held by different congregations?

In what follows, I deal with five areas that are crucial to the study of worship today and discuss the relevant recent resources.

**Traditional Worship**

While traditional worship has been much maligned in the past five years, it is also a deep source of strength and faith for many in the United States. Some congregations that have experimented with contemporary worship styles are going back to their liturgical roots and reintroducing more traditional practices. After Vatican II, the liturgical reform movement in both the Protestant and Catholic churches came to a consensus over many issues relating to early Christian worship practices. It was an exciting time, with much rich research and study being done on newly discovered docu-
ments from the early church. A renewed interest in the sacraments and the liturgical year is still present in many congregations as a result of this movement. Lectionary aids, as well as books on the sacraments and the theology of worship, have emerged.

James White’s *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Abingdon, 1999) is a wonderful overview of the role of sacraments, both historically and in the contemporary church. Marva Dawn, in *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Eerdmans, 1995), urges congregations to be faithful to the gospel and resist changes in worship that are market tools aimed at acquiescing to particular generational cultures.

**Contemporary Worship**

When I was young, *contemporary worship* meant the use of guitars in worship. Today, the term is used to describe a style of worship that tends to be geared to the Baby Boomer generation (born from 1945–1964). While it is often used as a tool for evangelism of the currently unchurched, this style of worship has been appreciated by different generations. Today, there are also worship services geared to persons who belong to Generation X (born since 1965).

A good source for understanding the generations and the issues involved with moving from a traditional worship service to a contemporary worship service is Andy Langford’s *Transitions in Worship: Moving from Traditional to Contemporary* (Abingdon, 1999). He lays out three patterns of contemporary worship: liturgical worship, praise and worship, and seeker services. Langford then discusses the origins of contemporary worship, as well as the various generations and how to apply these findings in developing one of these three forms of contemporary worship. The last chapter deals with “blended worship” (which I will discuss in the next section).

*Contemporary Worship for the 21st Century: Worship or Evangelism?* (Discipleship Resources, 1994), by Daniel T. Benedict, Jr., and Craig Kennet Miller, is still a good resource for those who are new to the topic. They deal with various models of contemporary worship and the spectrum of seekers (both churched and unchurched): church believers, churched seekers, unconnected believers, seekers on the journey, latent seekers, churched dropouts, and unbelievers. Designing worship for those who are seekers and those who are faithful believers involves different categories of catech-
esis. Precatechesis is aimed at seekers, presenting to them the gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of God. Catechesis is designed to take believers into a deeper understanding of and response to discipleship in the world. The purpose for the design and content of worship is different for each group. Benedict and Miller discuss ways to deal with these cross-purposes: the need for evangelism, and the need for believers to go deeper in their faith through the worship of God.

**Blended Worship and “Third Way” Worship**

For those who are not fully in either the traditional worship camp or the contemporary worship camp, Robert Webber proposes a combined approach in _Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship_ (Hendrickson, 1996). Webber describes the current conversation about different styles of worship, the changing worldview, and our biblical and historical traditions. He then discusses several areas of what he calls “convergence worship.” He honors the Christian Year, the sacraments, and the use of arts in worship, but also believes that worship renewal is crucial—that new elements can bring transformative power to Sunday worship. Webber believes that worship should empower evangelism, as well as education, spirituality, and social justice. Martin Thielen, in _Ancient-Modern Worship: A Practical Guide to Blending Worship Styles_ (Abingdon, 2000), continues the blended worship conversation. He discusses its benefits, various patterns, the process of liturgical design, and the content for the various elements of the liturgy.

In _Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship_ (The Alban Institute, 2001), Thomas Long makes his own contribution to the blended worship conversation by refusing to place himself in either of the two “camps”—traditional or contemporary. However, he also believes that blended worship forms imply a “mix-and-match approach—a dash of contemporary thrown in with a measure of traditional.” He prefers what he calls a “third way.” Third Way congregations have certain characteristics in common concerning their worship: they make room for the experience of mystery; show hospitality to strangers; have recovered and made visible the sense of drama inherent in Christian worship; emphasize congregational music that is excellent and eclectic; pay attention to the environment of worship; forge a strong connection between worship and mission; maintain a relatively stable order of service; move to a joyous festival experience toward the end of worship; and have strong, charismatic pastors as worship leaders.
Technology and Worship

Some people can’t wait to incorporate technology into worship and others avoid it like the plague. Technology for technology’s sake may not be a good goal, but technology in service to the gospel may be an important move as we address those who have been raised in a “wired world.”

Tex Sample makes a strong argument for paying attention to the needs of a technological culture in *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Abingdon, 1998). He discusses sound and image, beat, spectacle, soul music, and dance. I highly respect the work he does as a sociologist of religion in analyzing the culture and the issues that analysis raises for worship in today’s church. While I disagree with the way he applies his research to the design of a worship service, the issues he raises call for our attention and consideration.

For those who have studied the issues, have analyzed their congregation and constituency, and have already decided to move ahead with the use of multimedia in worship, Len Wilson’s *Wired Church: Making Media Ministry* (Abingdon, 1999) is an excellent resource. It is accompanied by a CD-ROM that enables one to see as well as read what the author is talking about. The book is divided into four sections: developing a mission for media; designing eye-popping media presentations; building a champion team; and buying the tools. It is a helpful, hands-on, step-by-step guide to using media in worship.

Worship in Multiethnic Contexts

For many multiethnic congregations in cities, suburbs, and small towns, assimilation has been the basic approach to worship. The newcomers (of whatever ethnicity) are expected to adopt the worship style and content of the congregation they have chosen to visit or even join. Some congregations, however, are trying to ascertain what the worship styles and expectations are of the newcomers, what music touches their hearts, what language(s) have formed their being and, therefore, their interpretation of the biblical texts. A reciprocal form of assimilation is the goal: newcomers learn to appreciate the worship of the existing congregation, but the congregation also learns to appreciate the worship style, music, and prayer forms of the newcomers.

My book *Worship across Cultures* (Abingdon, 1998) is a descriptive
analysis of the homogeneous worship practices of twenty-one cultures in The United Methodist Church. It is designed for pastors who are serving multiethnic congregations. For the pastor who has a Filipino member in the congregation who is getting married, the Filipino chapter has a section on weddings that will hopefully give this pastor some questions to ask of the couple about traditional practices they may expect in their wedding service. My book *Culturally Conscious Worship* (Abingdon, 2000) uses the biblical story of Pentecost as a vision for multicultural ministry. I discuss various models of multiethnic ministries, the importance of creating a shared story across cultures, the issue of music, and the problems of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.

Brian Blount and Nora Tubbs Tisdale edited a volume entitled *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship* (Westminster/John Knox, 2001). Each chapter is written by faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary; therefore, the book brings diverse perspectives from various disciplines to bear on this topic. The book is divided into three sections: biblical foundations, theological foundations, and contemporary practices of multicultural worship. The biblical scholars point out the multicultural issues in the Hebrew Bible, in Jesus’ ministry, and in the Pauline texts. The theologians deal with issues of power, contextual theology, and theology that emerges from communities that live between two cultures. Definitions of culture, youth culture, music wars, and theologies of worship are helpful conversations in the section “Multicultural Worship Today.”

**Music**

Music has become a divisive element in some congregations. Traditional hymns are still being sung; but the latter half of the past century saw a plethora of new hymns being written. Many lyricists wrote lyrics to traditional hymn tunes while other composers wrote new tunes. Contemporary Christian music greatly impacted a particular generation, and “praise music” emerged in what has come to be called “contemporary worship contexts.” Composers from Christian communities all over the globe have written music and lyrics from their indigenous contexts; and some of this music has made its way into North American congregations. And today, rock, jazz, pop, and country may all be found in worshiping congregations. In some cases, the lyrics are used unchanged, while in others the lyrics are adapted to fit a Christian context.
Brian Wren’s book *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Westminster/John Knox, 2000) is an excellent resource. He begins with creative insights into the kind of music used in worship, beginning with today and going back to 1200 B.C.E. in Israel. Wren then identifies the importance of music as congregational song and argues that congregational song and instrumental music “should aim to be one or more of the following: formative, transformative, cognitive, educational, inspirational.”

The genres of congregational song are identified and discussed as to their purpose: hymns, choruses, rounds, refrains, chants, ritual songs, and spirit singing. Wren discusses contemporary music and issues of beat and volume, disposability, and durability, engaging the mind as well as the emotions. For those interested in the more technical aspects of writing lyrics, the poetics of lyrics, and how and why lyrics are changed over the years, Wren also spends time analyzing some traditional and contemporary lyrics. Another interesting resource is Paul Westermeyer’s *Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice* (The Liturgical Press, 1998). In the past fifty years, many hymns have been written that deal with justice issues. Westermeyer discusses this phenomenon but also makes a strong case for the role of justice in hymn lyrics throughout the centuries.

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**Endnotes**

Reading the Bible in Faith: Theological Voices from the Pastorate, ed. by William Lazareth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

The contributors to this volume of brief essays share the assumption that there is a “crisis in the church.” This crisis, the authors insist, is one of faith, caused by the separation of the church from its theological tradition. And this separation has led both to the loss of authority in the pastoral office and to the trivialization of the church’s mission.

The thirty-two brief essays in Reading the Bible in Faith were written by members of the pastor-theologian program of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey. The authors, pastors of congregations from across the United States, represent an array of denominational and theological perspectives. Despite this diversity, however, a common vision emerges: pastors can speak an often-ignored word about the purpose of the church in our time and their voices can guide us to the resources necessary for renewal.

The essays are organized in six categories. The first group responds to the issue of the authority of Scripture in congregations, given the postmodern situation and the ambiguous legacy of historical criticism for the reading of Scripture in the church. The second and third categories attend to the Passion Narrative (Matthew 26–27) and the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). The final three sets of essays focus on doctrine, worship, and preaching in the life of the church. Each essay in some way converses with the core Scripture passages under consideration. Thus, pastors reflect on how the Atonement has been understood in the history of the church, with implications for the present. They also report on ways in which the Passion is narrated in a congregation’s life during the season of Lent, and they struggle with how the Cross is proclaimed with faithfulness and integrity.

Throughout these essays, the authors are aware of the ways in which the recovery of the pastoral office is both difficult and essential. Further, there is a sense that the writers are swimming against the stream. Our North American culture, and our denominations that have been so shaped by it, move more readily to the consultant who reads the past and predicts the
future. These essays say an unmistakable “no” to this trend. Here and there, an essay proposes an alternative that has been in our tradition and awaits recovery.

There is a crisis in the church. It can be seen in our politicized disagreements, our lack of compassion for the lost, our neglect of the poor, our apathy toward orthodoxy, and our tendency to seek alignment with the cultural trend of the moment. The resulting confusion has left us in a state of fragmentation, and it is the pastor’s challenge to make sense of the fragments. The voices from the pastorate in this book offer a modest way forward: we are invited to read the Scriptures together; reflect on the portions of the story that seem most at odds with our human inclinations; and guide the people in the practices that will shape them in the way of Jesus, which is the way of the cross. This helpful book is a model for renewal that will guide us into a future that is also faithful to the past.


Kathryn Tanner’s latest book is a compact outline of a broadly conceived and original systematic theology. In 124 pages, one is presented with a view of divinity and creation that takes up the traditional categories of systematic theology and interprets these categories based on an incarnational view of divine gifting and transcendence.

Two principles organize the thrust of her argument: “non-competitive relationships between God and creatures” and a “radically reinterpreted notion of divine transcendence” (2). Noncompetitive relations between creatures and God refers specifically to a kind of relationship where “the creature does not decrease so that God may increase” (2). This is the case for Tanner because, first, God is the “fecund provider of all that the creature is in itself; the creature in its giftedness, in its goodness, does not compete with God’s gift-fullness and goodness because God is the giver of all that the creature is for good” (3). Second, God is transcendent in the sense that God is not also a “kind of thing” as is the creature. God’s gift-giving to humanity comes at the hand of God’s radical transcendence. Tanner finds that this is most fully expressed in the life and person of Jesus.
Christ as assumed by the Word—and thereby also in the Trinity. Her theology possesses a deeply incarnational flavor that attempts, by virtue of God’s complete difference in transcendence, not to value the divinity of Christ over the humanity of Jesus, or the reverse.

The reader can expect to encounter familiar themes that are subtly directed into a highly nuanced approach to Christian thought. For example, in the final chapter, Tanner takes up eschatology by divorcing it from its temporal moorings, locating Christian hope instead in the new relationship with a gifting, noncompetitive God. While Tanner does not explain this or other arguments fully (due in large part to the compact nature of the work itself), readers will find this book and its expansive footnotes to be a treasure trove of Christian thought—drawing on significant historical and contemporary sources.

The depth of thought that gives rise to this book is evident, but it leaves the reader wishing for more. So, it is good news when Tanner indicates that a more complete volume of her theology is forthcoming, one that will hopefully address the issues she raises with more depth and breadth. As a tool for pastoral ministry, Tanner’s book brings fresh insight into the theological foundations of ministry and offers encouragement to faithful Christians in pursuing a life “according to the mode of Jesus’ own life” (67). How one lives one’s life is at the very heart of this theology that places a strong emphasis on God as the “source and securer of good gifts” (67). Readers will find Tanner’s book theologically engaging and practically relevant and the book will hopefully leave them anxious for this theology’s more complete elucidation.

Reviewed by Matthew W. Charlton. Charlton is a graduate student at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and a probationary member of the Tennessee Annual Conference.
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Eating with United Methodists

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

Hendrikus Berkhof observes that the Eucharist is the most comprehensive expression of the Christian understanding of salvation. In its celebration, we simultaneously look backward (to Christ's saving work on the cross) and forward (to the coming reign of God), upward (to the exalted Lord) and around us (to our family in Christ and to the world for which Christ died). The Supper is the triune God's gift of salvation to the church and through the church to the world. And so, by feasting together, the church gives thanks, for "it is right to give our thanks and praise." As both Don Saliers and Karen Westerfield Tucker point out, United Methodists share with the ecumenical community these central theological affirmations about the Eucharist, due in no small part to the remarkable liturgical renewal that swept across the churches—both Protestant and Catholic—in the past four decades. Yet United Methodists also recognize in the resurgent interest in the theology and practice of the sacraments a deep connection with the "best impulses of the larger Methodist/Wesleyan tradition" (224). These ecumenical and liturgical conversations, coupled with intensive study of United Methodist theology and practice of worship, prompted the denomination "to place into its orders for Lord's Day worship ... the expectation of a normative service of Word and Table" (234).

The Services of Word and Table in the United Methodist Hymnal and Book of Worship embody a theology and practice of the Eucharist that are firmly grounded in the ecumenical consensus and that faithfully express the distinctive contribution of the United Methodist tradition. One such contribution, says Westerfield Tucker, is Wesley's understanding of the means of grace—here the Eucharist—as both obligation and opportunity: obligation because "Christ commanded that we 'do this'" and opportunity because the holy meal is crucial for Christian life and growth (242).
Indeed, for United Methodists, the Eucharist feeds the soul for discipleship in the world. For Kenneth Waters, the liturgy of Word and Table affirms a distinctive way of being in the world, what he calls "a centrifugal form of Christian practice." From their spiritual center—their relationship with God—Christians are "propelled into the world into wider orbits of corporate interaction and responsibility" (248). The spiritual center thus becomes the matrix for a social response that finds embodiment in a witness to peace, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness, and service. Inherent in the Eucharist is a profound vision of social transformation that can bring healing to the human family, offering an urgently needed alternative to the violence and hatred that wrack so many communities today.

It is clear, however, that, while the resurgence in the theology and practice of the Eucharist finds powerful embodiment in our denomination's official worship resources, it has yet to transform the eucharistic practices of many United Methodist congregations. This leads David Tripp to argue that if United Methodists are serious about reasserting the Eucharist as essential to the celebration of the Lord's Day, they will need to rethink several areas of the church's self-understanding, particularly the need for nourishing—among clergy and laity alike—of a "confident sacramental spirituality" (281).

Mark Stamm examines the practice of "open Communion" and argues that the open table should be viewed as a Methodist exception to the classical order of Christian initiation. The Methodist exception reminds the church that the Supper is grounded not only in the so-called "institution narratives" but also in the wider meal ministry of Jesus.

In Word and Table, United Methodists now have a rich theology of the Eucharist. May we discover anew the transforming and revitalizing power that comes from faithful and persistent appropriation of this sacrament.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is editor of Quarterly Review.

Endnotes

I recall with affectionate memory certain childhood experiences of Holy Communion. My grandmother and aunt who raised me were Methodists who believed in attending church. As a grade schooler, I would sit beside my grandmother, who quietly told me when to sit up, to stand and share the Hymnal (then the 1933 edition), and to go to kneel with her at the altar rail of that small-town Ohio church. Receiving the small square of bread and the small glass of Welch’s grape juice was to come later, after Confirmation (three Saturdays with a book on what Methodists believe).

While the attendance was not always as full as on "regular" Sundays, still, for this child's perception, the quarterly Communion services held a great solemnity, even a quiet mystery. The tone of participation was that of a solemn funeral service for Jesus who "died for our sins." The language, the style, the gestures of kneeling—the pastor beside the small table in front of the pulpit—all evoked this tone. The intimacy with my grandmother and a sense of drawing closer to Jesus on those occasions, both remain precious memories for me. But much more about sacraments was to come.

My time in seminary coincided with Vatican II. The impact of ecumenical and liturgical movements was suddenly becoming obvious to Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. A remarkable new but ancient range of images and theological meanings were part of discussions and experimental worship practices. The sacrament of the table was a fellowship meal, a resurrection meal, and a joyful thanksgiving for all God had created and redeemed. Holy Communion had vast social implications that...
many Methodists (and others) had yet to conceive. At the same time, these recovered meanings seemed somehow attuned to the best impulses of the larger Methodist/Wesleyan traditions. In sum, Holy Communion was an eschatological meal “for the life of the world,” as Alexander Schmemann was claiming. It was profoundly eucharistic, a “good gift” from God, commanding our wholehearted thanks and praise.

Sacramental Awakenings

The United Methodist Church emerged in 1968, appointing a taskforce ("Word and Table") for a comprehensive look at our theology and practice of worship. It was a remarkable time of study and ecumenical exchange. Stimulated by the longer history of the "liturgical movement," whose roots were among the Benedictines of the late-nineteenth century but whose flowering was especially strong at the second Vatican Council (1963-1965), our group, both lay and clergy, set about the resources for reform and renewal of sacramental life. Drawing upon ancient sources, biblical and ecclesial, and keeping a strong eye on the Wesleys, we responded with a reformed set of worship resources. Few of us could have predicted the enormous impact the publication of "The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper; An Alternate Service, 1972" was to have on United Methodist practice and, consequently, on the rebirth of sacramental theology among many United Methodists, lay and clergy alike. The "Supplemental Worship Resource Series," published between 1972 and 1984 under the guidance of the Section on Worship of the General Board of Discipleship, provided us with a remarkable expansion of materials and pastoral/liturgical reflection on all the major services of the church. The response among those local churches that began to use and study these new rites indicated that a true spiritual hunger for more meaningful sacramental celebrations had been tapped. Ecumenical sharing took place in an unprecedented manner, even with bold and controversial experiments in intercommunion. Of course, this also brought theological issues to the forefront, especially those concerning the long, fragmented, and polemical history of differences among traditions, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Not only the sacrament of the table received attention as a result of these developments: the theology and practice of Christian baptism was also heightened. I recall the summer of 1975 in Buckhannon, West Virginia, when over a thousand United Methodists gathered for a worship and music conference. That week featured the first time we used a proposed...
service for the renewal and reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant for the whole congregation. This service was officially published in 1976 and has subsequently formed the liturgical rite in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) and in *The Book of Worship* (1992). The service at the conference was strong, loving, and animated, producing good preaching, vigorous hymn singing, gracious presiding, and the use of dancers moving amidst the assembly with generous signs of water for the renewal. I was in the sacristy after the service when a group came through the door. One woman spoke for them, exclaiming, “Was that a sacramental action or a revival? I couldn’t tell the difference!” I thought, *This is Methodism as its worshiping best.* That question and exclamation have remained with me for over twenty-five years as the right response to such a recovery of Word and Sacrament in our tradition. We all sensed that morning that the Holy Spirit had made something intrinsic to the Wesleyan movement come alive in us: the sacraments and evangelical depth of faith are fully compatible.

In the years since the reformed rites of the 1970s, The United Methodist Church and other denominations have witnessed a strong resurgence in the practice and theology of the principal sacraments. Even so, for a large number of United Methodists, including pastors, the significance of this resurgence has not been understood. I contend that, if faithfully and persistently explored in local churches, mature appropriation of the meaning and practice of the sacraments would revolutionize church life and mission. What are some of the theological features of this resurgence and what are the implications for the lives of our congregations and of the larger denominational issues we now face?

The range of issues for which such awareness is relevant is not confined to the sanctuary. Indeed, this is a true renaissance, a rebirth of the heart of the Christian gospel for life and ministry in the world. Baptism and Eucharist, from the beginnings of Christianity, were primal places of identity, grace, hope, and the formation of Christian fruits of the Spirit.

**Themes in United Methodist Baptismal and Eucharistic Rites**

We turn now to the theological features of the United Methodist worship services, which may illuminate the import of this sacramental resurgence. The emerging liturgical and ecumenical thinking that informed these services paid particular attention to biblical sources, the continuity of practices grounded in Jesus’ words and deeds, the experiential connection with
human life, and adequacy to the fullness of divine creation and promise. To
make this clear, let us first examine the liturgies of Holy Communion and
Baptism in our Hymnal and Book of Worship. This puts us in position to ask
about the theological and pastoral implications for local churches and,
more generally, for The United Methodist Church.

Perhaps the first and foremost recovery in the recent worship reforms
has to do with reclaiming the eschatological meaning of the sacraments.
What has God promised to human life and to the whole creation? Nothing
less than fulfillment of the divine intention in creation, covenant, and
Christ. The “eschatological” reality is found in the transforming grace and
justice of God already breaking in and at work in history, though not yet
fully consummated. This is found in the services of both The United
Methodist Hymnal and The Book of Worship. We hear this in the references to
sharing in Christ’s “final victory,” as well as in the acclamation “Christ has
died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” At the end of the prayer of
Great Thanksgiving we pray, “... until Christ comes in final victory and we
feast at his heavenly banquet.” Beyond the texts that speak freshly of a
future advent of Christ, we find that the baptismal act and the action of the
holy meal are both radically dependent upon the claim that the rule and
reign of God has already broken into human history. Both baptism and the
Lord’s table speak of the tension between the already of Christ’s incarna-
tion and the not yet of complete historical fulfillment of God’s purposes for
creation and for human history. This “active” principle of eschatological
reality already present can be traced in the major themes in the new rites: we
are baptized into Christ’s body, yet we await the full unity of Christ’s
church; we receive Christ in the meal, yet we pray for the Kingdom to come
on earth. We experience a tension between the Lord’s presence and his
absence. Yet, precisely because Christ has come, we cry out all the more,
“Come, Lord Jesus,” especially during Advent.

In Christian baptism we see marks of this “new creation” that is already
here. Forgiveness of sin and reconciliation of human beings make possible
participation in Christ’s ongoing life. Union with him means solidarity with
all his children, all the needy ones of a broken, suffering world. The very
act of incorporating persons into his Body, the church, signs and seals
empowerment by the Holy Spirit in continuity with Jesus’ life and mission.
The imagery of new birth is prominent in the baptismal rite, yet we pray
for the future life of the baptized.
To receive forgiveness is to be called to the sacrament of forgiveness in our social world. Unmistakable accent is placed on God's acting in and through the church's faithful celebration. This recovery of the divine agency challenges some of the older attitudes toward baptism as something we do ourselves to "express" faith rather than to receive and be strengthened in the faith community. In the baptismal prayer over the water, we pray that God will "wash away their [those being baptized] sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives." 4

Union with Christ's dying and rising is clearly restored in the baptismal ritual action and explicitly in the text. Jesus Christ calls "disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection." 5 This means union with the priestly ministry of Jesus, but this union is for all the church, not just the clergy or those laity appointed to special roles. This means that ordination is dependent upon the integrity and power of baptism, not the other way around. The whole church is called in baptism (in this sense, "set apart") to serve God's will and way in the world. We are made members of Christ's body and all are one in Christ. This is a claim of radical equality before God, as seen in texts such as Gal. 3:27-28. The new baptismal texts make it clear that all the baptized become members of Christ's universal church—that those baptized are "initiated into Christ's holy Church." 6

The baptismal covenant also places renewed emphasis on the reception of the Holy Spirit. The thanksgiving over the water makes this unmistakable, especially with the gesture of laying on of hands: "The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ." 7 The ecumenical implications here are strong and challenge lingering parochialisms, such as holding on to the notion of "preparatory members" or to sectarian impulses focusing on the necessity of certain kinds of personal experience as signs of conversion. That encounter with Christ is necessary for Christian life is clear. And the new baptismal rites reinforce this with the demanding questions asked of those presented for baptism and/or their parents and sponsors.

Of course, these dimensions and themes of the new baptismal services are also subject to controversy, none more clearly than the emphasis on regeneration or "new birth." But the new United Methodist rites insist that we are "given new birth through water and the Spirit." The questions of those who are presented for baptism and through sponsors hear the strong connection with accountable discipleship in those questions: "Do you
renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness . . . and repent of your sin? . . . Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression? Here the inner connection between living the baptized life and social accountability is made clear.

The primary theme of thanksgiving is intrinsic to the Eucharist itself. It inheres in the very meaning of the Greek New Testament word eucharisteo, which means to render or to give thanks. Eucharist calls the church to the continual praise of God. The range of eucharistic prayers in the Book of Worship (twenty-four prayers in all [pp. 54-80]) powerfully expresses this call. These eucharistic prayers combine with the recovery of Charles Wesley’s powerful indication of sacramental remembering. Remembering is more than mere “thinking” or a kind of nostalgia for a time that has passed. Rather, remembering is an anamnesis of what Jesus said and did not only at the Last Supper but also during his entire life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection. If we ask what is remembered in the Lord’s Supper as we now have it, we should point to the greatest of the biblical themes: creation, covenant, human sinfulness and divine deliverance, exile and return, the prophetic call for justice and righteousness—all culminating in what Jesus Christ accomplished. The reality of koinonia or “Communion fellowship” is of the whole assembly in relation to all who have gone before, the living and the dead. The conclusion of the Great Thanksgiving expresses this vividly: “By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world . . .”

All of these are references to the texts that speak what the actions of the water bath and the holy meal realize when faithfully celebrated by the community over time. The “sacrifice” of praise and thanksgiving, which is our whole life open to God’s grace and offered in adoration and service, is conjoined to Christ’s own self-giving for the whole world. The Eucharist, echoing the theme of the Holy Spirit in baptism, is invoked both for the hearing and receiving of the Word and at the table. In the Prayer for Illumination we implore God’s Spirit to enable us to hear and do the Word, just as at the table in the meal prayer we ask God to “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine.”

Taken together, these prayers unfold the comprehensiveness of what it means to celebrate the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper with these recovered biblical and existential themes made alive. Social holiness and justice are enjoined in both Baptism and Eucharist. So at the end of
the holy meal we pray, "Eternal God, ... you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may ... give ourselves for others." Here the link between the grace of Holy Communion and the ministry of service to the world is clear and compelling.

Some Implications for the Life of the Church

We are in a new day, with new demands. In recognition of the importance and the relevance of the sacraments to the life and mission of the church, the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church resolved that "there should be a strong sense of the importance of Holy Communion in the life of the church, and that there is at least an equally strong sense of the absence of any understanding of Eucharistic theology and practice." Acknowledging that the larger church has not had the formation in these developments, a Study Committee on the Eucharist was formed to address these concerns and to make recommendations to be brought to the General Conference in 2004. Gayle Felton's report to the worship resourcing project team of the General Board of Discipleship in May 1999 registers two major conclusions. First, the laity "feel a deep need for Eucharistic spirituality based upon fuller understanding and more meaningful practice." Second, "little connection is being made in our congregations between Eucharist and the life of Christian discipleship." Sacramental life goes well beyond the two principal Protestant sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist. But for Christians the other sacramental actions of the church in our worship and ministries in the world take their specific identification from these two sacraments. Or, more forcefully, since all sacramental life is rooted and grounded in conversion to and ongoing life in Jesus Christ, we can say that Christian existence itself is grounded in the one incarnate life of God. Thus, what Jesus said and did is now made real in what is said and done in his name and by the power of the animating Spirit of God. Simply put, the primary vocation of the church in the world is to continually join in the liturgy of Jesus Christ. What Jesus proclaimed and enacted, God now desires to enact and bring to spoken witness in and through the community of faith, Christ's body in human history. This is itself only possible by the lifegiving Spirit's making the crucified and risen One present within the world of space and time. The church's calling is to embody this word and action. As Christ preached the kingdom of God, so must we. As Christ reconciled and embodied justice and righteousness, so
must we. As he fed the hungry and gave living water to the thirsty, so must we. As he gave himself in gestures of compassion and hospitality, so must we. As he called human beings into holiness and discipline, so must we.

The specific courses of action this calling requires will always need contextual deliberation and discernment. That we will differ on some matters is clear. But that these actions are compelled by Word and Sacrament—that is, by Christ's speaking and acting—is undeniable.

It is clear from Christ's words and actions that the sacraments involve the whole range of our embodied life, including the intellect. To partake of the grace of God in the holy meal and the bath of initiation into Christ is more than rational assent to doctrines about salvation. It is a physical and mystical engagement with Jesus Christ in the Spirit and with one another as church. Thus, the new, emerging theology of sacraments and the more adequate celebrations of these rites open upon formation in Christian affections, attitudes, and holiness over time. This is why the question of how frequently to celebrate the Eucharist, linked with the marks of baptism, is important. We are not simply "remembering Jesus" (that is, having pious thoughts); we are invited to be formed into his image. And in so doing, we allow Word and Sacrament to continually re-shape and re-form us in the very image of God in which we were created.

Some persons find the new emphasis on sacraments in tension with the task of evangelism. Others experience a tension between sacraments and social action. These criticisms are to be taken seriously. But in such debates the problem lies not in the contradictions between sacrament, evangelism, and social action but rather in an inadequate conception of the nature of Christian sacraments. I have tried to clarify and deepen the meaning of Baptism and Eucharist in this article to show that conversion to the way of Christ and to the social transformation of our world actually flows from and back to vital experience of Word and Sacrament, which lie at the heart of the church's worship. Now is the time to teach and to deepen our experience of the sacramental grace of God so that evangelism and mission will be rooted and empowered by the one true sacrament of God: Jesus Christ in his fullness. This is the work of every congregation and it is the privilege of "being church" together, members of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

Our conception of The United Methodist Church itself may be invigorated by a more profound understanding and experience of the sacraments. We have been caught in an opposition between regarding The United

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Methodist Church as either "conciliar" or "confessional." United Methodists do not have the equivalent to a Heidelberg Catechism or an Augsburg Confession. We do not characteristically begin by creating and citing a series of confessional statements of doctrine as in the Presbyterian tradition.

And yet, United Methodists have a way to deal with this issue. If we grasp the fact that at the eucharistic table and at the baptismal pool we are professing a primary theology in prayer and ritual action, then we will realize that United Methodists do stand in doctrinally ordered continuity with the apostolic catholicity of Christian worship, life, and confession of faith. Thus, we have restored the Apostles Creed in our baptismal covenant; and the very shape of the prayers of Great Thanksgiving over the water and the table are fully trinitarian. For United Methodists, doctrine is "prayed" as address to the God for whom we listen and from whom grace is freely bestowed upon those who worship in spirit and in truth.

The implications of this retrieval are enormous. For one thing, it may allow us to avoid the problem of the binary bind mentioned above in terms of which we are either nonconfessional or confessional (in a narrowed sense of polemically formed statements). For another thing, the vision of right praise rendered to the incarnating God of all creation, received in the words and sacramental acts of Christ, is open to the wider work of God's Spirit in mission and ministry.

The Task Ahead: Communities Formed in Word and Sacrament

Our task as United Methodists, then, is at once theological, pastoral, and catechetical. Every local church needs to respond to the question, "What does God in Christ give us in the water bath and invocation of the Spirit, in the Word sung, prayed, and proclaimed in the holy meal, and in the range of the 'ordinary means of grace'?" The answer will involve us in experiential formation in the saving mystery of Jesus Christ and in the practices of the fruits of the Spirit, within and outside the four walls of our church buildings. "O taste and see that the Lord is good," says the psalmist (Ps. 34:8). So, in the sacraments we taste and receive the height, depth, and breadth of God's incarnate compassion for the world.

United Methodists now have splendid worship resources—theological and pastoral—to revitalize a deeper sense of sacramentality. Such a deepening of the means of grace and the receptivity to grace in this world is a profoundly Wesleyan theme. The recovery of a sacramentality that links worship with
social holiness in service to God and neighbor would truly renew the church. The resurgence of the means of grace in their more comprehensive and revelatory sense is also the heartbeat of the divine mission to and within God's whole created and redeemed order. At the heart of God's creating and redeeming care for the world is self-incarnating love. Christians confess that created things bear the grace of God. At the heart of life is a deep mystery: how ordinary things become extraordinary as we invoke and sense the divine in and through them. John Wesley was careful to enumerate various lists of the "ordinary means of grace" that continually expand the scope of our sacramental experience of the divine mission.

What would such renewed sacramentality mean for the way congregations approach the sacraments? First, it would require reinvigorated teaching and sacramental formation. With rare exceptions, most United Methodist churches do not promote extensive teaching about Christian worship. Church members long for, but do not have, a clear conception of the basics of worship, much less of the history and theology of the Christian sacraments. This is beginning to change, but there is resistance in places. Some pastors, heavily influenced by strategies for making worship "user-friendly," simply marginalize the sacraments. This is understandable when a diminished practice and understanding of the Eucharist is already in place.

Second, it would require preaching that roots itself in a sacramental sense of church and world. This means rereading the life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ as the foundation of Word and Sacrament. What has yet to be understood fully is how the whole life of Jesus Christ is expressed in word and actions. Proclamation cannot be content with a one-sided or narrow conception of Christ's work and person. Rather, the unity of Christ's life must be continually unfolded in our experience of worship over time. Thus, Christ's redemptive work, while culminating with the cross and empty tomb, must also include how he lived, what he taught, his healing ministry, table fellowship, and his very incarnate life itself.

Third, it would require more vibrant celebrations of Baptism and Eucharist. Churches should be creative in finding occasions to celebrate Eucharist in the whole range of the church's life: at retreats, camping events and youth and intergenerational gatherings and in people's homes. Of course, vibrancy needs to be accompanied by integrity; hence, attention should be paid to the feasts and seasons and the rhythms of congregational life in the world.
Endnotes

2. During the time that Henri Nouwen and I were teaching at Yale Divinity School, I recall the enormous power of gathering for Eucharist around the table, with a full-orbed eucharistic prayer and new styles of communing because of the alteration of space. We were challenging the issue of Christian intercommunion; but perhaps the more significant consequence was a generation of seminarians and some faculty who could "not go home again" in practice and in theology to our antecedent understandings.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 87.
7. Ibid., 91.
8. Ibid., 88.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 39. See also "A Service of Word and Table I," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 11.
13. Felton's report is unpublished, and was made available through the office of Daniel T. Benedict, Jr., at the General Board of Discipleship in Nashville. The citations are from pages 2-3.
"Let Us Thy Mercy Prove": A United Methodist Understanding of the Eucharist

KAREN B. WESTERFIELD TUCKER

In 1742, John Wesley published an essay on "The Character of a Methodist" in order to demonstrate to questioners from within and without the new movement that Methodism was "plain old Christianity" and not distinct from the Christianity practiced by "real Christians." Methodist approaches to worship and to the sacraments were, therefore, not to be substantively different from those of other Christians. Rather than proposing something new, the early Methodists advocated a recovery of practices and understandings that they believed to be in accord with "scriptural Christianity."

American Methodists, as well as the denominations that came to make up the Evangelical United Brethren Church, always emphasized their commitment to Scripture and, in a "catholic spirit," to the wider church. Such an affirmation was borne out by a willingness to participate in interdenominational camp meetings and revivals, and from the late-nineteenth century onwards, in broader ecumenical conversations and mutual endeavors. Many of these cooperative ecumenical efforts also took on a liturgical shape: the United Brethren, the Evangelical Church, and several branches of Methodism were involved in the 1930s with the work of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America to promote worship education at all levels and to introduce (or restore) the liturgical year in "free church" congregations. More recently, the participation of The United Methodist Church in the World Council of Churches and in various bilateral and multilateral dialogues has caused the denomination (once again) to measure its theological reflection and liturgical practices against those of other Christian groups. These ecumenical conversations, along with the liturgical renewal that swept across the churches especially in the past forty years, prompted The United Methodist Church to place into its orders for Lord's Day worship, if not yet into its practice, the expectation of a normative service of Word and Table.
In discussing a "United Methodist" theology of the Eucharist, therefore, one should not expect major theological distinctions from other Christian bodies. For example, it is not surprising to see the strong affirmation by the United Methodist Council of Bishops to the consensus document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (*BEM*, also known as the "Lima Document"), produced in 1982 by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (the final redaction of which was chaired by a British Methodist!). Although they acknowledged some United Methodist peculiarities, on the whole the bishops strove to locate The United Methodist Church firmly within the consensus. Indeed, they noted that in some places where there was divergence *BEM* could serve as a corrective.1

*BEM* develops the meaning of the Eucharist under five headings: thanksgiving to the Father, anamnesis of Christ, invocation of the Spirit, communion of the faithful, and meal of the Kingdom. Although the carefully worded contents under these five headings represent the results of contemporary ecumenical conversations, the subjects addressed are not new: explorations of these themes in third- and fourth-century writings informed modern theologians in their deliberations. Even the early Methodist movement in its sacramental revival identified these and similar issues and spoke to them through sermon and hymn in order to encourage a deeper appreciation of the Lord's table. Specifically, this meant recognizing a need for the sacrament that could be satisfied by frequent (preferably "constant") communion, acknowledging Christ's real presence at the table, celebrating the union of the "saints above" with the "saints below" in anticipation of the heavenly banquet, and actively linking the grace received at the table with acts of mercy toward neighbor and stranger.

To set forth a United Methodist theology of the Eucharist requires familiarity with the theological content of the current and previous official orders of service for Holy Communion (the current rite having affinities with both early Christian and contemporary orders; and the former Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren rites carrying the distinct genetic material of Anglicanism). Official responses to ecumenical documents like *BEM* and the theological texts produced for and by the predecessor denominations of The United Methodist Church should also be taken into account. In particular, John Wesley's sermons "The Means of Grace" and "On the Duty of Constant Communion," as well as *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745), consisting of 166 hymn texts, need to be consid-
erred. These texts contain Wesley's fullest statements on the sacrament (although brother Charles was the principal lyricist for the hymns, John affixed his name as coauthor of the collection). The two sermons were readily studied in North America and, on occasion, read from the pulpit. Although no edition of Hymns on the Lord’s Supper was ever published in the United States, certain hymns from the collection were put to use on this side of the Atlantic either in official hymnals or in other sources: a book of sermon outlines kept by early Methodist preacher Philip Gatch contained fifteen hand-copied Lord’s Supper hymns. The Hymns are an underrecognized United Methodist (and Anglican!) theological treasure, yet serve as an important point of conversation in dialogues, especially with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.

Many of the hymns from the Hymns on the Lord’s Supper are more suited to private meditation or theological reflection than to singing in a liturgical context. Their very density makes them a valuable resource in delineating the doctrine of the Eucharist held by the Wesleys and the early Methodists. In this respect, hymn number 53 may be drawn upon in order to develop several key points of teaching:

O God of truth and love,
Let us Thy mercy prove;
Bless Thine ordinance Divine,
Let it now effectual be,
Answer all its great design,
All its gracious ends in me.

O might the sacred word
Set forth our dying Lord,
Point us to Thy sufferings past,
Present grace and strength impart,
Give our ravish’d souls a taste,
Pledge of glory in our heart.

Come in Thy Spirit down,
Thine institution crown;
Lamb of God, as slain appear,
Life of all believers Thou.
Eucharist: Work of the Triune God

At the sacrament of the table the triune God is manifest, as is also true at the sacrament of the font. The three-stanza structure of hymn 53 reflects this reality: each stanza corresponds to one Person of the Godhead, with the coherently work of all Three subtly maintained. Such unity is expressed from the outset in the first line of the first stanza, where “truth” suggests the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and “love” hints at the outpoured Comforter. Yet it is to the First Person that the hymn speaks, for it is because of the Father’s originating work in creation, redemption, and sanctification that communion is both offered and fulfilled. The petitions to the Father throughout the hymn hint at the classic structure for prayers of thanksgiving (at least since St. Basil’s fourth-century treatise On the Holy Spirit) by which prayer is addressed to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The threefold sequence corresponds to the tripartite structure of the Great Thanksgiving in the official rite of The United Methodist Church, which was developed in light of ecumenical conversations and of rediscoveries made by the liturgical movement. This Antiochene, or West Syrian, structure for the eucharistic prayer that predominated in much of twentieth-century liturgical revision was not unknown to the Wesleys. Their liturgical interest in matters Patristic and Eastern attracted them to the so-called Clementine Liturgy in the eighth book of the fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions, which mostly follows the now-familiar Antiochene pattern. However, in providing a liturgy for the Methodist people in his Sunday Service of the Methodists (1784), John opted to depend upon the 1662 Communion service of the Church of England.

Use of the Antiochene structure for the eucharistic prayer has made overt in the liturgical text what United Methodists and their predecessors have always known: the Holy Spirit is present and active at the Lord’s Supper. However, prior to the most recent liturgical revisions, mention of the place and work of the Holy Spirit at the sacrament could be nonexistent in the rites of United Methodism’s ecclesiastical ancestors unless the Collect for Purity was used (“Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open . . . cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit . . .”) and a
Trinitarian reading was given to the Sanctus ("Holy, holy, holy . . ."). An exception was the Evangelical United Brethren rite from 1931 that, echoing the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, asked the Father to "bless and sanctify with thy Word and Holy Spirit these thy gifts of bread and wine." The singing of hymns that made reference to the work of the Spirit—for example, the line "Come in Thy Spirit down, Thine institution crown" in "O God of truth and love"—thus was essential to convey to those in attendance that the fullness of God was at work in the Eucharist. The use of the tripartite prayer, and particularly the addition of an epiklesis by which we "call down" the Spirit upon the eucharistic gifts and the people, has alerted attentive United Methodist congregations to the eucharistic work—and presence—of each person of the Godhead. Unfortunately, the all-too-common practices of reducing the Great Thanksgiving to the words of institution or the epiklesis alone, or of dividing up the Great Thanksgiving among different readers (with the elder only praying the words of institution, the epiklesis, or both), has fractured the theological wholeness intended by the structure of the prayer.

The Presence of Christ

It is by the power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the gathered community that hearts are gladdened and spirits joined. It is also by the power of the Holy Spirit that the historic words of Jesus become living and effective, thus making present him who was crucified and risen and who now reigns eternally. When sacramental remembrance of his saving work is made according to his own institution (anamnesis), Christ becomes visible to the eyes of faith. To use the text of our standard Great Thanksgiving, "When the Lord Jesus ascended, he promised to be with us always, in the power of your Word and Holy Spirit." Or in the poetry of hymn 53, the "sacred word set[s] forth our dying Lord," and by the Spirit the "Lamb of God, as slain appear[s];" the reader then petitions, "Let us now perceive Thee near; Come, Thou Hope of glory, now."

Over the centuries, the matter of how Christ is present at the sacrament has been a subject of debate—and schism. Generally, for the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ancestors of United Methodists, Christ's real presence at the table was never in doubt, because there was the expectation of an encounter with the divine as was intended in the fullest meaning of sacrament; the Lord's Supper was never just a bare memorial. Real presence certainly was not meant in the sense of transub-
stantiation, which, according to the eighteenth Methodist Article of Religion, "is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthreweth the nature of a sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions."5 Neither was presence defined in terms of consubstantiation, a theological interpretation sometimes connected with Luther. Writing in 1858, Methodist Orceuth Fisher commented that when our Lord says, "This is my body, this is my blood... his words are to be taken, not in a gross and literal, but in a spiritual and heavenly sense."6 Christ is really and truly present, but in a manner that defies precise definition.

Eventually, however, the perspective of many of our ecclesiastical ancestors shifted away from a positive understanding of real presence. This shift was brought about by fears that the phrase was indeed associated with transubstantiation (occasioned in part by an increase in the immigration of Roman Catholics) and by the heightened rationalism that permeated all aspects of American life. In 1864, the Methodist Episcopal Church introduced an alteration to the Communion text: the phrase from the Prayer of Consecration, "receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ's holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion," was shortened to "receiving these memorials of the sufferings and death of our Saviour Jesus Christ." This change lasted only one quadrennium, though, before the older form was restored. However, the die was cast: there was a greater tendency to read the Supper as a memorial of the absent one (a position often associated with Anabaptists and the Swiss reformer Huldreich Zwingli), with the bread and wine—and the entire liturgical event—as "mere" (meaning ineffective) symbols. Lord's Supper hymns selected for official hymnals articulated the memorial aspect, thereby capturing the theological position frequently found in denominational literature. Alterations made to the Communion service by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1932 (and kept, after merger, by the Methodist Church) expressed this change. In the Prayer of Consecration, "a perpetual memory of his precious death" became "this memorial of his precious death"; and, rather than partaking "of his most blessed body and blood," communicants partook "of the divine nature through him." In a fashion similar to this latter revision, "eating the flesh" and "drinking his blood" in the Prayer of Humble Access became "these memorials of Thy Son Jesus Christ."7

What United Methodist theological and liturgical reflection on the
"LET US THY MERCY PROVE": A UNITED METHODIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE EUCHARIST

By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace, I use this expression, 'means of grace,' because I know none better, and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages: in particular by our own church, which directs us to bless God both for the 'means of grace and hope of glory'; and teaches us that a sacrament is 'an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.'

Principal among these means, says Wesley, are prayer, searching the

sacraments has done, thanks to influences from the liturgical and ecumenical movements, is to invite Christ once again to his own table. Recovery of our own Wesleyan heritage has also assisted us in this matter. In the hymn "O Thou Who This Mysterious Bread," included in The United Methodist Hymnal (number 613) and originally from Hymns on the Lord's Supper, we sing using present, active verbs by which we repeat the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Return, herewith our souls to feed, and to thy followers speak. . . . Open our eyes to see thy face, our hearts to know the Lord. . . . Talk with us, and our hearts shall burn with flames of fervent love." Christ's real presence at the sacrament is unmistakably affirmed in the final stanza of the hymn: "Victim Divine, Thy Grace We Claim," also from Hymns on the Lord's Supper and printed in The Faith We Sing (number 2259): "To every faithful soul appear, and show thy real presence here!" (it is in the first part of this stanza that the text refutes Calvin's notion of the communicant's spiritual assent to heaven—"We need not go up to heaven, to bring the long-sought Savior down.") By recognizing the work of the Spirit—and the entire Godhead—in the celebration at the table, Christ's presence is acknowledged. Moreover, the full meaning of the sacrament—as an effective sign and a means of grace—may also be recovered. What Christ has promised, through the power of the Holy Spirit, he gives to us at his holy meal.

A Means of Grace

The phrase means of grace is not a distinctively Wesleyan term. John Wesley acknowledges his indebtedness to wider church usage in his sermon on "The Means of Grace":

By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.

I use this expression, 'means of grace,' because I know none better, and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages: in particular by our own church, which directs us to bless God both for the 'means of grace and hope of glory'; and teaches us that a sacrament is 'an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.'

Principal among these means, says Wesley, are prayer, searching the
Scriptures (and reading and hearing the Word), and the Lord's Supper. To this list of "instituted means of grace" are often added public worship, family and private prayer, and fasting.9

The impetus for Wesley's sermon came from the controversy at London's Fetter Lane Society regarding the use of the means of grace. Under the influence of Philip Henry Molther, some baptized Moravians and Methodists claimed that they should be "quiet" and wait upon the Lord, and thereby abstain from any means of grace until they had experienced full assurance of faith—or, in the terminology of that period, "conversion." Wesley countered this position by arguing that those persons with some degree of repentance and faith should participate in the means of grace even if they did not yet know full assurance. In fact, he says, the means could supply the grace—preventing, justifying, or sanctifying—specifically needed. Hence, the Lord's Supper could be a "converting ordinance" to those baptized in infancy, for it could produce in the heart the requisite assurance.10 Yet Wesley was as much against an understanding of the power of the sacrament as due to its human performance as he was against Fetter Lane spiritualism. The key for Wesley is trusting "that it is God alone who is the giver of every good gift, the author of all grace."11 Because of God's generosity, "is not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us? Let all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God, eat of that bread and drink of that cup."12

Because the Lord's Supper is an ordinary means of grace, Christians may be confident that grace will be given. Christ's word is true; therefore, the bread and the wine will convey what is promised. The text of hymn 53 proceeds under this assumption: "Bless Thine ordinance Divine, Let it now effectual be, Answer all its great design, All its gracious ends in me." Supping at the Lord's table imparts "present grace and strength" and "give[s] our ravish'd souls a taste." It is to "believers"—those who have at least a modicum of faith—that such grace is given. The necessity of faith prior to the reception of the sacrament is a theological position set out in United Methodism's historic documents. According to Methodist Article 18, "to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup
of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ." Article 6 of the
Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church follows a
similar line: "Those who rightly, worthily and in faith eat the broken bread
and drink the blessed cup partake of the body and blood of Christ in a
spiritual manner until he comes." 13

How is the Eucharist efficacious? The Wesleys were hesitant to offer an
explanation and their spiritual descendants have also refrained from theo-
philosophical speculation. But the Wesleys unhesitatingly affirmed that the
sacrament does work, though later Wesleyans seemingly have not been so
confident. The hymn "O the Depth of Love Divine" from Hymns on the
Lord's Supper and in The United Methodist Hymnal (number 627) emphasizes
that trust in the promise of God on this matter is paramount. "Who shall
say how bread and wine God into us conveys! How the bread his flesh
imparts, how the wine transmits his blood, fills his faithful people's hearts
with all the life of God!" Even the angels "bow to search it out, in vain."
Nevertheless, despite the absence of an elaborate explanation, by "the
Father's wisdom" the "feeble elements bestow a power not theirs to give";
"these the virtue did convey, yet still remain the same." The appropriate
human response thus is neither analysis nor despair but simply to "wonder
and adore."

Although the Eucharist as a means of grace is not a concept unique to
United Methodism, perhaps a Wesleyan contribution to the churches is an
understanding of the means of grace as both obligation and opportunity. In
his sermon on "The Duty of Constant Communion," John Wesley put these
two points side by side in identifying the reasons why Christians should
frequent the table and the excuses (even the ones used today!) that are
often given for absence. It is the duty of Christians to receive the sacra-
ment, said Wesley, because Christ commanded that we "do this." But the
Christian should also receive as often as he or she can because the benefits
are so great: "the forgiveness of our past sins, and the present strengthen-
ing and refreshing of our souls." 14 This is what we sing in "O Thou Who
This Mysterious Bread": "Enkindle now the heavenly zeal, and make thy
mercy known, and give our pardoned souls to feel that God and love are
one." It is precisely because the means of grace do something that their
reception is so important for Christian life and growth. For this reason,
among others, John Wesley in 1784 advised Methodist elders "to admin-
ister the supper of the Lord on every Lord's day." 15 In the same vein, our
spiritual ancestors insisted on keeping one another accountable regarding the regular practice of the means of grace. Such accountability was, in certain periods of our history, committed to explicit and firm legislation. The General Rules that stand among the United Methodist doctrinal standards in the Book of Discipline give a glimpse of these previously held convictions. Indeed, the General Rules call United Methodists again to spiritual practices and accountability: "It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation... by attending upon all the ordinances of God."16

A Sign of Christian Fellowship

Although the Eucharist is oftentimes construed as simply a private affair between the individual and God, its corporate aspect was a hallmark of the early church and, with the recovery of ancient Christian practices, is so of the churches today. The Wesleyan sacramental revival strongly affirmed the corporate dimension of the Supper alongside the personal. In the hymn "O God of truth and love," both first-person plural and first-person singular pronouns are used: "Let us Thy mercy prove [meaning "experience"]." "Point us to Thy sufferings past," and "Let us now perceive Thee near"; but also, "Answer all its great design, All its gracious ends in me." But because of the stress upon personal piety and individual freedom in our preaching and teaching, it has sometimes been overlooked or even forgotten that communion is with God and with other Christians—the whole church—in every time and place. The pastor praying the Great Thanksgiving reminds us of this connection toward the end of the standard prayer by the words "make us one with Christ [and] one with each other."17 The return in many United Methodist churches to use of the common loaf and the common cup serves as a visible reminder of the unity that is to be found in Christ. Yet it also testifies to the reality that the oneness of the church for which Jesus prayed (John 17:20-21) has still to be accomplished.

The pastor celebrating the Supper makes another claim for the corporate dimension of the sacrament immediately before the congregation joins in the Sanctus: "And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven."18 The union of "your people on earth" with "all the company of heaven" was a frequent theme in the Wesley hymns, both eucharistic and otherwise (of the latter category, for example, is "Come, Let Us Join Our Friends Above," number 709 in The United Methodist Hymnal). None of the
hymns in *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* with this theme are found in the current hymnal, though one appeared in its predecessor of 1964: the second stanza of “Happy the Souls to Jesus Joined” (number 535) reads, “The Church triumphant in thy love, Their mighty joys we know; They sing the Lamb in hymns above, And we in hymns below.” Another hymn, “How Happy Are Thy Servants, Lord” (number 328 in the 1964 book), emphasizes the earthly fellowship by which “Our hearts and minds and spirits join, And all in Jesus meet.” Holy Communion is precisely that—communion.

The interconnection of believers around the common table and the effectiveness of the sacrament should have the consequence, according to the standard United Methodist Great Thanksgiving, of making us “one in ministry to all the world.” This is one of the “gracious ends” of the “ordination Divine” spoken of in the hymn “O God of truth and love.” Recovery of the ancient link between worship (*leitourgia*) and service (*diaconia*) is a feature of the modern liturgical and ecumenical movements, and in light of this emphasis, the concept is articulated in our official liturgical text. As “imitators of Christ” (cf. Eph. 5:1), Christians not only gather to pray “in [his] name” (Matt. 18:20) but also have the example of Christ himself who “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). Yet the framers of the Great Thanksgiving recognized as well that the relationship between worship and service was a central facet of the Methodist revival in the eighteenth century. Indeed, one Wesleyan contribution to the ecumenical conversation was precisely on this point, since in early Methodism, scriptural and primitive Christian models were used that connected liturgical praxis with care of the needy (e.g., the love feast with its collection of alms for the poor). The “work” of worship was to issue forth in works of mercy and charity. Christians are to put into practice what they preach and pray. The ministry that emanates from the strengthening meal at the table is summed up by the General Rules in the *Discipline* in two words: “doing good.” Christians come to the table for pardon and renewal, but they should also come in order to be sent out for discipleship and mission.

*An Anticipation of the Heavenly Banquet*

The Eucharist draws upon the past; it is anamnetic. The benefits of the one-time sacrifice of Jesus—all that he accomplished for the sake of the world and all that he promised—are brought into the present. The sacrament also looks to the future; it is proleptic. It is an anticipation, a foretaste.
of the Lord’s banquet at which the church triumphant and the church militant together will feast (Matt. 26:29; 1 Cor. 11:26). At the Supper, time is collapsed into the present; earth and heaven meet. The redemptive work that God has done and will do is summed up with the bread and the wine. Hence, our response is one of gratitude, joy, and thanksgiving (eucharistia).

In the sequence of benefits petitioned for in the hymn “O God of truth and love,” the final request is for the “pledge of glory in our heart” that is given by the one who himself is the “hope of glory” (cf. Col. 1:27). Those hymns in Hymns on the Lord’s Supper that focus upon “The Sacrament a Pledge of Heaven” often use terms like pledge or earnest or title to speak to the joyous expectation of the heavenly feast which is, nevertheless, a part of present knowledge and experience. In Christ, the Kingdom has come; the Second Coming and the final fulfillment still await. But by faith and hope at the “great Kingdom feast,” the blessings of that future day may be realized now. The Wesley hymns conveyed a rich eschatological understanding of the sacrament that drew heavily upon early Christian literature. Unfortunately, the eschatological emphasis in the hymns never was paralleled in an official text for the Lord’s Supper; only a few of these eschatologically oriented hymns were ever included in an authorized hymnal. Even the current Great Thanksgiving, influenced as it is by the ecumenical rediscovery of the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist, is weak compared to the eschatological perspective expressed in the hymns. The prayer simply announces that we celebrate the sacrament “until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.” Here is a place where United Methodist reappropriation of its own heritage may assist in the shaping of further ecumenical conversation regarding the Eucharist.

**Reclaiming our Heritage**

To be true to our ancestral “character,” United Methodists should not expect our theology or practices to distinguish us substantively from other “real” Christians. But there is much from United Methodism’s own distinct and often-forgotten history that is relevant for contemporary conversations about the Eucharist, both within the denomination and across the churches. Certain aspects of early Christian thinking and practice that were recovered by the liturgical and ecumenical movements of the past century were already embraced in early Methodism. For the sake of the Christian unity to which we as a denomination are committed, we should make a
concerted effort to reclaim those things in our more distant past that place us into greater conformity with other Christians. The bishops, in their response to BEM, made a similar observation, noting that "BEM encourages our generation of Methodists to recover our own Wesleyan heritage while experiencing the theological convergence with many other Christians." The eucharistic action itself may set the pattern: while we anticipate that day when all God's people are gathered at the one table, we recall how God's saving mercy has been with us on the journey and how Christ has been present in our midst.

O God of truth and love,
Let us Thy mercy prove.

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Endnotes


12. Ibid., 389-90 (3.12).


18. Ibid., 9.


21. Ibid.

22. "United Methodist Church [USA],” in *Churches Respond to BEM*, 2:190.
Eucharist and Global Reconciliation: A Liturgical Vision of Social Transformation

KENNETH L. WATERS, SR.

When we celebrate the Eucharist we also affirm a centrifugal form of Christian practice. We proclaim a way of being in the world that moves out from an expressly spiritual center. We understand this spiritual center as the interior life of the individual—that inward space, that sanctuary of the heart, where persons yield themselves to God. In this space the person commits both to a relationship with God and to the way that relationship unfolds through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and fulfillment of calling. From this spiritual center the worshiper is driven into that wider circle which is life in the church and then from there to that even wider circle which is service in the world. Like a spinning centrifuge on the worktable of a high school science lab, the spiritual center propels individuals into wider orbits of corporate interaction and responsibility. We find this centrifugal notion of Christian spirituality expressed in the liturgy of Eucharist.

The Genesis of the Spiritual Center

For Wesley, not only was the idea of the empowering spiritual center expressed in the Eucharist but also the Eucharist itself was empowering for Christian practice. Wesley himself conceived of the Eucharist, which he referred to as the Supper of the Lord, as that “food for the soul” which gives us strength to fulfill our duties and move toward perfection. We guarantee for ourselves power to love and obey God through the doing of good works when we avail ourselves of every opportunity to receive the Lord’s Supper. More than affirming the outward-reaching spiritual life, Wesley understood the Eucharist as the very nourishment for that life. Our discussion, however, focuses more on the Eucharist as a witness to the kind of spiritual praxis that Wesley praised.

We need only review the language of the Service of Word and Table I, as
found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, to discover strong allusion to the prerequisite for this social spirituality, namely, the genesis of the spiritual center within the worshiper. Occurring early in the liturgy, specifically in the Opening Prayer, are the words of invocation, "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit." This is only the first reference to some prerequisite change at the level of the heart. In the Prayer of Illumination, the words "Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit" may express an even more preliminary moment in spiritual transformation. There is a place in the Confession and Pardon where God hears "we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart," as one more acknowledgement of what is required for spiritual renewal. All of the above is finally reiterated in the Great Thanksgiving, where the appeal "Lift up your hearts" is answered by "We lift them up to the Lord." What lies behind these various liturgical references to the heart or the inner self? Clearly it is the conviction that all is for nought unless our inner selves are yielded to and then transformed by God into centers of spiritual vitality.

However, we do not pursue a withdrawn, contemplative style of spirituality—an inner discipline that seeks salvation through detachment from others. Eucharistic language instead affirms the transformed heart as the matrix for social response.

After everyone has communed and prior to the sending forth, we pray, "Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." Here, and in the liturgist's dismissal, "Go forth in peace," the centrifugal nature of Christian spirituality is plainly disclosed (11).

**A Witness to Peace and Justice**

More specifically, the translation of spirituality into social response is attested through four modes of language in the celebration of Eucharist. First is the language of peace seeking. "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another" (7). The very structure of this invitation places the practice of peace seeking within the larger framework of Christ-centered devotion and penitence. There is no reason to think that peace seeking is any different from peacemaking, an activity of the blessed as Jesus acknowledged in Matt. 5:9. Whether the words are to seek or to make peace, we speak not of a passive waiting for the end of hostilities but rather of an
oftentimes costly exertion of the will. Peace is achieved through God's support but nevertheless through human effort. Something personal is always sacrificed when peace is the prize.

Second is the language of justice. Ironically, we affirm our commitment to justice in the context of the Confession and Pardon, where we acknowledge the ways we fall short of its achievement. Thus "we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy . . ." (8). Within this same context the work of justice is directly related to loving God with our whole heart and obeying God's will. Therefore, we speak not of mere distributive justice, where the goal is only to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people and where access to goods and resources is based only on equal treatment. We speak of God's justice, where the goal is to meet the needs of all individuals even if special treatment or beneficence is required for some. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), God's justice is a summons to reversing or undoing the victimization of human beings.

A Witness to Reconciliation

Third is the language of reconciliation. The most ostensible expression of this language occurs in the Peace, where we have the directive, "Let us offer one another signs of reconciliation and love," and in the Offering, where we hear, "As forgiven and reconciled people, let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God" (8). The act of reconciliation is immediately followed by the commitment of self and substance to God. Admittedly, the brevity of these statements may obscure the significance of reconciliation as the core of the eucharistic meal, the pervasive theme of the whole liturgy, and the foundation of life in the community of faith. Biblically, the significance of the theme is undeniable. As the first Evangelist recalls, Jesus required reconciliation with others before one even approaches God (Matt. 5:23-24). In the Didache, a late first- or early second-century compilation of early Christian teaching, persons are barred even from the worship gathering on the Lord's Day, let alone the Eucharist, until those persons achieve reconciliation with their fellows. So biblically and historically significant is the theme of reconciliation that it needs to be explored more fully than other aspects of the eucharistic language.

On a visit to South Africa shortly after the release of Nelson Mandela, I heard the question raised on more than one occasion, "How can there be
reconciliation without justice?" Usually the question was raised by clergy and others of the Xhosa and Zulu nations in that country; but the question has relevance to us on both sides of the Atlantic, with our separate histories of racial estrangement. If our life in the world is to be fully formed by eucharistic theology, then we certainly cannot authentically celebrate the meal apart from engagement with the larger issues of global justice. This point seemed especially poignant in South Africa, where drinking from the common cup seemed to be more customary in the church than use of individual glasses or even the intinction method. In those rare instances when Black and White did commune together, there was a powerful sense of commitment to social healing as well as meaningful worship. Here it was just as plain as anywhere that there can be no separating of justice and reconciliation around the table of the Lord.

Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Perhaps even more fundamental to reconciliation is its relationship to forgiveness. As the language of the Offering itself suggests, reconciliation is inseparable from forgiveness. Here forgiveness confronts us as yet another requirement for actual reconciliation. At the same time, however, we must clarify that forgiveness can nevertheless occur without reconciliation. This point may be more important than it appears.

Most analysts of our social situation in one way or another acknowledge that progress toward social reconciliation in this country has stalled. In some cases, there exists a still, quiet seething beneath the surface of civility and in others just plain resignation. Memories of past injustices continue to be aggravated by present inequalities and disparities in opportunity. Voices of protest can still be heard and there are certainly more legal and political resources brought to bear on issues requiring redress. In many cases, these resources are employed by former members of marginalized communities who have achieved high office. But among the marginalized masses, both the voices of protest and the efforts of their kin in high office have felt like too little too late.

Many on the margins of society have therefore retreated into a still, silent seething. However, this appearance of resignation is deceptive and dangerous, for in reality this seething is neither still nor silent. Much of the rage generated by social disadvantage is turned away from the real object of anger toward oneself or one's community. It is a typical pattern that
results when rage intermingles with a perception of powerlessness.  

A great deal of the abuse and violence in marginalized communities can therefore be attributed to rage turned inward, either upon the enraged self or upon that person's community or family. It is certainly not that it would be better if that rage were turned outward to the real cause of social repression. Rather, it is that rage must cease altogether.

It is also not that the structures and strictures of social oppression must be accepted. On the contrary, the economy of social oppression and related ills must be engaged more earnestly than ever before with a view toward their elimination. It is just that rage must not be the emotional content of that engagement. This caveat is not so much to spare oppressors and their institutions as it is to spare the oppressed. Rage is ultimately self-defeating and self-destructive, regardless of whether it is directed outward or inward.

Perhaps it is my experience as an inner-city pastor that makes me sensitive to the destructive effects of rage at both the individual and communal levels. Pastoral ministry in an urban context has provided me much opportunity to see the warping effects of rage. To be sure, this is not to deny the warping effects of racism, sexism, and classism in society. The victims are not to be blamed for the misery they experience. However, assigning true blame has so far done very little to alleviate suffering and bring healing. Rage has done even less and has in fact increased suffering and trauma.

People in a given situation may perceive themselves as powerless and, as such, their powerlessness is probably an illusion; but rage will make powerlessness a fact. Therefore, rage must cease. Forgiveness must take its place.

No one communicated these ideas more eloquently than Martin Luther King, Jr., whose message of love and forgiveness was designed not to absolve oppressors but to empower the oppressed. With prophetic insight King realized that the power to change society came from within and that it was a spiritual power released by love and forgiveness. King espoused a radical idea, which is also tacitly affirmed in the Eucharist: we must forgive, regardless of whether the act of forgiveness is attended by reconciliation or justice. Along with its theme of reconciliation, the Eucharist makes its greatest promise for social transformation when it bears witness to the power of forgiveness. Herein also lies the significance of the possibility of forgiveness without reconciliation. Forgiveness means the end of rage and the end of rage means the power to transform ourselves and the world in which we live.
KENNETH L. WATERS, SR.

Two Kinds of Forgiveness

It is Scripture itself that provides the basis for two kinds of forgiveness: forgiveness with reconciliation and forgiveness without reconciliation. In regard to forgiveness with reconciliation Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one" (Matt. 18:15); and again, "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Luke 17:3-4). The point is not merely that we are obliged to forgive if the one who wronged us repents but also that this very act of repentance creates the opportunity for the restoration of a relationship. What is reconciliation if not the restoration of a relationship? Certainly, the sequence of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is the ideal, and both Scripture and the Eucharist celebrate this sequence as such.

It is seldom acknowledged, however, that forgiveness must still occur in the absence of repentance or the acknowledgement of wrong. The consummate pattern for this is found in the prayer of Jesus from the cross, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), or the prayer of Stephen, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). A less clear but important example is drawn from Jesus' mandate to his disciples to "shake off the dust from your feet" against anyone who will not welcome them (Matt. 10:14; cf. Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:11; Acts 13:51). Are we to suppose that the disciples should continue to begrudge those who turned them away? Hardly. In this case, the disciples must forgive those who wronged them. The act of shaking dust off of their feet was also a dramatic way of shaking off ill will toward those who insulted them. Still, there was no opportunity for reconciliation. Where there is no repentance, there can be no reconciliation; but there must still be forgiveness.

Jesus made it clear: we must forgive others if we also want to be forgiven by God (Matt. 6:14-15). There is no suggestion at all that the one who forgives must wait for an expression of repentance or an act of reconciliation from the one who is forgiven. In Matt. 18:21-22, Jesus tells Peter, in response to the disciple's question that he must forgive the one who sins against him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." It is
striking that Jesus adds nothing like "if that one repents." It is a blanket mandate to forgive, regardless. Scripture reminds us, then, that we need not become emotional hostages to those who refuse to repent, apologize, or make amends for their wrongful acts toward us. Such refusal does not absolve them, but it empowers us.

An Occasion for Liberation

The goal of fellowship around the table of the Lord is reconciliation, but one who approaches the Lord's table must make the decision to forgive others even when reconciliation is made impossible by their failure to repent. Let us be clear: to say, "I forgive you," whether audibly or not, does not necessarily mean to say, "I trust you." Nor does it mean, "I will give you an opportunity to hurt me like you did before." It means, instead, "I will not allow you the power to elicit in me feelings of hate, anger, rage, or any other negative emotion."

In this way, the Eucharist becomes the occasion for spiritual, mental, and emotional liberation, even if the failings of others prevent it from being an occasion for reconciliation. At the same time, those who grant forgiveness must ask if there are any to whom they must go and confess wrongdoing. Are there any to whom I must say, "I am sorry. Please forgive me"? By so doing, the celebrant's complete inward liberation is assured. One can never be truly liberated if one is not first liberated within.

Our preceding discussion, however, is not in despair of achieving the ideal promised in the celebration of Eucharist. We must realize the transformative power inherent in obeying God's mandate to forgive and the opportunity Eucharist provides to do just that; but we must also pursue the vision of a reconciled humanity, enacted in the Eucharist.

In recent times, the extent of the racial divide between African Americans and Anglo-Americans has been exposed in the aftermath of verdicts reached in the trials of Rodney King and O.J. Simpson. More recently, the events of September 11, 2001, made it clear that there is a divide separating Arab Americans or Arab-looking Americans from their fellow Americans. Japanese Americans of a certain generation still recall their experience of the racial divide following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Native Americans continue to be largely overlooked in the shade of headline-grabbing events.

There remains an unresolved tension within the fabric of American society and around the globe. This tension worsens as the years go by and
periodically explodes through some pressure-valve event; yet it is never healed or resolved. And it never will be, until there is a collective voice that says, "I repent," and another collective voice that says in response, "I forgive you."

In 1990, Lech Walesa, president of Poland, apologized for his country's role in the persecution of Jews during World War II. It was a significant moment in Polish-Jewish relations. On the other hand, no one doubts that more than an apology—even by a president or national spokesperson—is needed to heal the rift between historically estranged groups. But an apology is a significant beginning. Overtures to conciliation have been made to Native Americans, Japanese Americans, and African Americans in local religious and civil settings; but we continue to wait for any ground-swell movement toward reconciliation between historically estranged groups on a national or global scale.

Anglo-Americans and African Americans, particularly, epitomize the historic dance of guilt and anger that keeps this society spinning in circles and making no progress toward spiritual wholeness. With Anglo-Americans unwilling to do that which will eliminate their guilt and African Americans unwilling to do that which will eliminate their anger, we can only wait until the next pressure-valve event. However, the situation has grown more complex. As September 11 has most tragically demonstrated, there are other communities out there with their own issues of guilt and anger. Suddenly, the summons to reconciliation heard in the Eucharist has become a matter of life and death within the global community. In truth, it has always been. Unless we receive the summons and respond in obedience, we are laying the groundwork for more pressure-valve events. The vision of a reconciled humanity enacted in the Eucharist is more crucial for the human family than ever before.

A Model for Social Healing

The Eucharist, with its themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, offers a model for healing human communities at all levels of interaction. Although the sacrament clearly draws its power and meaning from the presence of Christ in its celebration, its message has significance even for faith communities other than Christian. Forgiveness and reconciliation are themes common to all religious traditions and therefore become common ground for efforts to vanquish hatred and violence. Perhaps our best example of this remains Martin Luther King, Jr., a Christian who found that the best
vehicle for his ethic of love was a philosophy of nonviolent resistance, which he learned from the example of a Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi. We seek only common ground, not a compromise of the Christian message; and, as King showed, the best way to achieve common ground with other families who will work for peace is through our practice. Let the world see our Christianity first, and then the opportunity will present itself for sharing our message. It will be then that we can lift up the message of Eucharist as a witness that has universal relevance for a fragmented world.

John Wesley preached that although we cannot all think alike, we can love alike. Wesley, however, was speaking in the context of diverse Christian fellowships. He held that Christians can retain their differences and yet move forward together in love and good works. Love is the key to Christian unity. Yet this very principle can be extended in practice beyond diverse Christian communities and applied in the work of reconciliation among diverse global communities. In Didache IX, the bread of the Eucharist itself was held up as a symbol of Christian unity. As the broken bread was scattered and then gathered into one, so is the church gathered into one. The image is rather incongruous with what actually occurs in the sacrament, but the meaning is clear. Again, if unity can occur among Christians through the celebration of Eucharist, it can happen in the global community through the practice of what the Eucharist proclaims.

A Witness to Service

We finally come to the language of service, a fourth mode of expression in the Eucharist. Particularly in that part of the Great Thanksgiving known as the epiklesis, we find acknowledgement of the call to service: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here . . . that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. . . . By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world" (10). The significant observation here is that our act of service is an expression of membership in a Spirit-formed and Spirit-empowered community. It is a community that believes in Christ's atoning sacrifice and experiences itself as redeemed. As such, our service in and through this community is incarnational, because it represents the body of Christ active in the world. The concern here is not how the world responds to the gospel of Jesus Christ but how we live out the gospel before the eyes of others.

Our emphasis upon service, both in the language of Eucharist and the
general life of the congregation, is a distinctive part of our Wesleyan heritage. Wesley himself chronicled his rejection of the kind of religion that focuses so much on union with God and inward piety that it makes good works seem ignoble. Though at first intrigued with the literature of this perspective, Wesley realized that it was not the spirituality represented by Jesus and his disciples, namely, a religion of comprehensive love. He would eventually characterize this love as "scriptural perfection" and acknowledge its rule over all speech and action. It is not surprising that in the rules for the United Societies, Wesley follows a detailed description of good works with a listing of "the ordinances of God," which includes the Lord's Supper, and refers to both sections as "evidence for the desire for salvation." For Wesley, participation in the life of the church and its sacraments ineluctably issues in social service.\(^\text{11}\)

In the Eucharist, we therefore see the formation of a spirituality that spirals outward in acts of relational and communal healing. In this sense, eucharistic spirituality is a distinctively centrifugal kind of piety.

You Are Forgiven

At the core of centrifugal spirituality, at the heart of the spiritual center itself, lies a vital inward experience, namely, that of being forgiven and accepted by God. The words of mutual affirmation attest to this experience: "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!" (8). The occurrence of this affirmation in the context of the Confession and Pardon clearly shows that it is God's forgiveness of us that is being acknowledged, even though forgiveness is received from as well as given to other human beings. Here is an event that is simply fundamental to all that occurs around the table of the Lord: the experience of my own forgiveness. Those who know that they are forgiven and accepted by God are able to forgive and accept themselves, and they are then able to forgive and accept others. Indeed, we could speak in terms of "love" instead of "forgiving and accepting" and make essentially the same point. Love of one's self is prerequisite to loving others, as implied in the famous commandment (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31). There is no difference in meaning, regardless of which terms we use. Before one can find healing for his or her relationship with others, one must first find healing for his or her relationship with self. The moment this level of healing occurs is surely indistinguishable from the moment in which one is reconciled to God.
Three Dimensions of Human Existence

We see, then, that the Eucharist summons us to wholeness in three areas, or dimensions, of human existence. It is helpful to name them the vertical, the horizontal, and the axial dimensions of life. These metaphors, of course, refer respectively to our relationship to God, to other human beings, and to self.

By referring to our relationship with God as the vertical relationship, I am not entering the debate over whether God is "in here" or "out there," or suggesting any particular spatial location for God. I am saying only that there is a dimension of human existence that is accessed only when one acknowledges and seeks a relationship with God. As we will see below, the relationship with God is the indispensable anchor for all other aspects of our lives.

The horizontal dimension is so named because it implies reaching across to one's fellow human being. As such, one neither reaches down in condescension or paternalism nor reaches up in subservience or humiliation. We begin with the acknowledgement that social advantage or privilege is at best an accident of history or at worst the legacy of injustice, but that it is no more deserved than marginalization or poverty. The horizontal reach is an effort at partnership with others in raising the quality of life for all. We especially seek to defeat violence by eliminating poverty and despair, its root causes.

A person's relationship to self is "axial" in the sense that other relationships revolve around it. On the other hand, the relationship to self is affected by relationships to others and also by the relationship to God. It is the relationship to other people that may be a hindrance to a healthy self-relationship, particularly if these others constitute a negative environment. In this case, the one who hears God's call to wholeness must have the courage to resist the detrimental aspects of his or her environment and, if possible, to relocate to more positive surroundings. God provides a healthy alternative to both the arrogant narcissism that passes for self-love and the self-loathing instilled by the negative messages of one's environment. God's offer of love and forgiveness at the table of the Lord is one place to find that alternative.

In his famous sermon on Rev. 21:16 entitled "Dimensions of a Complete Life," Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of these same aspects of human existence as the length, breadth, and height of life. King observed that although length of life—healthy self-concern—and breadth of life—
KENNETH L. WATERS, SR.

concern for others—are indispensable, life is still incomplete as long as people fail to progress beyond these two dimensions. Without the height of life—the relationship with God—life is a dead end. In this way, King disassociated himself from a humanistic altruism. In his perspective, any endeavor not grounded in God lacks power and ultimately fails.

If King was correct, as I believe he was, then the witness of the Eucharist is not mere party line or sectarian jargon but the key to the transformation of human society. King's message that our relationship to self and others must be grounded in our relationship to God is the message of the Eucharist. King's sermon was focused upon the completeness of the individual life, but his lesson certainly has implications for wholeness in the global community.

**The Cascade Effect**

That the Eucharist has more than provincial meaning is significant in light of attempts in postmodern society to dismiss the church and its sacraments as irrelevant. In the wake of September 11, there seemed to be momentary recognition that the message and sacraments of the church are important for the human family. There was at least a sense that the church might be able to interpret the devastating tragedy of that day in theological terms. But one wonders if the greater society really sees the potential for global healing that lies in what the church has to offer. Even the church itself may be guilty of underestimating the power inherent in what it does around the Lord's table. When Christians all over the world gather at various times for Holy Communion, there is a cascade effect that spreads throughout the global community, effecting change in ways both subtle and not so subtle.

It is true that this effect may not always be acknowledged, but that does not stop the effect itself. Perhaps what is needed now is for Christians to pay more attention to how the seeds of hate are bearing fruit in overlooked quarters of the world. September 11 showed us the fruit of hatred when hatred is all that is left. When love and its expressions of forgiveness and reconciliation are absent, this kind of hate is all that will ever be left. It is clear that the world cannot continue on this course, and political entities seem incapable of summoning the right resources. But what about the church? Do we not have a vision of social transformation embodied in the Eucharist? Is not this vision an urgently needed alternative to violence as an expression of sociopolitical grievance? It may be that each of our attempts at love and reconciliation may affect only a small corner of our
Eucharist and Global Reconciliation: A Liturgical Vision of Social Transformation

world; but events that occur in enough small corners tend to coalesce into
global movements. Therefore, "[a]s forgiven and reconciled people, let us
offer ourselves and our gifts to God" (8).

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Endnotes

1. John Wesley, "Sermon Cl." in John Wesley, A Representative Collection of His
Writings: A Library of Protestant Thought, ed. by Albert C. Outler (New York:
2. "Service of Word and Table I," The United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville: The
United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 9. Hereafter, all page citations from
the service appear in the text.
American Predicament. Sage Series on Race and Ethnic Relations 9
the problem as "nihilism."
7. Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and
Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. by James M. Washington (New York:
8. Ibid., 38.
11. See Outler, John Wesley, 47, 179, 293.
12. See Dennis E. Gale, Understanding Urban Unrest: From Reverend King to
13. Martin Luther King, Jr., The Measure of a Man (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988),
35-56.
Open Communion as a United Methodist Exception

MARK W. STAMM

Who should be allowed to receive Communion in The United Methodist Church? In an earlier essay, I began my discussion of that question by pointing to the invitation in "A Service of Word and Table" in The United Methodist Hymnal. It says:

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him,
who earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.
Therefore, let us confess our sin before God and one another.²

The invitation does not demand that one be a member of any particular denomination. In that ecclesiastical sense, it points to an "open" table. The invitation is, however, not unconditional. It makes demands, implying that those who come for Communion should be disciples of Jesus Christ. To state this demand in sacramental language, Holy Communion is for those living within the grace and disciplines of the baptismal covenant. It is for those who commit themselves to renouncing sin, resisting evil, professing faith, and living in a diverse fellowship—all of it made possible by the Holy Spirit.³

The church's official teaching on baptism, By Water and the Spirit, allows for an unrestricted table, but only in a provisional sense: "Unbaptized persons who receive communion should be counseled and nurtured toward baptism as soon as possible."⁴ It is implied that Communion of the non-baptized is possible, yet irregular. Doubtless this provision arose out of a generous spirit, yet its unspoken implications can undermine the foundational insight of the whole sacramental system. Baptism witnesses that God's action makes us part of the body of Christ, where we are then nurtured by the sacramental body (see 1 Corinthians 11–12). An open Communion that includes nonbaptized persons implies that one can effect this transition from world to church by an act of human will, through a simple decision to rise
and come to the table. Such thinking is like crossing the Red Sea in our own boat, without God's help. It expresses the voluntaristic individualism that our best sacramental theologians have been arguing against for the past three decades and more. Baptism is God's action, God's gift. 5

This voluntaristic understanding of admission to the table has a potential dark side. If an individual or corporate human decision—mine, or even a decision of the General Conference—can admit people, then an individual or corporate human decision can exclude them as well. Of course, the church has a long history of excluding persons it finds undesirable, and Methodism has participated in that history. 6 To require baptism for admission is to insist that God's action admits persons of all ages, races, and stations to the one table. In the long run, requiring baptism for admission will protect the theological foundation of an inclusive United Methodist fellowship. 7

Nevertheless, pastoral realities often make such theological questions more complicated. For instance, in some cultural and religious contexts, families have disowned members who receive Christian baptism. As a bishop of the Mar Thoma Church once asked me quite pointedly, "Should a Hindu man or woman drawn to Christ be forced to choose between family and church?" In order to avoid such problems, should such persons be admitted to the Eucharist without benefit of baptism? One can argue that the choice, difficult as it is, should be made. After all, disciples are called to take up the cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-38). According to Jesus, the disciple who insists on returning home to bury his father is not fit for the kingdom (Luke 9:59-62). Nevertheless, if the church insists on baptism in such cases, it must become the family of God in specific and practical ways that move beyond mere rhetoric. Otherwise, the demand for baptism has little moral integrity.

On a less urgent plane stands the church's call to exercise hospitality with seekers that come from secular culture. If we do not invite these people to the table, will they become offended and never return? Once alienated from the church, will they care about our vision of radical inclusivity, regardless of its theological foundation? These issues remind us, yet again, that matters of evangelism and missiology, ethics and theology, are not easily separated from the church's worship life, nor should they be.

Who should be allowed to receive Communion in The United Methodist Church? Complicating the discussion is the fact that many (if not most) United Methodists have already settled the question—official rites, rubrics, and resolutions notwithstanding. Indeed, the vast majority of
United Methodist parishes practice a completely open table, with no restrictions whatsoever, and they have come to take it for granted. Nevertheless, The United Methodist Church does not exist in a historical and ecumenical vacuum. Thus, we should ask the theological question: Who should be allowed to receive? If United Methodists insist on a completely unrestricted table, can they justify that practice theologically, and if so, on what basis? How should such a practice be understood by the rest of the church catholic? What unintended problems may arise from this practice of the open table?

Corporate Experience as Theological Justification

Since the Methodist tradition values what John Wesley called "experimental religion," justification for the practice of open Communion begins with the corporate experience of United Methodist people. We will take the "sense of the faithful" seriously. Some may argue that developing a sense of the faithful requires a clear process of corporate discernment, such as a congregation might enter when it is contemplating a radical shift in missional focus. In that deliberative sense, the corporate experience I am describing does not qualify as a sense of the faithful. I would contend, however, that the long evolution of a liturgical praxis is, in fact, such a corporate discernment process. Positions are expressed, feedback is received and arguments occur, practices are adjusted, and something like a consensus emerges. One discovers the boundaries of the consensus by transgressing them. Such an evolutionary process may not use the specialized language of spiritual formation, but it is an intensely spiritual and theological process.

So, how is this consensus on open Communion embodied in The United Methodist Church? Regardless of the words used to invite persons to the table—and they range from the Word and Table I invitation to something like "Everybody present is welcomed"—I know of no United Methodist congregation that actually checks the spiritual and ecclesial credentials of persons who present themselves for Communion. We should take note of the obvious passion with which United Methodists practice and defend their commitment to the open table, especially when their consensus is transgressed. "It is the Lord's table," we say, "not a United Methodist table." Such language is deeply rooted in debates that occurred among and between nineteenth-century Baptists, members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and Methodists. Writing in 1853, Baptist minister Samuel Whitney argued against
the closed Communion practiced by some of his Baptist colleagues by quoting Jesus’ commandment, “Drink ye all of it.” He continued, “[This commandment means] not merely the baptized, but all members of the household of faith who may be present, for it is the Lord’s table, designed for any who are members of his body.” Whitney wrote, “If this were not the Lord’s table, but ours, the case would be different.” Commenting on Whitney’s book, the Methodist Quarterly Review from the same year said.

This is an age of progress, and though all progress is not necessarily good, this is an instance in which it is undoubtedly so . . . Let [our Baptist brethren] hold to immersion, let them hold to Calvinism, but do not let them exclude from the Lord’s Supper those who they concede to be the Lord’s people.

These persons were arguing not for the admission of the unchurched or persons of other religions but for the admission of all who profess Christ. The language of this debate remains with contemporary United Methodists. Indeed, many worship leaders today will say something like, “This is not a United Methodist table; it is an open table. All who wish to receive may come.” Many witness to the formative power of that affirmation, saying that it expresses the essence of The United Methodist Church. Conversely, at Communion services in some denominations, printed notices and/or spoken rubrics will express something like, “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive Communion.” The intent of such statements is hospitable and invitational, yet many United Methodists hear them as exclusionary, responding to them with perplexity, sometimes even with anger. After a seminary chapel service at which the “all baptized Christians” invitation was given, one of my United Methodist students remarked, “The presider said all baptized Christians are invited to the table. In this setting, can’t everyone come?” Such passion among United Methodists seems to reflect a deeply felt commitment—the product of long debate, theological reflection, and discernment—and should be taken seriously.

The Open Table and the Classical Paradigm

Acknowledging such a passionate sense of the faithful does not mean, however, that United Methodists may thereby set aside the classical norms of Scripture and tradition. As the Discipline states, “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by
Methodist tradition is rooted in John Wesley's encounter with the gospel; that is, it is rooted in his experience of the gospel.

Admitting nonbaptized persons was hardly a question in John Wesley's context, where state church realities meant that most of the populace were baptized. However, Wesley contended with a related sacramental problem in his dealings with the Moravians and their "stillness" doctrine, also called "quietism." Although the Moravians practiced infant baptism, they insisted that one refrain from the Lord's Supper and other means of grace until one had received assurance of justification. Wesley rejected this doctrine, insisting instead that "all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside." Thus, one sought God in the midst of faithful reflection on Scripture and faithful worship and prayer, through fasting and receiving the Eucharist. Out of this debate with the Moravians grew the Methodist understanding of Communion as a converting ordinance. This idea was not a new one, but it became particularly important in Methodist praxis. The experience of Susanna Wesley, who received assurance of justification while receiving Communion, helped confirm this understanding of Communion as converting ordinance, as has the testimony of others. Many extend its logic to include the nonbaptized.

Directly related to this emphasis on the Eucharist as a means of grace is the Wesleyan emphasis on prevenient grace—that universal work of God's Spirit that calls each person toward a saving relationship with Christ and his church. Of course, John Wesley taught that persons might resist such grace though persistent disobedience and lack of faith. In that sense, he was no universalist, but he did believe that no one should be denied the possibility of salvation in Christ. Based on this doctrine of prevenient grace, many Methodists will insist that denying the sacrament to a non-baptized person will hinder God's work in their life, even to the point of their exclusion from the kingdom of heaven. Who is willing to bear the responsibility of that risk? It is a weighty question.

Standing against this Methodist argument is the normative order for Christian initiation practiced in the ancient church and still affirmed (in principle) by most Christian communions. In this order, catechumenal formation is followed by baptism, which is then followed by first Eucharist. Again, we can assume that this pattern developed in faithfulness to a gospel tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.
that calls the church to make disciples through baptism and teaching. It
developed in response to the gospel call to receive the body of Christ for

The commitment to formation embodied in some of the ancient orders
is truly impressive. Take, for instance, the description given by Hippolytus
of Rome, writing in the third century. He spoke of a clear call to repen­tance
followed by a catechumenate that lasted three years. Then came
baptism and first Communion. Infants could be baptized, but one may
presume that their sponsors were well-formed disciples.13 Spanish pilgrim
Egeria described a similar pattern as it occurred in late fourth-century
Jerusalem. Candidates for baptism were enrolled in the company of spon­sors
who knew them well and could hold them accountable to the way of
discipleship. The candidates would gather around the bishop each weekday
during Lent and receive three hours of instruction in the Bible and the
Creed. Thus, only after extensive formation were persons admitted for
baptism and first Communion.14 As we engage these ancient orders for
making disciples, we should assume that those who formed them were
faithful interpreters of the biblical narrative with wise pastoral intentions.
We should not, however, assume that they understood all things perfectly.
All tradition, regardless of its antiquity, is subject to correction and adjust­ment
under the same biblical witness that first shaped it.

The Open Table as Methodist Exception

Due to their belief in the Eucharist as converting ordinance and their focus
on prevenient grace, most Methodists will lean toward a radical inclusion.
When pressed theologically, they will argue that the ancient order needs an
adjustment. How can such an adjustment be defended ecumenically? I
argue that the open table should be understood as a Methodist exception to
the classical order for Christian initiation. As I explained in a previous
essay,15 an exception is a conscious departure from the accepted norm, yet
not for reasons of disobedience or lack of faith. It is prophetic in nature,
seeking a higher expression of faith. Such a sacramental exception seeks to
highlight meanings of the Eucharist that may be obscured by the normative
pattern itself. For example, the Society of Friends does not celebrate the
sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the ritualized sense practiced by most
Christians. Members of the Society may challenge us, however, were we to
accuse them of setting aside Jesus' commandment 'Do this in remembrance
of me" (1 Cor. 11:24). On the contrary, they may insist that every meal shared is the Lord's table, not just those meals formally called "the Eucharist." Every meal is an agape, an occasion for koinonia among Christ and his people. The founder of the Society, George Fox, rejected the idea of sacraments, but he also wrote, "The bread that the saints break is the body of Christ and the cup that they drink is the blood of Christ, this I witness." What did he mean? With this sacramental exception, the Friends remind the rest of the church that first-generation Christians knew no sharp distinction between agape meals and the Lord's Supper. Attempts to drive a wedge between them represents our concern more than theirs. The Friends remind contemporary Christians to seek a closer connection between the Eucharist and all of our eating and drinking. Their understanding of all meals as Lord's table follows a longstanding prophetic tradition that criticizes and even rejects ritual, not in disobedience or impiety, but for the sake of its essential meaning. Prophetic witnesses will say, "I hate, I despise your festivals" (Amos 5:21-24)—even festivals established by God and shaped by the best pastoral wisdom—in order that justice and righteousness may abound and festivals be celebrated aright. The Friends understanding of the table calls us to look closer at the practices of the first century.

The Methodist exception to the normative pattern for Christian initiation calls the church to a similar process, to look beyond the so-called "institution narratives" (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor. 11:23-26) to the wider context of Jesus' eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors, to his feeding of the crowds, to the many parables and stories relating to meals. All of these biblical texts reflect the insights of first-century churches—that is, of active eucharistic communities—and we can assume that their telling is shaped by the experience of eating and drinking with Jesus in the Eucharist. For instance, the multiplication stories are obviously eucharistic in shape, portraying a Jesus who, when he fed the multitudes, took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17). We can assume that the stories of the Jesus who "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2) reflects the lifestyle of the historical Jesus; yet the Gospel accounts also reflect the eucharistic experience of the church that told the stories. The Risen Christ of their experience welcomed sinners who returned from their sojourn in "a distant country" (Luke 15:13) and made them guests of honor at his great banquet. They experienced such a welcome every Lord's Day in the sharing of bread
and cup. By this understanding, the entire gospel is an institution narrative.

United Methodists have embodied this wider sense of the gospel in their eucharistic prayers. Our Great Thanksgiving patterns recall the entirety of Jesus' life and ministry, not just his death and resurrection. We remember the Christ who "healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners."17 As we understand it, the holy meal is rooted not just in a scene from the passion narrative but also in the wider meal ministry of Jesus. When Methodists proclaim their radically open table, they call the church to a fuller anamnesis of the Christ proclaimed in the Gospels—of the Christ who would eat with anybody, anywhere, at any time.

The United Methodist Church has made this gospel insight a particularly integral part of its eucharistic praying through the above-mentioned phrase: "He (Jesus) healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners." At some point during the shaping of the Great Thanksgiving for a Service of Word and Table I, James F. White heard a seminary chapel sermon delivered by the late New Testament scholar William Farmer. Farmer reminded the congregation about Jesus' practice of eating with sinners and the scholarly consensus on the historicity of that claim. After the sermon, White returned to his office and added the phrase "ate with sinners" to the proposed text,18 thus making an important United Methodist contribution to the ecumenical church's experience of praying at the Lord's table. This phrase resonates deeply with United Methodists. If Christ was so clearly indiscriminate in his table fellowship, they will argue, then who are we to do otherwise? "The table is not a United Methodist table, it is the Lord's table."

Potential Problems?

As I have demonstrated, United Methodists may be able to justify their sacramental exception, but practicing it presents potential problems that should be acknowledged. The ancient orders for Christian initiation embody important, hard-won values. In particular, they embody a commitment to a disciplined formation that initiates persons into a countercultural, eucharistic way of life. If all can partake of the Eucharist, with or without repentance and spiritual formation, then by what right do United Methodists call anyone to such holiness of heart and life? Or, if Methodists do not follow the ancient church in calling persons to radical formation through disciplines related to baptism and admission to the Eucharist, then at what point will they do so? In the past, Methodists did such formational
work in the class meetings. With that system long inactive, its spirit exists mostly in special interest groups like Covenant Discipleship, yet its dynamics are needed by the whole church, not just a select few. If we do not adopt something like a catechumenal prebaptismal discipline, then at what point will we do the work of forming the previously unchurched? Do United Methodists expect such formation to occur spontaneously? What are the negative consequences, albeit unintended, of setting aside all fencing off of the table? If baptism does not come first, then how will we logically insist that God admits people to the table?

Its positive witness of generosity notwithstanding, the open table must not contradict the biblical expectation that those who eat and drink with Jesus will repent, opening their hearts to new life. As I have insisted in Sacraments and Discipleship, Methodist ecclesiology and its attendant sacramental praxis should be marked not simply by an open invitation, as important and compelling as that may be, but also by an open invitation to a disciplined life. To take this point to its deeper level, we should recall the most scandalous implications of eating and drinking with Jesus. As with baptism, those who eat with Jesus enter into the dynamics of his death. That is, they enter the depths of the Paschal mystery itself. Many eucharistic hymns written during the twentieth century, and particularly those included in The United Methodist Hymnal, have focused on banquet and fellowship imagery. Not unlike the previously mentioned trend in eucharistic praying, which has included aspects of Christ's life beyond his suffering and death, this expansion of imagery was necessary to make a more complete exposition of New Testament themes. Eucharist is banquet and feast—the joyful marriage supper of the Lamb—yet it is not that alone. If emphasized to the exclusion of other themes, focus on banquet and feast can become a new form of docetism, a denial of the Paschal character of the Christian life. The eucharistic mystery is far deeper than the conviviality shared at a church coffee hour. Again, those who eat with Jesus enter into the dynamics of his death.

In that light, those who would eat and drink with Jesus may well be warned as well as invited. They should hear the question he posed to his often uncomprehending disciples: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). They should also hear his plea in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). Like the other texts about eating
and drinking with Jesus, these also should be heard in light of the early
church's eucharistic experience. Indeed, only God's grace makes us able to
drink the eucharistic cup, but the grace that we receive does not excuse us
from the dynamics of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. The Wesleys
spoke eloquently about the Eucharist as means of grace and foretaste of the
celestial banquet; so we are right to do the same. They also understood the
Eucharist as identification with Christ's death, and so they expressed this
idea in their Communion hymns. Charles Wesley wrote,

Would the Savior of mankind
Without His people die?
No, to Him we all are join'd
As more than standers by.
Freely as the Victim came
To the altar of His cross,
We attend the slaughter'd Lamb,
And suffer for His cause.

Indeed, participation in the Eucharist is potentially dangerous, like the
rest of Christian life. The Eucharist is a means of grace, but grace is not a
freefloating, abstract concept that we may define any way we please. The
meaning of grace is rooted in the biblical narrative, where the grace
proclaimed moves us toward life and resurrection, but only by way of Good
Friday and the Cross. If United Methodists insist on a radically open table,
then they should (at least) proclaim this Paschal dynamic as part of their
invitation. At the very least, those who eat and drink with Jesus are entering
a realm where costly love is demanded, where they will be called to repent
and to love the unlovable. Again, the classic invitation may say it best:

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him,
who earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.

Conclusion

John Wesley was quite suspicious of Christians who thought they could do
without God's appointed means of grace. Against advocates of the "still-
ness" doctrine, he wrote, "[A]ll who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which [God] hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside." This conviction leads us to our practice of the open table. Ironically, the open table can undermine the sacramental dynamic it seeks to magnify.

While the open table as practiced by many United Methodists is not the classical norm proclaimed by the wider church, it can, nonetheless, help the church catholic come to a deeper understanding of the Eucharist, one shaped by the entire meal ministry of Jesus. In all likelihood, United Methodists will continue practicing the open table. Even so, they should affirm the formational values of the classic initiatory order, heeding the wisdom expressed in By Water and the Spirit. Methodists may continue to invite all persons to the Lord's table, as long as they understand that non-baptized seekers should be urged to enter the baptismal covenant and be taught the full truth about its costly dynamics.

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Endnotes
3. All of these values are expressed in "The Baptismal Covenant I," The United Methodist Hymnal, 33-39.
7. I make a similar argument in my doctoral dissertation. See Mark W. Stamm,

8. Samuel Worcester Whitney, Open Communion, or the principles of restricted communion examined and proved to be unscriptural and false in a series of letters to a friend (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1853), 78, 81.


17. The United Methodist Hymnal, 9 (my emphasis).


23. The United Methodist Hymnal, 7.

How Often Should United Methodists Commune?

DAVID TRIPP

How often should United Methodists commune? Either this question does not matter at all; and the simple answer is that every congregation, every pastor, should simply follow instinct, inclination, fashion, or the majority vote. Or it matters desperately, because it goes to the root of our church's authenticity as a Christian church, a witnessing church—and then the answers will not be simple.

Perhaps the question is not about United (or other kinds of) Methodists but about Christians and Christian churches in general. To make one limited tradition the self-contained basis for a confrontation with this issue is stultifying and forecloses the discussion before it begins. This particular tradition has its history, and the present results of that history are well known. Historical explanations are valuable; and they may suggest how intractable present issues will be, how deeply entrenched present feelings are, and how far we may seem to have departed from original visions. But the history will not give the power to change the present results. At the same time, we have to face this limited tradition as it is, accepting responsibility for its current state.

Perhaps the question is oddly phrased, because it is not simply a matter of communing—receiving Communion—which is only part of the service. There is indeed a pressing moral question for each communicant: how often ought I to receive Holy Communion? But that does not exhaust, let alone predetermine, the wider issue: how often, in each of our congregations, ought we to spread the table of the Lord, celebrate the Eucharist, observe the Lord's Supper? Whatever the preferred name, the question is the same.

A further question suggests itself: is it really a matter of how often we do, or ought to do, this? Are we in fact the agents here? Here, at once, we dive into deep water. Here also, if my argument is sound, is the fundamental decision point. The sacraments are not, in the first place, our--
HOW OFTEN SHOULD UNITED METHODISTS COMMUNE?

church's acts. We are allowed to take part in them, and in grace we are
given the aweful responsibility of being their necessary instruments.
whether as members of the celebrating body of Christ, or, within that
Body, as ordained officiants. But the agent is the triune God. Of the sacra-
ments, our church says that "they are certain signs of grace and God's good
will towards us, in which he doth work invisibly in us," and that "they are
means of grace by which God works invisibly in us." Further, we assert that
sacraments, as means of grace, are "outward signs, words, or actions,
ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels
whereby He might convey to . . . [us] preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace." In
the words of one of the few Methodist treatises on sacramental theology
that has proved to be durable: sacraments are God's self-giving.

A Sacramental Church in a Sacramental Universe

The implications of this are remarkable. Let us state them here with the
minimum of reservation. The Logos, in whom the fullness of Deity dwells
(that is, in whose presence and action, according to the principle of coin-
herence, is the presence and action of the divine totality), is the governing
principle of the universe: the entirety of things has at its heart, and
throughout the extent of all events, the personal principle of self-giving, of
self-oblation, of self-communicating. When we speak (or sing) of grace, we
are contemplating the impact of the divine, not merely upon individual
personalities or human groups, or even society as a whole, but upon and
through the entire extent of matter and mind and space and time. There is
more than a poetic conceit in the desperate cry of Dr. Faustus in
Christopher Marlowe's climactic scene: "See, see, where Christ's blood
streams in the firmament . . ." Thus, what we do or omit to do in what
happens in church conveys and instills an understanding of all reality, all
relationships.

In the midst of his church, at every moment, is Christ, the Incarnate
Logos. At every moment he is holding out his gospel, his announcement of
the reality of the Kingdom and his invitation into it, his invitation to enter
it through faith by water and the Spirit and to abide and mature in that
kingdom by feasting at his table. Every moment, therefore, Christ is
holding out the gift of himself in bread and wine. In the Spirit, he manifests
this presence--his summons, his offering--in and through his church's
ministries of love and witness and, most explicitly, in its sacramental acts.

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This places a staggering burden upon us, the Christian church. If we silence or muffle the preaching of Christ's gospel, it is Christ's own voice that we are trying to mute—and, even though he will find ways to make himself heard in spite of us, our failure as his representatives is reprehensible. When we are not spreading the table of the Lord, it is Christ's own offering of himself that we are withholding.

Word and Table

When we divide the Word, we have not finished until we have broken the bread. The once overly familiar dichotomy between preaching and sacraments, which was alleged to be integral to Protestantism, may still be asserted, but it is no longer tenable. When this view was still taken for granted, it was beginning to show signs of disintegration. Paul Tillich, writing in 1926, commented:

Protestantism rests upon the preaching, the proclamation of the otherworldly (jenseitigen) God, who transcends all human implementation (Verwirklichung). Protestantism has none of the sacrament which was rejected by the message of the prophets, and therefore it has no priesthood and no real worship. And yet even the sermon, when it is something more than grace-bestowed prophecy, presupposes a stance which is both priestly and cultic. Preaching, by its very essence, is the very nullification of priesthood and worship, and yet at the same time a new foundation for both.

One important reason why we cannot be content now with formulations such as this is that sacraments (like preaching, when it is truly so called), are precisely not "human implementation": they are realized and manifested through human acts and words, but they are done by God. "For the sake of Christ, and on Christ's behalf, we appeal, as ambassadors of God who, as it were, is beseeching through us: we entreat you on behalf of Christ—be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20, my translation). What Paul says of apostolic ministry is true not only of preaching but also of the entire ministry of reconciliation, and an essential part of reconciliation is that the errant children are seated again at the Father's table.

One of the most far-reaching of all liturgical decisions, possibly the most vital, is the allocation of time. It is frustrating to many that we cannot trace in detail how Christians came, instead of making the Sabbath rest the
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first rule, to defining their week with the Lord's day, the day of celebration. The reason for this decision is, of course, obvious: This first day of the week is the day of triumph, the feast of resurrection, and therefore also a foretaste of the world to come. From the Emmaus encounter onward, the Christian Kyriake has been a day for meeting the Risen One in the breaking of the bread. In our present situation in the Western world, where, although many people have to go to work on Sunday, the day is still privileged in many ways, the plans a church makes for this day constitute its definitive manifesto. This is the day of days, and what we set forth this day says what we are, what we mean to be, what we invite everyone to be, today and eternally. This makes the choice of liturgical program for Sunday a crucial decision.

Our Road So Far

If we put together all these considerations set out so far, the implication is obvious: the Eucharist should be celebrated, the table of the Lord spread, on every Lord's Day. This was certainly John Wesley's counsel for the nascent denomination that was to be the Methodist Episcopal Church in the newly independent United States: "I . . . advise the elders to administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord's day . . ."; and on this and other aspects of his liturgical program: "If any one will point out a more rational and scriptural way, of feeding and guiding those poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it." His unambiguous counsel for individual communicants, in his sermon on "constant Communion," was this:

It is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he [or she] can . . . because it is a plain command of Christ . . . because the benefits of doing it are so great to all that do it in obedience to him; viz., the forgiveness of our past sins, the present strengthening and refreshing of our souls . . . This is the food of our souls: This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection.

John Wesley's own habits matched his professed principles. John Bowmer showed, in his classic study of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in early Methodism, that John Wesley "probably communicated at least from seventy to ninety times a year, that is, an average of once every four or five days." In the 1745 Hymns on the Lord's Supper, published by John
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and Charles Wesley early in their ministry, there is even a hint (hyperbolic though it may have been) of a daily Eucharist, even if this might have been possible for early Methodists or other contemporary Anglicans only during the octaves of Christmas and Easter:

Ye Royal Priests of Jesus, rise,
And join the Daily Sacrifice ... 

So what happened to change this early vision? It is plain that the various strands of world Methodism did not perpetuate, if indeed they ever really endorsed, the pattern that John Wesley advocated. We must insist again: the subsequent developments neither invalidate what he stood for nor dictate what we ought to do now, but some explanation is needed for the ways things have changed.

We must first note that John Wesley's summons to constant Communion was neither a call to nor an assumption of frequent Communion. For the pupils in his care around 1733, weekly Communion was a possibility, since they were all in Oxford, where the rubric could be obeyed: "And in Cathedral and Collegiate Churches, and Colleges, where there are many Priests and Deacons, they shall all receive the Communion with the Priest every Sunday at the least, except they have a reasonable cause to the contrary." All well and good in Oxford, but the situation in the parishes of eighteenth-century England was very different. In many places, the legal minimum of three Communion services a year was all you could find. The Anglican conditioning of early British Methodists was at least as strong, subliminally, as their reconditioning by the Evangelical Revival and the Wesleyan part of it. We should also keep in mind the general ethos of eighteenth-century England: increasingly sceptical, cautious, fearful of enthusiasm in every sense, fearful of Roman Catholicism, uneasy in the face of symbolism, and readily inclined to describe religion in anthropocentric, rationally (i.e., humanistically) manageable, nonmysterious, and nonsacerdotal ways. Sacramental religion will not, in such a climate, be the obvious thing to go in for. However, when it is engaged in, it will be with measured seriousness, with a fear of unworthiness (although the Eucharist is essentially a feast of grace, not of merit), and probably as a special and rare observance.

This is exemplified in the spirituality of Francis Asbury, and although the factors determining liturgical development are in almost every case far

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more complex than the influence of individual leaders, his place in American Methodism must not be ignored. From his arrival in America in 1771 until the Christmas Conference in 1784, Asbury had to restrain Methodists from administering the ordinances without the benefit of ordination. Encounters from this period, such as the following, are suggestive. Benedict Swope and Asbury had some conversation about the ordinances administered by Mr. Strawbridge. He advanced some reasons to urge the necessity of them, and said Mr. Wesley did not do well to hinder us from the administration of them. I told him they did not appear to me as essential to salvation and that it did not appear to be my duty to administer the ordinances at that time (November 22, 1772); [and on March 11, 1774:] Calling at Dr. Henderson's, I met with I.R., a Quaker, who said it gave him pain to think that Joseph Filmoor should go home for ordination, and expressed his disapprobation of our going to the Church for the ordinances supposing that we might have them amongst ourselves. But this was all a farce. He would rather that we should drop them altogether. And in the course of conversation he laboured to overthrow them entirely. But when I told him it might appear to me as a duty to use them, though I should not suppose that all went to hell who did not use them; he asked, why we use them if they are not essential to salvation? What weak reasoning is this?

There is, on Asbury's side, no hint that the sacraments are not of divine institution and permanent obligation; but if they are not necessary to salvation, how binding is the institution and how peremptory the obligation?

Another complicating factor is the setting of eucharistic celebrations in the formative years of American Methodism. They are indeed high seasons—"market days of the soul"—and they occur especially at quarterly meetings. In close association with love feasts. Fervent testimonies to justifying and sanctifying grace accompanied both celebrations; and it is not clear to which, if either of these types of service, the participants attached more significance. Lester Ruth, in his excellent study, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings*, has warned us against underestimating early Methodists' appreciation of worship—specifically sacramental worship—with their keen appreciation of the transforming presence of the power of God. We have, however, yet to discover (if, indeed, we ever can) where the emphasis lay in their interpretation of what was
happening in the worship at these gatherings. Back in England, the issue was raised in a controversial setting. The Tractarian leader Edward Bouverie Pusey accused the Wesleyan Methodists (and I use the expression “accused” quite literally) of preferring their humanly invented Methodist peculiarity, the love feast, to the divinely instituted Supper of the Lord. Thomas Jackson vigorously defended the Methodists against the charge. However, there is some evidence that Pusey had the facts on his side. In some Methodist Societies, at least, the collection for the Poor Fund was consistently larger at the quarterly love feast than at Communion. Of course, the love feast has faded, among white Methodist-descended churches, while the Eucharist has survived. So, we must face this question: Is there indeed a tendency in the Methodist tradition to prefer rites of our own invention to those of dominical origin? Further, do we tend to shy away from the symbolic and the visual? And do we fear to look too similar to other Christians?

This complex of historical meanderings does not give us clear direction for the future. However, it does leave us with issues that we must resolve on grounds other than precedent.

On both sides of the Atlantic, there is still the calendrical dimension: if the Lord's Supper, however special and numinous and potent, is a quarterly event, can it be seen as the norm, or even part of the norm, of Christian celebration on the Lord's Day? The present pattern of United Methodist celebration seems to vary principally between monthly and quarterly observance, with rare instances of a weekly celebration; and there are churches where the members tell me that the Lord's Supper takes place when the pastor decides it will, but they cannot identify the pattern of these choices (and they do not seem to know how to ask). Whatever our future policy is to be, decisions will best be made openly and corporately, with reasons given and misgivings admitted and gently considered. And both clergy and laity will have to live with compromise and bear one another's burdens.

Rethinking—and Not Just about the Eucharist

If we are to think of pursuing a collective reassertion of the Eucharist as essential to the celebration of the Lord's Day, several areas of rethinking are involved.

One area is the entire strategy of the provision of ministry to churches
of various sizes. How many congregations can be offered only a "supply pastor," who cannot, of course, be given a license to perform sacramental ministry? How many churches in such a situation are denied the sacraments for many weeks, even months, because no elder is available or willing to travel out to them? The answers to these questions (which I cannot give, and do not wish to seek) might be embarrassing. Leaving such a situation a moment longer than is inevitable, and thereby effectively denying such a congregation the heart of Christian worship and witness, would surely be unthinkable. A glance at the wider problem of the provision of ministry tells us at once that, in the long term, the assumption that individual congregations and clergy must function in isolation must be questioned. (This is what has, in effect, come to be accepted as the norm, though it makes the "connectional" principle a pious fiction.) There are resources to meet this challenge in our traditional, however much neglected, Methodist ecclesiology, according to which, in the language of Scripture, "none of us lives for herself or himself, and none dies for herself or himself" (cf. Rom. 14:7). Further, any thorough commitment to provision of authenticated sacramental ministry will, if the implications of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry are adequately noted, involve us in reconsidering the ordination of "local" pastors and the abandonment of the absurd notion that ordination (which is not a piece of denominational private property) is significantly linked with itinerancy.

Structural or polity adaptations are not insignificant, but they can achieve little without a continued revitalization of ministry and membership. As to the ministry, do we, the ordained or otherwise appointed, in fact see the Eucharist as one of the indispensable areas of our ministry? (Yes, we all know what the ordination rites and the Discipline say, but where are we emotionally?) And how do we perceive the interlocking of liturgy and the rest of ministry and the interlocking of preaching with presidency at the table of the Lord? There are, of course, some (United) Methodist materials to support us in this rethinking, which is in itself an overhauling of our ministerial discipleship and spirituality. But, as an act of faith, we need to look beyond our anxious borders to see how colleagues in other traditions have been led to set side by side the service of the Word and the service of the Table. A personal choice is to read (in any order) two works by members of the other "order of preachers," Paul on Preaching by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., and Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God by
Underlying Spirituality for Ministry and Membership

One foundation stone of a ministerial spirituality to which the sacraments are central is a proper understanding of the *ex opere operato* principle. This is not to revert to magic but to insist that the authenticity of the sacraments does not rest on us, the ministers—on the *opus operantis*—but on the act obiediently done; for it is to that act which God’s gracious covenant has made the divine pledge to needy humankind. Behind that act, according to the wise interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas, is the act above all acts, the work of love done once for all and with universal efficacy on the cross, by the suffering Savior in person.22

Equally urgent is the discovery by all church members, lay and ordained, of a confident sacramental spirituality. The answer will no doubt include some preaching on the sacraments, but, as James White has cogently shown, specialized Communion meditations are not the indicated forward move. Preaching of Christ will, by *its very nature*, call us into incorporation into Christ, and will naturally deepen a hunger for receiving the body and blood as the missionary Body.23 Both lay and clergy will have to unlearn a consumerist, self-serving approach to ritual. It may be true, on a phenomenological level, that “prayer, ritual, and dogma... all are means of focusing the religious intention during a definite period of time”; that prayer may, but does not essentially, require a God to respond; and that group rituals and symbols develop because “the expressive symbols aid the individual by eliciting intentions that would otherwise lie mostly dormant.”24 This may be true, but, if so, what it shows is that the religious instinct is both an avenue for the divine self-giving of revelation and an area where healing and transformation are desperately needed. When we take part in the Eucharist, our individuality is affirmed but also lifted into a corporate richness in which the individual is saved progressively from individualism. The model for this manifold transformation, and the power that enables and bestows it, is the life of the triune God, in whom “person” is
not a closed and self-defending private world but an openness that knows no limit to giving and a shared life that reaches out in shared sacrifice. Growing into trinitarian life includes a new vision of hope for the whole human community, as well as for the church.

Another continuous need of the church is catechesis on the nature, structure, movement, and implications of the Eucharist, addressing a variety of personalities and using varied media. Methodists can do this, as we see in the work of Herchel H. Sheets and, most recently, Byron Anderson. One such resource may be a booklet of hymns, for reading more than singing, illustrating the successive phases of the liturgy.

Behold the Lamb of God: Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Table

Congregations, as missionary congregations, also require catechesis in their missionary role, especially when they are tempted to limit Sunday events to ostensibly evangelistic presentations that offer song and motivational speech but reserve or conceal the altar to which the gospel calls. Even where witness is through TV or the Internet, with the new models of society that are thus emerging, the Eucharist is indispensable; and a congregation reaching out by this means will need a special form of sacramental catechesis. The key to such catechesis seems to lie not in exhortations just to go in for lots of eucharistic celebration but in rediscovering boldly the missionary nature of the Body, with commitment to the whole range of society, seeing Jesus in every neighbor. Anyone who has been at such a church—the Broadway Christian Parish in South Bend, Indiana, being the most obvious example I know—will attest to this. This congregation, which decided not to run away from a failing neighborhood, sustains a most varied ministry of teaching, giving, and caring; and celebrates the Eucharist every Lord's Day. During this celebration, which is ordered and regular in format, emotionally disturbed people may do the most unexpected things, yet, there is no comment, just silent acceptance in love, sustained by reverence. But those who have been there and have been part of these events are reminded of the scene in the martyrs' dreams in third-century Carthage (Acts of Perpetua and Felicity), where the Good Shepherd welcomes his lambs into the Garden of Peace with embraces of acceptance and feeds them with his own hand. And when the dream ends, there remains a sweet taste in the mouth.
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Endnotes

1. Many of those responsible in United Methodist congregations for sacramental ministration are not ordained, but nonetheless licensed. Our United Methodist procedure is ecclesiologically odd, although we seldom face up to our ecumenical responsibilities here. In theological terms, licensing is in effect a temporary, localized, and secondary form of ordination.


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12. From the rubrics at the end of "The Order of the Administration of the Lord Supper, or Holy Communion," in the Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the Use of the Church of England (various editions from 1662).


16. My data, as yet unpublished, rely upon examination of the Poor Stewards' account books for the Wesleyan Methodist Society at Ancoats, Manchester (England), which are kept at the Methodist Central Hall, Oldham Street, Manchester. To quote Josephine Tey (The Daughter of Time), "The truth is not in accounts, but in account books."


22. See Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*, 100-9; also A.L. Lilley, *Sacraments: A Study of Some Moments in Attempt to Define Their Meaning for Christian Worship* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1928), especially ch. 4. Reference to classic works from the past is an essential element in truly ecumenical theology. This view of the *opus operatum* emphasizes that the essential action is God's action, an action of grace, to be apprehended in faith. To this extent, Robert W. Goodloe's placement of the principle "By Grace are ye saved, through Faith" as ch. 2 in his *The Sacraments in Methodism* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1953) is justified. Cf. John Wesley, "Salvation by Faith, Standard Sermon I," *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1:11.

23. White, *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving*, 119-34. I have expanded one element of White's argument.


27. The text of the 1745 *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* will not meet this need. Selected items from that source would combine well with material from other periods and traditions.

In Advent 1997 a startling conversation occurred during a United Methodist clergy gathering that determined the focus of my doctoral research on the spiritual and leadership crises that face The United Methodist Church. As I led my colleagues in reflection on Luke 1:5-38 during our time of worship, I asked, "What new life is coming-to-be in you?" To my surprise, every one of the ten clergy present responded that they had never, at any point in their lives, considered that question. I began to wonder how a person can lead if she or he has no sense of the newness into which God is inviting her or him.

This interaction was followed, in May 1998, by a conversation with a member of the California-Nevada Board of Ordained Ministry, in which I was informed that the board's primary issue was "clergy effectiveness." I responded that clergy "aliveness" or "awakeness" seemed to me to be a prior issue. As support, I mentioned a recent conference-wide survey, which indicated that the first two priorities of United Methodist clergy and laity in our conference related to spiritual growth, not to church programs or any kind of effectiveness. The two priorities were, and are, quite clear: "1. Renew our commitment to and support of spiritual growth"; and "2. Develop leadership for spiritual growth."1

In reviewing the questions on the California-Nevada Conference Board of Ordained Ministry's form titled "Appraisal of an Applicant for Ordination in the UMC," I did discover an emphasis on effectiveness. It was not until the seventh question (of nine)—and after a series of questions about the candidate's effectiveness in ministry—that the appraiser was asked, "How are this person's depth of faith, commitment and hope..."
Even then there was no question at all about spiritual practices or passionate call. The remaining questions were about the local church's vision and mission and about recommendation for ministry.

However, effectiveness is not the same as aliveness. Ezra Earl Jones, former general secretary of the General Board of Discipleship, notes, "Clergy effectiveness is one way of stating the issue, but it does not go to the depth to deal with the question of 'aliveness.'"

As a denomination, we know we are out of balance. The report from the Connectional Process Team, titled "Transforming: A United Methodist Church for the Twenty-First Century" (presented to the 1996 General Conference), states:

The United Methodist Church has focused on a model of leadership driven more by programs and structure than by spiritual formation and discipleship. We too often measure the health of a congregation more by the number of programs and committees than by the growth in faith and the fruits of Christian maturity found in its members. While these programs and structures intend to facilitate spiritual growth and witness, we often have little time or space for intentional spiritual growth.

Recognition of the problem is not enough, because management thinking is still in place and effectiveness is its goal. As a result, the development of spiritual leaders becomes one more thing to do in an already crowded agenda:

In order to build spiritual leadership, current leaders must provide the support that will equip future leaders with a variety of leadership styles and forms of ministry. This means that current leaders must focus not only on programmatic, administrative, and organizational activities, but also on the development of disciples as future spiritual leaders.

This section of the document continues with the assumption that pastors are well versed in this process of spiritual formation: "Pastors, as appointed spiritual leaders, guide the people of faith to be attentive to God and grow in their discipleship."

However, research consistently shows that most pastors are not well prepared to address the spiritual lives of their congregation members.
"Many church leaders have never seriously considered spirituality as something different from worship or study or programmed ministry." Pastors quickly discover that what is "highly rewarded are numbers and activities, the increase in church attendance or membership, the increase in moneys given to denominational administration or missions, or service on a denominational board." And so, as Eugene Peterson points out:

[The working environment of the pastor erodes patience and rewards impatience. People are uncomfortable with mystery (God) and mess (themselves). They avoid both mystery and mess by devising programs and hiring pastors to manage them. A program provides a defined structure with an achievable goal. Mystery and mess are eliminated at a stroke. This is appealing.]

While it may be appealing, this focus on effectiveness has a high cost in terms of the pastor's soul. Studies by management consultant Peter Drucker show that pastors represent the "most frustrated profession" in the United States. "It is no secret that of all occupations parish clergy have among the highest incidences of physical and emotional breakdowns. . . . Roy Oswald's research indicates that one of every five clergy is severely burned out. A key contributing factor is the expectation that clergy be competent in all areas of ministry." Given these statistics, it is no surprise that Rolf Demming's research at Duke University Divinity School (as part of a Lilly Endowment project titled "United Methodism and American Culture") shows that "of those ordained up to 1984, 30 to 40 percent from any given year had dropped out of the ministry within ten years." My research in the California-Nevada Annual Conference indicates that the reason for this may be because it becomes harder and harder for clergy to live God-centered lives as outer pressures from both the local church and the conference increase. The integrity that is present at the outset of ministry seems to decline as the years of service increase, and its decline is evidenced by an increased disparity between spirituality and leadership style indicators and by a decreased overall satisfaction level with one's spiritual life. This is particularly acute at the ten-year mark. The clergy who leave local church ministry seem to be those who insist on maintaining the integrity of the connection between their inner and outer lives.

The issue of living God-centered lives caused an uproar in the email
lectionary study group to which I belonged when, in October 1998, I registered surprise at the statistic (mentioned by one of my doctoral professors) that the average pastor prays fewer than five minutes each day. I received some very angry responses. One participant wrote, "What counts as prayer? Does God have a stopwatch? It seems to me that the tax collector's prayer in Luke 18:9-14 was sufficient to save his soul, and its words take about three seconds."  

It is no surprise that the issue of prayer turned out to be a hot issue for these local church clergy; the issue of prayer and solitude is central to our denominational crises. The pastor quoted above was focused on effectiveness. This type of outer-driven response is a symptom of our ingrained patterns of transactional leadership, which is really a form of management.

The pattern of leadership that brings about deep transformation is a different, inner-directed process. Transformational leadership is based on the leader's and the community's deep spiritual need for (1) renewal of relationship with God; (2) a sense of belonging; (3) a sense of safety and support; and then, and only then, (4) a sense of significance and meaning.

Biblically, it is the process of transformational leadership, and not management, that God and faithful leaders model for the people in times of great crisis. There are two instances of this process at work in the story of Korach's rebellion (see Numbers 16-18). Both times, when the community falls into disarray, Moses begins by seeking the renewal of his relationship with God. One rabbi observes that the "telling moment" when Moses falls down in prayer is central to how Moses leads. Moses' first leadership move in this crisis is to go to God in prayer and to listen for that still, small voice within. He allows time for prayer and he allows time to see what will emerge. His first reaction to Korach is not something from his own preconceived agenda.

In that time of communing, Moses is given instructions that include all the people involved in the crisis. This step of inclusion is followed by directions from God that ensure the safety of the gathered community. And, finally, God provides a detailed plan for something significant that will be a reminder of what has occurred. The purpose of these reminders is to provide the people with a sense of meaning underlying the recent events and to help move them into renewed trust in God's future.

God also works in a transformational way in one-on-one encounters and in ordinary times. When Jesus meets with the Samaritan woman at the well...
(John 4:1-41), rather than addressing the woman's needs in a transactional, management mode, he models transformational leadership. First, Jesus meets the woman's need for an experience of and relationship with God. Then he meets her need for belonging and respect by engaging her as an equal in the process of reflection. He provides the information she needs in order to take the risk of witnessing to his presence. And, finally, after these needs have been met, she takes the initiative and does something decisive: she goes back to the city and brings others out to meet Jesus.

A Twentieth-Century Shift

We value pastors who are effective and get things done, because the results of their work can be measured. This emphasis is due to a shift in the perception of ministry that emerged concomitant with the acceptance of assembly lines and the corporate philosophy of "Taylorism" in corporate America.

Richard Niebuhr, in his book *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, writes, "Whenever there has been a clear conception of the [pastoral] office, one of these functions has been regarded as central and the other functions have been ordered to serve" the goal of that primary function. He notes that, in the 1920s, the central function of "pastoral director" emerged. The pastoral director carries on all the traditional functions of ministry—preaching, leading the worshipping community, administering the sacraments, caring for souls, presiding over the church. But as the preacher and priest organized these traditional functions in special ways, so did the pastoral director. His first function is that of building or "edifying" the church; he is concerned in everything he does to bring into being a people of God who as a church will serve the purpose of the church in the local community and the world. 

The pastoral director is one who does the administrative task of managing and maintaining a church for the benefit of the denomination. Retired United Methodist Bishop Richard Wilke points out that James Glasse took Niebuhr's notion of pastoral director a step further in the 1960s. "Glasse," notes Wilke, "emphasized competency, acquired skills, and professional status. The professional minister came across as a three-piece-suit clergyman who feels comfortable working side by side with a physician or an attorney or the president of a bank."
The result of this emphasis is that, since 1920, there has been an increasing loss of the transformational dynamic of ministry under the weight of the transactional management approach. The shift in the clergy person's primary function from that of spiritual leader to that of pastoral director and producer has resulted in the creation of the "ecclesiastical manager." There has been a marked turn from a focus on care of souls to a focus on control of the organization. *"Ministry has become increasingly divorced in modern times from the role of spiritual mentor to the community and is now largely the work of an office manager or general caretaker."*

As we consider ministry in the twenty-first century, there is a sense that effectiveness will not cure what ails the church. Wilke writes, "If we are to tackle the world for Christ, the seminaries must be fiery furnaces. The task is not to grant degrees, but to inflame the minds and hearts of a generation of preachers. Boards of Ordained Ministries will have to phrase their questions differently, or we will continue to quench the fires."  

However, as I learned at the Lilly convocation, "Forming Christian Leaders," held at Claremont School of Theology in May 1999, many seminaries are not "fiery furnaces." At that meeting, echoing Jeffrey Hadden's observation that "liberal Protestant seminaries have become more like the graduate schools of religion at secular universities," the seminary faculty present from Claremont, Union, Iliff, Princeton, Pacific School of Religion, and other schools saw their role as providing the traditional focus on academics, not on spiritual formation. The reason for the continued focus on academics, they noted, was a concern that, if spiritual formation became a priority at seminaries, the seminaries would have to change their focus. As a result, the consensus among the mainline seminary staff present was that spiritual formation was the responsibility of the local church.

In addition to the concerns about spirituality I noted at the convocation, I also became aware of the additional, and very real, tension between the need for pastors to have a solid academic background and the reality that congregations are, in Jones's words, "places for programs." Because seminaries focus on academics and churches focus on programs, most pastors, Jones told me, "haven't known the church to be a place of spiritual formation."  

As a result of their own poverty in spiritual disciplines, pastors are not prepared to help people build relationships with God. Jones notes, "My data, largely about United Methodist pastors, confirms... that our pastors..."
in large part are not praying people. They do not practice the historic spiritual disciplines, and therefore it is impossible for them to help those of us who look to them for guidance in the church to be praying people seeking God and love of neighbor." He further observes:

When we first began [working with congregations] a decade ago we thought that people were more in touch with their spiritual hungers and that the leadership of the church was better prepared to understand it and therefore do those things in the congregations that would remove the blockages and facilitate the search. We have been astounded at how weak that ability is.

The weakness of our clergy’s ability to be in touch with their own spiritual needs and, therefore, those of their congregation members has everything to do with our current leadership crisis. If neither mainline seminaries, in their current, academic mindset, nor congregations, with their focus on programs, are able to provide training in spiritual formation for pastors and other congregational leaders, how will spiritual formation happen? If ministry “comes alive when spiritual disciplines are nurtured,” what does a lack of spiritual formation mean for the wider church? And what does the absence of a deep spiritual life mean for the souls of pastors?

We are lost. And, because we are lost, we are floundering. Yet, both the saints of our tradition and contemporary transformational leadership theorists say there is a way out of our current morass. Both sets of voices say, Leadership begins with spirituality. It is central to who and how we are in the world.

Transformational Leadership

Leadership is commonly thought to be a four-step process that moves from vision to mission to plan and, then, to people. According to this model, the first step is to formulate a vision. The second step is to set a mission with clear goals, objectives, and measurements. The third step in this process is to draw up a plan, delineating responsibilities, norms, procedures, time lines, and budgets. As a final step, people are asked to “buy in.” This process can be illustrated as follows:
This is a classic transactional approach. Ronald Heifetz of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University observes that we usually define leadership "with respect to organizational effectiveness. Effectiveness means reaching viable decisions that implement the goals of the organization. This definition . . . provides no real guide to determine the nature or formation of those goals."26 Transactional leadership is essentially management. "The root origin of manage is a word meaning 'hand.' At its core, managing is about 'handling' things, about maintaining order, about organization and control."27 Effectiveness is the point, because "the function of management is to cope with complexity."28

Most churches try to lead by following the transactional model but soon discover, to their frustration, that it falters at the point between "plan" and "people"; people don't "buy in." This passive resistance is no surprise, because the transactional approach is modeled on consumerism and the marketplace mentality. Congregation members are viewed as customers and spirituality as a commodity. Eugene Peterson observes:

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from the competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.29

The process of transformational leadership reverses the transactional management flow and is based on deeper, spiritual needs. These needs are renewal, belonging, safety/structure, and significance.
Transformational leadership begins with the renewal of relationship with God for both the individual and the community; therefore, it starts with a sense of radical openness to the Spirit. This means that transformational leadership begins with an adventure into the unknown. Christians know that it is precisely here, in the wilderness, that God encounters those who are willing to let go of the old and venture into the new. Isaiah speaks God’s word to a people lost in the wilderness of exile: “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” (Isa. 42:9).

When an individual renews her or his relationship with God, her or his gifts, values, and call are identified. Then that person is able to see her or himself as an integral part of God’s movement into the future. When this safety is established, the person experiences the freedom to try, fail, and try again. With this kind of support, she or he is free to attempt something significant, knowing that the results are in God’s hands. The person can act, knowing that the call is to be faithful, not “successful” or “effective.”

Likewise, when a community begins its leadership process by renewing its relationship with God, a vision emerges that gives the people a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. As this kind of collaborative effort is given free rein, a structure is established in which it is safe to try, fail, and try again. With this kind of support, it is possible to attempt something significant, which becomes that community’s unique gift to the advancement of the reign of God.30

The word to the churches from corporate America is that a leader must begin in daily solitude, away from the throng of voices that surround her or him in order to hear the small voice that speaks a word of the new. “Leaders have to heed the voice within,” urges a recent *Fortune* magazine
article, exclaiming that "you need a new skill: reflection." And John
Gardner, former secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, warns, "The
future announces itself from afar. But most people are not listening. The
noisy clatter of the present drowns out the tentative sound of things to
come. The sound of the new does not fit old perceptual patterns and goes
unnoticed by most people."

Where Do We Begin?

"Our spirituality is the nourishment for vision; it is one's inner self where the
conditions are set right to see God, oneself, and the possibilities." Because of
this, Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser insist that "any discussion of
vision, then, must begin with our spirituality, and not our work." Or, as
Parker Palmer expresses it, "A leader is a person who must take special
responsibility for what's going on inside him or herself, inside his or her
consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good."

This is essential, for a congregation "will not journey beyond the
pastor; the congregation will not venture where the pastor is not leading.
This is a hard saying. It would be more comfortable to work like the traffic
cop—to give a map or a few verbal instructions—but spiritual formation is a
case where only those who have eyes to see can lead."

The witness of church leaders over the centuries is that the leader's
need to "make a difference"—the need for significance—must be set aside in
order to be "made different," because this need for renewed relationship
with God is primary. John Wesley wrote of his own spiritual disciplines and
his daily time of solitude at 4:30 or 5:00 A.M.: "Here then I am, far from the
busy ways of men. I sit down alone; only God is here, in his presence I
open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven."
Eventually,
in addition to his morning disciplines, Wesley spent his Saturdays in soli­
tude and self-examination.

In a letter to a pastor, dated 7 August 1760, Wesley clearly states the
importance of soul care for pastors: "What has exceedingly hurt you in
times past, now, and I fear, to this day, is, want of reading. . . . Whether you
like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way;
else you will be a trifle all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give
it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer."

I believe that church leaders of the twenty-first century are being called
to focus on the care of souls, beginning with their own. This is a return to
an older understanding of the vocation of clergy, which prevailed until a
century ago. According to Thomas Moore:

"For hundreds of years the parish priest received into his charge the souls of
those who lived within the boundaries of his church. This responsibility . . .
was known as cura animarum, the cure of souls. Cure meant "charge" as well as
"care" . . . The role of the curate, as he was called, was to provide a religious
context for the larger turning points of life and also to maintain the affectional
ties of family, marriage, and community." 38

The reclaiming of this historic pastoral work "is a determination to
work at the center, to concentrate on the essential." 39 That work begins
with the pastor's own spiritual life. As Howard Rice says: "The care of
souls, as a model for ministry, means paying close attention to what God is
doing in a given life. It requires an attitude of quiet reflection and careful
attentiveness to each person but also an attitude of responsiveness to God
cultivated by the practice of prayer." 40

Nurturing one's soul takes time—necessary, essential time. Peterson
writes,

I know it takes time to develop a life of prayer: set-aside, disciplined, deliberate
time. It isn't accomplished on the run, nor by offering prayers from a pulpit or
at a hospital bedside. I know I can't be busy and pray at the same time. I can
be active and pray; I can work and pray; but I cannot be busy and pray. I
cannot be inwardly rushed, distracted, or dispersed. In order to pray I have to
be paying more attention to God than to what people are saying to me; to
God than to my clamoring ego. Usually, for that to happen there must be a
deliberate withdrawal from the noise of the day, a disciplined detachment
from the insatiable self. 41

If we give up our insistence on administrative and organizational
effectiveness as the epitome of leadership, then the foundation for the
spiritual practices of solitude and prayer essential to the care of souls and
to transformational leadership could be developed in seminaries and
strengthened in the early years of ministry. If we begin to support current
and future pastors in attending to their own souls, we would be saying
that the spiritual, emotional—and, in some cases, even physical—death of
our clergy is no longer an acceptable cost of ministry.

In eighteen years of spiritual direction and eight years as a spiritual director, weekly accountability to my own spiritual director has kept me focused on and growing in my life with God. This was affirmed by the people of Crystal Springs United Methodist Church in San Mateo, California, who insisted that the pastor who followed me in July 2000 also be someone who participated in weekly spiritual direction. The congregation told the district superintendent and bishop that they had learned that "the pastor must care for her/his soul, if s/he is to care for ours." This is such an important criterion for this church that it created a separate line item in its budget to pay the 50 percent of the cost of spiritual direction that is not covered by our Conference Supportive Services. Might The United Methodist Church not come alive in new ways if all of our churches were to insist that their pastors and lay leadership take at least an hour a day to care for their souls, with weekly accountability?

Finally, a shift in the role of the pastor means a shift in the role of laity. If we begin to see the pastor's primary role as caring for souls rather than as attending to program and administration, we may begin to discover the leadership competencies in our laity and develop spiritually based "communities of leaders" rather than relying on the pastor to be the "hero leader." Both our United Methodist tradition and corporate America assure us that, as these leaders live into and lead from their own strengths in the church community, others will be freed to do the same.

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Endnotes

1. Paragraph Report noted by Anne M. Dilenschneider in correspondence with Mark Bollwinkel, Chairperson, Conference Coordinating Team, 3 April, 1997.
TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

4. Connectional Process Team, The United Methodist Church, Transforming: A United Methodist Church for the Twenty-First Century (Nashville: The United Methodist Church, 1999), 34.

5. Ibid., 8.

6. Ibid.


11. Quoted in “Taking the Measure of UMC Clergy,” The Flyer (General Commission on the Status and Role of Women in The United Methodist Church, Spring 1997), 2.


17. John Killinger, Preaching the New Millennium (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 78.

18. Wilke, 100.


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25. Parrott and Dileenschneider, 1.
30. Parrott and Dileenschneider, 3.
33. Shawchuck and Heuser, 69.
35. Shawchuck and Heuser, 126.
42. "Non-negotiable Values of Crystal Springs UMC," (Crystal Springs United Methodist Church, February 2000).
I am very concerned with church growth, because of the very nature of the church. I believe the church is in the world to transform the world. I believe people’s souls are nourished and preserved in the church. I believe the world is a better place because of the church and that people are restored and healed because of the church. I believe if we are doers of the word of God and are positively reacting to the Great Commission found in Matt. 28:18-20 and to the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ, then we know that the answer to the question whether United Methodist churches should grow is a resounding yes!

Since God is alive and well, the church of God ought be alive and well too! Indeed, the church must stay alive and well! It is important for us to accept the fact that if a living thing is not growing, it is dying—there is no in-between. I am often bewildered at my own experience of watching this denomination.

The only answer to this question that seems acceptable is an unqualified yes. The question appears simple, but a moment’s reflection reveals several layers. What kind of growth are we talking about? Is it numerical growth? spiritual growth? Does moving from being an unhealthy church to a healthy one count as growth? If a congregation has grown in its outreach to others or has “grown” new leadership or a new youth ministry or has grown in its practice of stewardship—will we include it among the growing churches? Unfortunately, it seems that when we speak of “growth” in the church, the prevailing understanding is that the truly important growth is numerical. It is this narrow understanding of church growth that has United Methodists striving to make disciples of Jesus Christ in less than faithful ways.

It pleases me to see the number of persons in local churches who know that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.
die in so many areas. I believe God is grieved at the fact that so many United
Methodists are content with small numbers. The world is in such pain; why
are we not more concerned with bringing in the “lost sheep”? The world is so
confused; why are we not assured that the church has the answer in our
Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Every human being is precious in God’s sight;
why are we not concerned with numbers in the church? Numbers represent
persons, souls, disciples for Jesus Christ. Numbers are everything when you
look at the brokenness of the lives that walk our streets; the precious lives
being wasted in our prison systems; the lives addicted to drugs, crime,
alcohol, food, sex, fortune, and fame. Why are these people not in the
church? Can these social pathologies be seen as a failure of the church? To
be whole, people need the church. If the church is not growing, then the
world is not being transformed. We cannot sit comfortably and satisfied
inside God’s church and condemn the world that the church is in the world
to save. Indeed, God did not send Jesus to condemn the world but through
Jesus to save it (see John 3:17). As long as there is one human being left
outside the church, we have a job to do!

I have encountered United Methodist churches that do not want
to grow. New people come in and the old members run them out. Such
behavior is sinful and it grieves God; for the church belongs to God, not to
its members, regardless of how long they’ve been there. John 3:16 declares,
“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (my emphasis).
Thus, the church exists for the sake of the world.

I have pastored churches that acted as if they would rather die than
change. So, as leader, I had to always remind them of the purpose of God’s
church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ. I had to keep challenging them to
be in tune with God’s Spirit, to move to God’s rhythm, and to long for
God’s presence; for, if they did, people would come. After all, Jesus
promised, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people
to myself” (John 12:32). It is our mandate to bring people into the house of
the Lord and to help them become disciples.

Why is this denomination so often satisfied with “smallness”? If the
world were small, I could understand this reasoning; but we are in a big
world. Every church needs to be filled to capacity. What is it that makes us
justify the fact that we are not growing? Is it that we are not wise enough
to choose and respect good leadership? What is it that makes us jealous
Should United Methodist churches grow? Yes, we are mandated by God to grow. And where we find churches that are not growing, we need to do everything possible to break that bondage. Where we see churches that have great potential for growth, we need to offer them all the help they need. Where we see churches with leadership unwilling to learn and grow themselves, we need to reevaluate the positions of these leaders.

We are not mandated to grow because the church needs the people; we are mandated to grow because people need the church. People need the church more than ever today. But the reality is this: People will not come to

and hostile toward churches and pastors who have growing congregations? Have United Methodists accepted incompetence and mediocrity as our norm? Why do we criticize the way growing churches do church? Is it because we do not like what we feel incapable of doing? What is it that keeps some of us comfortable with the state of our decline? Common sense and wisdom would tell us that if you keep doing what you're doing, you are going to keep getting what you've got. If it is broken, fix it! Either we are feeling too inadequate to fix the churches or too arrogant and proud to let somebody else help us.

It seems to me that arrogance and pride are keeping us from moving with what God is doing in this great time of "awakening." We sing, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord; she is his new creation." God is surely doing a new thing, but do we perceive it? Indeed, God is always doing a new thing, preparing even now a time of new birth and renewal for the church. This is a great time for the church to be the church.

African-American churches that worship in the authentic Black church tradition are among the fastest-growing churches in the United States today. We could learn much from this tradition. Indeed, nondenominational White churches that are borrowing from the Black church tradition are growing, too, and are attracting persons from all races. Is it pride that keeps The United Methodist Church from considering the gifts for renewal that the Black church tradition offers? What would happen if we realized that other groups—other ethnic groups—have traditions that may help bring renewal to the church? And what would happen if we availed ourselves of some of these traditions? Now that would truly be a new thing for the church. The reality is this: God is doing a new thing; we may just have to look at those who we think are at the "bottom" to get the answers we need to stay on top of things.

Should United Methodist churches grow? Yes, we are mandated by God to grow. And where we find churches that are not growing, we need to do everything possible to break that bondage. Where we see churches that have great potential for growth, we need to offer them all the help they need. Where we see churches with leadership unwilling to learn and grow themselves, we need to reevaluate the positions of these leaders.
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a church where they do not experience the welcoming presence of God—where they do not feel accepted, loved, and cared for. People will never attend a gathering where they sense no compassion and understanding for those who need help. Finally, and simply, people will not come unless the people of God invite them to come.

The church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual hospital and all human beings (even those of us who have been in the church for a long time) need spiritual healing. This is a forceful reminder that the church does not belong to us; the church belongs to Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, nobody should feel left out of the church.

The world is dying to hear what the Word of God has to say to them. The purpose of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Put together, this amounts to a challenge to be renewed and thus to grow spiritually, numerically, financially, and programmatically.
But when I ask these same persons about what they understand by "making disciples," most have difficulty coming up with an answer other than numerical growth. That disappoints me. Occasionally, someone will connect church growth with redemption—but it is rare. To be sure, one way of measuring the church's growth is to count each new person who surrenders his or her life to Christ. However, it is in the nurturing of persons for discipleship in the midst of life that the church truly grows. This requires that we move beyond a simplistic vision of church growth. Of course we should make disciples of Jesus Christ—and even count them. But we should remember that "making disciples" has several parts:

- Proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ.
- Lead persons to commit their lives to God through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley's Christian conferencing.
- Send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel.

While these statements reflect the church's commitment to "church growth," I am amazed to see how many of us have chosen to claim only parts of it. Some claim only the first two statements and the last, proposing to grow the church by bringing people into the church but with little regard for the world. Then there are those who seek to grow the church through a focus on the third statement—service in the world and the creation of just social orders—but often with little regard for the institutional church. Neither of these approaches will grow the church in ways that truly build up the body of Christ and enable it to be about God's work in the world. For United Methodists, church growth is holistic: We are called to invite others to a commitment to Christ, nurture those persons in discipleship, and send them out in service to the world in Christ's name. How might we
nurture such a holistic approach to our task of growing the church?

We begin by recognizing that we need each other. Those who emphasize evangelism need those who stress social justice, for each represents an aspect of the total work of discipleship necessary to faithfully grow the church and build up the body of Christ. We must commit to mending and healing our own relationships within the church if we hope to convince others that we serve the Prince of Peace. In some places in our church, there is truly a spirit of enmity between those with differing perspectives. Needless to say, this is not only unhealthy but also destructive of the very church we are trying to grow. Let us pray for one another and seek ways to be in authentic, transparent conversation with one another. In everything, let us learn together what God is calling us to be and do as a denomination. We need this relational foundation if The United Methodist Church is to grow.

The struggle in the church is not only about the tension between the so-called “conservatives” and “liberals.” There is also the broad concern that, while we are committed to reaching out to all people with the Good News, the church is still primarily white and middle-class. In light of the changing demographics in this country, the growth and ministry of the denomination depend on a church that includes the great diversity of persons living in our communities. Persons spearheading comprehensive plans to reach out to Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans are valiantly leading us in opening up to others but it is going to take more than they can do on their own. The social activists among us who have faithfully served among the poor in behalf of all of us have much to share with us about reaching out to the poor. And, yes, we must also be open to receiving and nurturing the discipleship of persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered. Christ’s church has a place for everyone.

The church will grow when we surrender it to Christ the Good Shepherd, who does not rest until all have been found and cared for. If we had the heart of Jesus, would anyone be left out or without the basic necessities for life and wholeness? If we had the spirit of Jesus, would reaching out to others who are different from us seem so impossible? If we had the mind of Jesus, would the picture of an inclusive church be so difficult to dream?

How do we grow a diverse and inclusive church that serves others? What if, for one year, every local congregation focused its ministry on reaching out to persons different from those who are already members? What if every church in a demographically changing community received a
pastor who reflected the ethnic character of the community? And what if we shared clergy across annual conference lines to fill this need? What if, for one year, we withheld judgment and worked in ministry and mission side by side with a person who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered? What if, for one year, every lay- and clergyperson gave whatever wage increase he or she received to ministry with the poor? What if membership in our church required a year of service with the poor, followed by a concrete commitment to the ongoing work of justice? What if every church member shared her or his Christian witness with twelve other persons in a twelve-month period? And what if each member then mentored one other person in doing the same? These questions do not involve complicated actions, but they do require focused intention. With God's help, we can grow a diverse and inclusive church whose spirit is both evangelistic and just.

Finally, we cannot speak of church growth without recommitting ourselves to being ecumenical in spirit and action. We must not view growing Christ's church in isolation from other Christians. What we do as United Methodists is but one of many contributions to the building of the body of Christ. Moreover, we never have a clear picture of the church's growth without a view of the whole. Being able to see the whole requires that we be in relationship with other Christians in our local communities and in the world and that we work together in the sharing of the Good News and the building of God's reign among us.

When was the last time we United Methodists celebrated the growth of Christ's body because a Lutheran congregation grew in number or because the Catholic Church commissioned new missionaries or because the Baptists planted a new church? We may not agree with everything that is being done in and through these denominations, but we must recognize that they also are members of the body of Christ and that their church growth counts, too. Besides, how can we expect to be able to effectively challenge their shortcomings if we are not in relationship with them? It may be that through genuine Christian relationship with those of other Christian communions, we can learn something about our own shortcomings and be freed from them to grow in spirit, service, and number.

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A Word on The Word

Lectionary Study

J. MICHAEL RIPSKI

The Roman god Janus is two-faced, like a door or gate. One face looks backward to the past, the other forward to the future. The first month of the secular calendar, January, received its name from this god. The first season of the Christian calendar likewise looks backward to the past and forward to the future. It is between what God has done and what God promises to do that Christians seek to live faithfully in the present. This "already-not yet," backward/forward posture provides the hermeneutical lens through which the Christian interprets experience.

What will the future bring? The Christian believes that the answer lies in the treasure inherited from the past. There was a time when they were no people. Then they became God's people. God gave them a future based on a promise. Their number would be as many as the stars in the night sky. They would have their own land. All this was God's gift, offered to them without price.

What will the future bring? A pharaoh who no longer remembered Joseph made slaves of Joseph's descendants, who were becoming as many as the stars in the night sky. Threatened by their strength in numbers, Pharaoh sought to kill the Hebrews' male babies upon their birth. God's people were destined to become no people once again because they had no future. Tomorrow promised more oppression, suffering, and death than today.

Moses had been spared from Pharaoh's infanticide. While tending sheep, a burning bush caught his attention. God spoke to Moses from the bush: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I ... have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a ... land flowing with milk and honey ... (Exod. 3:7-8).

I AM WHO I AM sent Moses to give the chosen people a future. For to be a chosen people is to live by a promise. It entailed Moses' leading them from where they did not belong to their true home.
What is hope but faith in the promise that we are "predestined" to someday enjoy our true home? To have I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE covenant with us entails our becoming who we will be. Who we are and who we will be is a gift from I AM AND I WILL BE. To receive the covenant is to bet our lives on it. "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:8).

What will the future bring? In the Diaspora, the memory of their true home was fading for God's people. Without memory of who they are by virtue of the Covenant-Maker, they are like withering grass and a fading flower against a future of displacement, deprivation, and despair. It hurts too much to sing "Beautiful, Beautiful Zion" in a foreign land. Is it possible to adjust to exile and still be God's people? When fate replaces faith, have both parties of the covenant died?

The voice of the prophet penetrates through the dense fog of deadening acquiescence. The exile is ending because Israel "has served her term,... her penalty is paid,... she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Isa. 40:2). Thus, the psalmist declares good news: "God will speak peace to his people... to those who turn to him in their hearts... that his glory may dwell in our land" (Ps. 85:8-9).

God loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing and will faithfully give God's people "their recompense." Yet, God promises to "make an everlasting covenant" with God's people, prompting all the nations to "acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed" (Isa. 61:8-9).

The Lord God is a covenant-maker and a covenant-keeper. When God's people are unfaithful to the covenant, there are consequences. When God's people hate what God loves and love what God hates, God offers mercy and forgiveness. Both are covenantal virtues—and so is judgment. God's grace is not cheap; it is covenantal. This means the parties involved are justified in holding each other accountable for meeting the expectations each has for the other. To enjoy the covenantal relationship requires the repentance of a contrite heart. It requires loving what God loves and hating what God hates.

What will the future bring? An anointed one, a messiah, will come in the likeness of King David. He will be of David's lineage. He will rally God's people against their Roman oppressors. He will restore Israel to its proper place among the nations. He will usher in shalom. No more exploitative taxation. No more having to be Rome's scapegoats. No more "Caesar is Lord."
Our thoughts are not God's thoughts and our ways not God's ways; yet, we assume we can predict how God will be faithful to the covenant that makes us a people. We assume that because being God's people took a particular expression yesterday, it will take the same expression tomorrow. God's hesed—God's steadfast love—is constant, to be sure. But constancy is not sameness. God's promise is to make all things new. The future God gives us can be counted on to surprise us—or it would not be God's future.

What will the future bring? It brought a man whose hometown was Nazareth in Galilee. He was an itinerant Jewish rabbi who identified with the prophet's call and mission: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me," he said, "because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners ..." (Isa. 61:1-2a).

Twelve disciples followed this man, who acted and sounded like the herald of Jubilee. Jesus taught his religion's law, but he emphasized its spirit rather than its letter. It sounded like heresy to those who preferred the letter. He offered forgiveness to persons as though he had the authority of God to do so. He was accused of blasphemy. Those who suffered from disease, infirmity, mental illness, poverty, and exclusion—those who were viewed as having little or no value—were attracted to Jesus because he treated them as precious neighbors. He ate with tax collectors and other sinners. He was known for the company he kept. He proclaimed that God's reign was in the midst of the least of these and those he blessed knew it was.

Some saw in Jesus the long-expected Messiah. Of course, he was not exactly who they thought the Messiah would be. His "kingdom" didn't resemble Caesar's. He resisted the devil's temptation for such a kingdom.

The kingdom Jesus proclaimed and embodied is governed by an ethic of social reversal. Living in covenant with God means living in covenant with our neighbors. Since God's covenant with us is based on love and justice, so our covenant must be with one another. The result is that the first will be last and the last will be first. We will wash one another's feet, regardless of our gender, age, ethnicity, or religion. The high and mighty will vacate their thrones for the lowly. The full will become empty and the empty full. The rich in spirit will be made humble.

Jesus' way was perceived rightly as a threat to the way the world was constructed. The truth hurts the unholy when its origin is the Holy One. Especially did it hurt those who recognized that if Jesus had his way they
would lose much of what they believed they could not live without. Marching to a different drumbeat, Jesus was out of step with the religious and political powers. If his way of living caught on, as it already had among "the least, the last, and the lost," the lives of the powerful were doomed. So they crucified him.

What will the future bring? As Jesus died on the cross, his holy light was extinguished. There was darkness. The earth shook. Was it creation's grief or its wrath? Then, on the third day, those who went to his tomb found it empty. They were told, "He is not here. He is risen." He had told his disciples to expect it. But their minds dismissed what they could not comprehend. Those who heard the witnesses chalked it up as an idle tale told by some hysterical women.

His disciples went back to business as usual. The future they had glimpsed in Jesus was nice while it lasted. In him they had experienced their true home—the place where they belonged, the place they were created for. But all good things must come to an end. You can't fight city hall. The good die young. The more things change, the more they stay the same. "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21a). Only a fool would choose faith with its hope over fate and its realism.

What will the future bring? The risen Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene in the garden outside the tomb. He appeared to the disciples who sought safety behind locked doors. He opened the Scriptures about himself for the two forlorn disciples as they walked the road to Emmaus. He ate broiled fish with the disciples. He gave them advice about where to cast their nets. He told Peter to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. He commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations.

Jesus' way, truth, and life did not die when he died. He lives. So does his way, his truth, and his life. God gave Jesus a future. With Jesus' resurrection those who believe in him are given a future, too. That future is eternal life, because it is life with God. As Jesus revealed, this life consists of giving our lives away, witnessing to the God who gave life to Jesus, who then gave his life away. When we deny ourselves and take up our cross, Jesus promises to lead us to our true home. We are given hope because we are given a future. Jesus sealed this new covenant with his shed blood.

What will the future bring? Early Christians anticipated their Lord's imminent return. They remembered his promise not to let their hearts be troubled and they believed that Jesus had gone to prepare an eternal
dwell and that he would return to take them there with him (John 14:1-3). Thus, we proclaim at the Lord's table, “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” But when?

When the Christians at Thessalonica asked this question, the apostle Paul replied that the day will come “like a thief in the night,” like a pregnant woman’s labor pains—and no one will escape it (1 Thess. 5:1-3).

The Petrine epistle-writer replies to his community’s concern by offering both a perspective on time and a justification for the Lord’s delayed parousia: “[w]ith the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” The Lord keeps his promises, but he is patient, “not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:8-9).

What will the future bring? It is not a question we Americans are prone to ask. Some of us asked it following the events of September 11, but church attendance quickly returned to pre-September 11 levels. Unlike many in our global village, we are satisfied enough with our lives to go to great lengths to defend and preserve them as they are.

There are those, however, who eagerly await the end of their “world,” so it can be replaced. Their current one is killing them. They are keenly aware of what it is to live in exile, to suffer as fate’s victims, to feel God-forsaken, to be nobody with no future, to hear as good news the reversal of the present social configuration in which they are among the last, to pray for Jesus’ return to judge all who hate what God loves and love what God hates. These don’t need to seek a hermeneutic that will make the Advent Gospel texts meaningful. It is their existential reality.

But few of us who read Quarterly Review and few of those to whom we preach are among these people. We prefer December’s cultural nostalgia to Advent’s harsh wake-up call to a future radically different from our present.

Advent’s Gospel lessons are not easy. They are obtuse. What little we do understand of them tastes like bitter medicine. They are speaking the foreign language of cosmic havoc, of an ascetic preacher urging repentance, of baptism by the Holy Spirit, of social revolution, of reproductive impossibility. It is enough to make a preacher forsake the lectionary for more palatable sentiments. This one has.

If the Gospel lessons are going to engage both the preacher and those in the pew, the preacher must find a way of tapping into the human yearning
for a future that is different from the present. Is there any awareness that where we are is not our true home—that we were meant for more than this? Can the preacher articulate the barely perceptible stirring of discontent with life's shallowness and self-centeredness so that permission is given to acknowledge it? Can we name the promises—the covenants—by which we live and the gods from which they come? Are they proving to be trustworthy, or can we point to signs of the Deceiver's deception? What is lost if we dismiss Jesus' first coming as legend and find his second coming irrelevant?

The challenge of the Advent Gospel lessons is to break up the clay soil of our current worlds of meaning, so that the seeds of these texts can take root and grow. Should it happen, we veteran preachers of Decembers past probably would not believe it. But then we have trouble believing the virgin birth, too.

December 1, 2002—First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37; Isa. 64:1-9; Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Cor. 1:3-9

The Gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Advent consists of what may have been a popular apocalyptic composition that the Gospel writer inserts into his narrative. With it, Christians keep time by beginning with the end. Is the end to be understood as a literal, cosmic event or as the end of every humanly constructed world—the prerequisite for the gathering of the elect under the governance of the Son of Man?

In between the already and the not-yet is the pregnant present. We live in it, aware that, no matter how good our present world may be, it is still destined for the Refiner's fire. It will not escape purification. We will not escape purification. To forget or to deny this is to live as though we are sleepwalking. It is to live on autopilot, blown and tossed about by every wind. It is to be inspired by spirits that oppose the Holy Spirit.

In every present moment, the world as we know it and by which we have allowed ourselves to be defined is susceptible to destruction. The Son will come and see to it. We can look forward to it or we can stick our heads in the sand of self-delusion.

God the covenant-maker can be trusted to give us a new world to replace the one that the Son judges into oblivion. The prophets were given a vision of that new world with its justice and shalom. It was against that backdrop that they placed a brutally honest depiction of the current order. The discrepancy was evident. For those with eyes to see, it was hard to
deny the crack in the foundation of what had been taken for granted and assumed eternal. They could see that their deformed world was destined to come apart and to be replaced by a transformed one.

When will it happen? Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (Mark 13:30). Can it be that "this generation" includes every generation? After all, every generation is in need of Jesus' death, resurrection, and baptism by the Holy Spirit. Every generation's world, inherited and reinforced, is destined to die on its own dark Friday to be resurrected with Jesus to Easter's abundant and eternal life.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away," Jesus assures us. And, what is more, he says, only God knows the day and hour of the end. So, live, anticipating that sooner or later it will occur. Hold loosely to the present world. Open your hands to receive the one that the Son is bringing. Hold tightly to the hope of that promise.

December 8, 2002—Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1-8; Isa. 40:1-11; Ps. 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Pet. 3:8-15a

For Mark, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" must be pro-essional (pro—"before," fateri—"acknowledgement"), the first acknowledgment upon which all other knowledge will be based. That foundational acknowledgment is this: In Jesus Christ God's salvific activity has begun. In him, the prophets' eschatological hope is fulfilled.

Take Malachi, who speaks of a messenger of the covenant who is coming, one who is "like a refiner's fire" (3:1-2). He identifies the messenger: He is the prophet Elijah (4:5). In time, John and Jesus both would be accused of being Elijah. For Joel, the One for whom John is preparing the way will baptize with the Holy Spirit, in contrast to John's baptism with water. God, says Joel, will pour out God's spirit on all flesh, causing young people to prophesy and see visions and old men to dream dreams; even male and female slaves will receive the divine spirit "in those days" (2:28-29).

Mark can be no neutral biographer. What he is about is to pro-claim (cry out before, ahead of), as did the Baptist, that the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the power of God, has come. To receive him, to be included in God's salvific activity, requires repentance—a turning from all that we must be saved from toward God. Mark professes: When we turn
away from all that is hostile to God and toward God, we will recognize and acknowledge that God is the One whose story we are about to tell. It is the story of the One who is not merely the messenger of God’s covenant but is God’s covenant actualized in what he says and does. Believe in what he says and does and you will be empowered to live the life he lived.

When this happens, God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as in heaven. And that is good news—at least for those who acknowledge that they are unworthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

December 15, 2002—Third Sunday of Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isa. 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126; 1 Thess. 5:16-24

It is as though we can’t get to God’s birth among us without first spending time—much time—with John. This Sunday we get the Johannine version of John the Baptizer.

In his commentary on John,1 Raymond Brown observes that unlike the Baptizer of the Synoptics (which focus on Jesus’ message and baptism of repentance), the Johannine John is the first witness to the Word and its light as it is put on trial by those who sit and who walk in darkness (cf. Isa. 42:6; 9:2). These people, the Gospel writer adds, actually prefer the darkness (John 3:19-20).

In John’s Prologue a setting is provided for the rest of the Jesus narrative. In God’s logos made flesh, a way out of the darkness that keeps humankind lost and perishing is given. It is given because God loved the world so much (John 3:16).

God chose Israel to be a light to the nations, incarnating the divine covenant through his people. In Jesus, God “enfleshed” the covenant through an act of self-revelation. Just as Israel’s purpose was to open the eyes that are blind and bring out prisoners from the dark dungeons, so will the Word that is made flesh and lives among us full of grace and truth (1:14).

John the Baptizer is interrogated by those sent by the Pharisees to check him out. (Brown wonders if the Johannine writer is here addressing members of his community who are claiming that the Baptizer was the light?) The cause for the Pharisees’ concern is that, as they see things, John is performing an official initiation rite without the proper authority to do so. Just who is he? He confesses he is not the Messiah or Elijah or “the prophet” (1:21). Who he understands himself to be originates with his role.

He is a herald and a forerunner and a testifier to the light.

How does one testify to the light? The Gospel writer mixes auditory and visual metaphors. When God's Word is made flesh it illumines the dark dungeon prisons. The Baptist himself lives in the light by testifying to who he is not (John 1:19-27) and to who Jesus is (1:29-36). John's disciples believe his testimony to be true and they follow Jesus (1:37). Then John steps down from the witness stand, because he was not the light but came to testify to the light.

The Pharisees—representing all who think they see but who are, in truth, blind (cf. John 9:39-41)—are unable to figure out John, just as they will not be able to figure out the One whom John heralds. The price of enlightenment will be too great. "Among you stands one whom you do not know" (1:26). John's initiation rite was not official—the officials were right about this. His initiation rite was to testify to God's true light, which enlightens everyone (1:9), at least everyone who does not prefer the darkness.

Is finding oneself in the dark dungeon prison into which God's incarnate light shines similar to closing one's eyes and falling asleep, as in last week's Gospel lesson?

December 22, 2002—Fourth Sunday of Advent


The lectionary offers Luke 1:47-55 instead of a psalm for this Sunday. This means the congregation gets both Mary's call and her magnificent song in response to God's calling of her, a lowly servant.

As was stated earlier, in between the already and the not-yet is the pregnant present. God has already taken the initiative to redeem creation. God has promised that what has begun will be completed. Living between what God has done and what God will do makes every present moment pregnant. What God has conceived is waiting to be born.

Mary mirrors for us our own situation. As Luke 1:26-38 makes clear, she doesn't seem to be awake and alert to God's possibilities and is thus perplexed and frightened by Gabriel's exuberant greeting. She is certainly not expecting the world as she has known it to be destroyed by God's future.

Gabriel awakens Mary. He tells her God is going to make her a business partner. Mary's fear is understandable. God only knows what you're getting yourself into or, more accurately, what God is getting you into when you team up with "the Mighty One" (Luke 1:49). But become a partner in
God's business of redeeming the world and nothing will be impossible.

"In the beginning ... the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:1-2). From God's Spirit and Word came the original creation. Now the Spirit and Word of God conceive a child in Mary in order to bring about a new, redeemed creation.

Mary heard the promise that her child "will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High ..." (Luke 1:32). His kingdom will be eternal. The more Gabriel talked the more Mary's fear and incredulity faded. She is free to receive what she cannot comprehend. She is free to be theotokos, the bearer of God. She answers, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Isn't that what it means to be awake and alert? We anticipate what God is going to do, because we remember what God has done and promised to do. It is not without trepidation that we wonder what role God will call us to play. When the call comes, will we surrender to it as did Mary?

Preaching the Light

The Gospel lessons for Advent invite the preacher to wrestle with "otherworldly" themes. Yet, as we saw, the truths affirmed in these themes aim to shine the divine light in this world—including the many dark places of our world today. Like the Baptizer of old, the preacher today must give testimony to the light so that those in the pew can see by hearing.

We should understand that seeing God's light—and preaching it—is risky business in our world today. It calls us to a vision of the world and a form of discipleship that are deeply countercultural. To wit, when we become captivated with a vision of the world to come, we will anticipate rather than fear the loss of the current one. Rather than face the future with trepidation, we will live with a sense of promise, for we trust the God who is both covenant-maker and covenant-keeper.

May we be bold and fearless in our witness, knowing that the light that came into the world in the first century indeed enlightens everyone (John 1:9), even in our "enlightened" twenty-first-century world.

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Endnotes
2. Ibid., 28.

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Worship has become a hotbed of controversy over the past five years. Some even talk about it as the "worship wars." It is an exciting and very challenging time to be involved in thinking about, designing, and implementing worship in this new century. There are so many issues that have risen to the forefront. With the decline in membership in many mainline Protestant denominations, worship has become the central focus for keeping current members and evangelizing new converts.

In some congregations, generational cultures (GI generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, etc.) are being studied to better match the design, content, and rhythms of worship to a specific target audience. In other congregations, technology is being used to integrate worship with our technological society. Our multiethnic society is also impacting the church and an increasing number of congregations are trying to figure out what it means to design worship in a multiethnic context. Music styles, rhythms, and lyrics are a crucial component of this conversation. What music is appropriate for the worship of God? What is the purpose of worship? What theology or theologies of worship are held by different congregations?

In what follows, I deal with six areas that are crucial to the study of worship today and discuss the relevant recent resources.

Traditional Worship

While traditional worship has been much maligned in the past five years, it is also a deep source of strength and faith for many in the United States. Some congregations that have experimented with contemporary worship styles are going back to their liturgical roots and reintroducing more traditional practices. After Vatican II, the liturgical reform movement in both the Protestant and Catholic churches came to a consensus over many issues relating to early Christian worship practices. It was an exciting time, with much rich research and study being done on newly discovered docu-
ments from the early church. A renewed interest in the sacraments and the liturgical year is still present in many congregations as a result of this movement. Lectionary aids, as well as books on the sacraments and the theology of worship, have emerged.

James White's *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Abingdon, 1999) is a wonderful overview of the role of sacraments, both historically and in the contemporary church. Marva Dawn, in *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Eerdmans, 1995), urges congregations to be faithful to the gospel and resist changes in worship that are market tools aimed at acquiescing to particular generational cultures.

**Contemporary Worship**

When I was young, *contemporary worship* meant the use of guitars in worship. Today, the term is used to describe a style of worship that tends to be geared to the Baby Boomer generation (born from 1945-1964). While it is often used as a tool for evangelism of the currently unchurched, this style of worship has been appreciated by different generations. Today, there are also worship services geared to persons who belong to Generation X (born since 1965).

A good source for understanding the generations and the issues involved with moving from a traditional worship service to a contemporary worship service is Andy Langford's *Transitions in Worship: Moving from Traditional to Contemporary* (Abingdon, 1999). He lays out three patterns of contemporary worship: liturgical worship, praise and worship, and seeker services. Langford then discusses the origins of contemporary worship, as well as the various generations and how to apply these findings in developing one of these three forms of contemporary worship. The last chapter deals with "blended worship" (which I will discuss in the next section).

*Contemporary Worship for the 21st Century: Worship or Evangelism?* (Discipleship Resources, 1994), by Daniel T. Benedict, Jr., and Craig Kennet Miller, is still a good resource for those who are new to the topic. They deal with various models of contemporary worship and the spectrum of seekers (both churched and unchurched); church believers, churched seekers, unconnected believers, seekers on the journey, latent seekers, churched dropouts, and unbelievers. Designing worship for those who are seekers and those who are faithful believers involves different categories of catech-
esis. **Precatechesis** is aimed at seekers, presenting to them the gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of God. **Catechesis** is designed to take believers into a deeper understanding of and response to discipleship in the world. The purpose for the design and content of worship is different for each group. Benedict and Miller discuss ways to deal with these cross-purposes: the need for evangelism, and the need for believers to go deeper in their faith through the worship of God.

**Blended Worship and “Third Way” Worship**

For those who are not fully in either the traditional worship camp or the contemporary worship camp, Robert Webber proposes a combined approach in *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Hendrickson, 1996). Webber describes the current conversation about different styles of worship, the changing worldview, and our biblical and historical traditions. He then discusses several areas of what he calls “convergence worship.” He honors the Christian Year, the sacraments, and the use of arts in worship, but also believes that worship renewal is crucial—that new elements can bring transformative power to Sunday worship. Webber believes that worship should empower evangelism, as well as education, spirituality, and social justice. Martin Thielen, in *Ancient-Modern Worship: A Practical Guide to Blending Worship Styles* (Abingdon, 2000), continues the blended worship conversation. He discusses its benefits, various patterns, the process of liturgical design, and the content for the various elements of the liturgy.

In *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2001), Thomas Long makes his own contribution to the blended worship conversation by refusing to place himself in either of the two “camps”—traditional or contemporary. However, he also believes that blended worship forms imply a “mix-and-match approach—a dash of contemporary thrown in with a measure of traditional.” He prefers what he calls a “third way.” Third Way congregations have certain characteristics in common concerning their worship: they make room for the experience of mystery; show hospitality to strangers; have recovered and made visible the sense of drama inherent in Christian worship; emphasize congregational music that is excellent and eclectic; pay attention to the environment of worship; forge a strong connection between worship and mission; maintain a relatively stable order of service; move to a joyous festival experience toward the end of worship; and have strong, charismatic pastors as worship leaders.
Some people can't wait to incorporate technology into worship and others avoid it like the plague. Technology for technology's sake may not be a good goal, but technology in service to the gospel may be an important move as we address those who have been raised in a "wired world."

Tex Sample makes a strong argument for paying attention to the needs of a technological culture in *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Abingdon, 1998). He discusses sound and image, beat, spectacle, soul music, and dance. I highly respect the work he does as a sociologist of religion in analyzing the culture and the issues that analysis raises for worship in today's church. While I disagree with the way he applies his research to the design of a worship service, the issues he raises call for our attention and consideration.

For those who have studied the issues, have analyzed their congregation and constituency, and have already decided to move ahead with the use of multimedia in worship, Len Wilson's *Wired Church: Making Media Ministry* (Abingdon, 1999) is an excellent resource. It is accompanied by a CD-ROM that enables one to see as well as read what the author is talking about. The book is divided into four sections: developing a mission for media; designing eye-popping media presentations; building a championship team; and buying the tools. It is a helpful, hands-on, step-by-step guide to using media in worship.

For many multiethnic congregations in cities, suburbs, and small towns, assimilation has been the basic approach to worship. The newcomers (of whatever ethnicity) are expected to adopt the worship style and content of the congregation they have chosen to visit or even join. Some congregations, however, are trying to ascertain what the worship styles and expectations are of the newcomers, what music touches their hearts, what language(s) have formed their being and, therefore, their interpretation of the biblical texts. A reciprocal form of assimilation is the goal: newcomers learn to appreciate the worship of the existing congregation, but the congregation also learns to appreciate the worship style, music, and prayer forms of the newcomers.

My book *Worship across Cultures* (Abingdon, 1998) is a descriptive...
analysis of the homogeneous worship practices of twenty-one cultures in The United Methodist Church. It is designed for pastors who are serving multiethnic congregations. For the pastor who has a Filipino member in the congregation who is getting married, the Filipino chapter has a section on weddings that will hopefully give this pastor some questions to ask of the couple about traditional practices they may expect in their wedding service. My book Culturally Conscious Worship (Abingdon, 2000) uses the biblical story of Pentecost as a vision for multicultural ministry. I discuss various models of multiethnic ministries, the importance of creating a shared story across cultures, the issue of music, and the problems of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.

Brian Blount and Nora Tubbs Tisdale edited a volume entitled Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship (Westminster/John Knox, 2001). Each chapter is written by faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary; therefore, the book brings diverse perspectives from various disciplines to bear on this topic. The book is divided into three sections: biblical foundations, theological foundations, and contemporary practices of multicultural worship. The biblical scholars point out the multicultural issues in the Hebrew Bible, in Jesus’ ministry, and in the Pauline texts. The theologians deal with issues of power, contextual theology, and theology that emerges from communities that live between two cultures. Definitions of culture, youth culture, music wars, and theologies of worship are helpful conversations in the section “Multicultural Worship Today.”

Music
Music has become a divisive element in some congregations. Traditional hymns are still being sung; but the latter half of the past century saw a plethora of new hymns being written. Many lyricists wrote lyrics to traditional hymn tunes while other composers wrote new tunes. Contemporary Christian music greatly impacted a particular generation, and “praise music” emerged in what has come to be called “contemporary worship contexts.” Composers from Christian communities all over the globe have written music and lyrics from their indigenous contexts; and some of this music has made its way into North American congregations. And today, rock, jazz, pop, and country may all be found in worshipping congregations. In some cases, the lyrics are used unchanged, while in others the lyrics are adapted to fit a Christian context.
Brian Wren’s book *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Westminster/John Knox, 2000) is an excellent resource. He begins with creative insights into the kind of music used in worship, beginning with today and going back to 1200 B.C.E. in Israel. Wren then identifies the importance of music as congregational song and argues that congregational song and instrumental music "should aim to be one or more of the following: formative, transformative, cognitive, educational, inspirational." The genres of congregational song are identified and discussed as to their purpose: hymns, choruses, rounds, refrains, chants, ritual songs, and spirit singing. Wren discusses contemporary music and issues of beat and volume, disposability, and durability, engaging the mind as well as the emotions. For those interested in the more technical aspects of writing lyrics, the poetics of lyrics, and how and why lyrics are changed over the years, Wren also spends time analyzing some traditional and contemporary lyrics. Another interesting resource is Paul Westermeyer’s *Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice* (The Liturgical Press, 1998). In the past fifty years, many hymns have been written that deal with justice issues. Westermeyer discusses this phenomenon but also makes a strong case for the role of justice in hymn lyrics throughout the centuries.

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**Endnotes**

The contributors to this volume of brief essays share the assumption that there is a "crisis in the church." This crisis, the authors insist, is one of faith, caused by the separation of the church from its theological tradition. And this separation has led both to the loss of authority in the pastoral office and to the trivialization of the church's mission.

The thirty-two brief essays in *Reading the Bible in Faith* were written by members of the pastor-theologian program of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey. The authors, pastors of congregations from across the United States, represent an array of denominational and theological perspectives. Despite this diversity, however, a common vision emerges: pastors can speak an often-ignored word about the purpose of the church in our time and their voices can guide us to the resources necessary for renewal.

The essays are organized in six categories. The first group responds to the issue of the authority of Scripture in congregations, given the post-modern situation and the ambiguous legacy of historical criticism for the reading of Scripture in the church. The second and third categories attend to the Passion Narrative (Matthew 26-27) and the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). The final three sets of essays focus on doctrine, worship, and preaching in the life of the church. Each essay in some way converses with the core Scripture passages under consideration. Thus, pastors reflect on how the Atonement has been understood in the history of the church, with implications for the present. They also report on ways in which the Passion is narrated in a congregation's life during the season of Lent, and they struggle with how the Cross is proclaimed with faithfulness and integrity.

Throughout these essays, the authors are aware of the ways in which the recovery of the pastoral office is both difficult and essential. Further, there is a sense that the writers are swimming against the stream. Our North American culture, and our denominations that have been so shaped by it, move more readily to the consultant who reads the past and predicts the
future. These essays say an unmistakable “no” to this trend. Here and there, an essay proposes an alternative that has been in our tradition and awaits recovery.

There is a crisis in the church. It can be seen in our politicized disagreements, our lack of compassion for the lost, our neglect of the poor, our apathy toward orthodoxy, and our tendency to seek alignment with the cultural trend of the moment. The resulting confusion has left us in a state of fragmentation, and it is the pastor’s challenge to make sense of the fragments. The voices from the pastorate in this book offer a modest way forward: we are invited to read the Scriptures together; reflect on the portions of the story that seem most at odds with our human inclinations; and guide the people in the practices that will shape them in the way of Jesus, which is the way of the cross. This helpful book is a model for renewal that will guide us into a future that is also faithful to the past.


Kathryn Tanner’s latest book is a compact outline of a broadly conceived and original systematic theology. In 124 pages, one is presented with a view of divinity and creation that takes up the traditional categories of systematic theology and interprets these categories based on an incarnational view of divine gifting and transcendence.

Two principles organize the thrust of her argument: “non-competitive relationships between God and creatures” and a “radically reinterpreted notion of divine transcendence” (2). Noncompetitive relations between creatures and God refers specifically to a kind of relationship where “the creature does not decrease so that God may increase” (2). This is the case for Tanner because, first, God is the “feciund provider of all that the creature is in itself; the creature in its giftedness, in its goodness, does not compete with God’s gift-fullness and goodness because God is the giver of all that the creature is for good” (3). Second, God is transcendent in the sense that God is not also a “kind of thing” as is the creature. God’s gift-giving to humanity comes at the hand of God’s radical transcendence. Tanner finds that this is most fully expressed in the life and person of Jesus.
Christ as assumed by the Word—and thereby also in the Trinity. Her theology possesses a deeply incarnational flavor that attempts, by virtue of God's complete difference in transcendence, not to value the divinity of Christ over the humanity of Jesus, or the reverse.

The reader can expect to encounter familiar themes that are subtly directed into a highly nuanced approach to Christian thought. For example, in the final chapter, Tanner takes up eschatology by divorcing it from its temporal moorings, locating Christian hope instead in the new relationship with a gifting, noncompetitive God. While Tanner does not explain this or other arguments fully (due in large part to the compact nature of the work itself), readers will find this book and its expansive footnotes to be a treasure trove of Christian thought—drawing on significant historical and contemporary sources.

The depth of thought that gives rise to this book is evident, but it leaves the reader wishing for more. So, it is good news when Tanner indicates that a more complete volume of her theology is forthcoming, one that will hopefully address the issues she raises with more depth and breadth. As a tool for pastoral ministry, Tanner's book brings fresh insight into the theological foundations of ministry and offers encouragement to faithful Christians in pursuing a life "according to the mode of Jesus' own life" (67). How one lives one's life is at the very heart of this theology that places a strong emphasis on God as the "source and securer of good gifts" (67). Readers will find Tanner's book theologically engaging and practically relevant and the book will hopefully leave them anxious for this theology's more complete elucidation.

Reviewed by Matthew W. Charlton. Charlton is a graduate student at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and a probationary member of the Tennessee Annual Conference.
Issue Theme:
The Eucharist in a United Methodist Perspective
‘Taste and See’: Sacramental Renewal Among United Methodists
Don E. Saliers
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