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Learning for a Change

An important aspect of John Wesley's oft-quoted aim to unite "knowledge" and "vital piety" was his desire to situate theological knowledge at the intersection of scholarship and ministry. For him, in the final analysis, theological education stands in the service of the formation of passionately committed Christians who are at the same time intellectually and theologically competent and articulate in representing the mystery of the faith in an astonishingly diverse, complex, and increasingly pluralistic world. This is an extraordinarily difficult and delicate challenge. While they should not be "disjoined," knowledge and piety (faith) necessarily exist in a tensive relationship. Dissolving the tension results in either idolatrous acquiescence to the status quo or reckless and unaccountable theological iconoclasm. For Wesley, as for us, avoiding the Scylla of intellectual Idolatry and the Charybdis of theological iconoclasm calls for an educated and educating clergy and for a learned laity.

For a variety of reasons rooted deeply in our history—intertwined as it is with the history of Western culture—United Methodists have always struggled properly to locate the place of this tension and then to honor it in every aspect of our life together. More often than not, we have tended to relax this tensive relationship in favor of "vital piety" or "experience" or "practical ministry," thus uncoupling theological reflection from its basis in the life of faith and eviscerating the rationale for faith seeking understanding.

At least two deleterious effects follow from this severing of "knowledge" and "piety." (1) It leads to a lamentable confusion and uncertainty about the nature and place of theology in the context of ministry. (2) The expectation that United Methodist leaders, clergy and lay, will continue to hone their intellectual and theological skills beyond their formal training—as a discipline integral to their calling as leaders—simply is not valued as it should be. The essays in this volume concentrate on the second issue—the rationale, scope, and challenges of continuing education in ministry. Yet, the
first issue—the meaning and place of theological learning in the context of ministry—lurks just below the surface in all five articles and is taken up explicitly by Charles Wood in his essay. For him, a comprehensive vision of the role of learning in ministerial leadership must be grounded in nothing less than the church’s calling to Word, Sacrament, and Order.

Drawing on his rich experience in the work of continuing theological education, Bruce Roberts chronicles the historical development of continuing theological education and then asks the provocative question: “What are the alternatives for lay and clergy continuing theological education that will build new skills for transforming congregations, increase competence, and produce innovative explorers?” Drawing on recent research in “emotional intelligence,” Roberts argues for a new paradigm of continuing education involving forms of “self-directed learning” embodied in clergy peer group projects.

Lovett Weems situates his discussion of continuing education in the context of a recent survey of the United Methodist clergy probationary process, undertaken by the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. As the period designed to help nurture the disciplines that make for “effectiveness in ministry,” the probationary process is a critical component in the clergyperson’s calling to lifelong learning. The survey suggests a deep commitment to ongoing theological reflection on the part of probationers and an equally sustained interest in integrating theology in the practice of ministry.

In her article, Susan Willhauck surveys the history and present state of lay theological education in The United Methodist Church and, drawing on our Methodist commitment to the theological education of all Christians, argues passionately for what I would call the “theological reenfranchisement of the laity.” Obstacles remain, but theology, as a practice “intersecting faith and life,” can be practiced in the church and in the world by the laity “for excellent purposes.”

Thomas Hawkins explores the possibilities and pitfalls of continuing theological education in a digital age. Online learning opens up enormous opportunities and resources for continuing theological education. Yet cyberlearning also poses important theological questions that continuing theological educators will ignore at their peril.

_Hendrik R. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review._
Learn for the Twenty-first Century

How Can Continuing Theological Education Serve the Church?

D. BRUCE ROBERTS

Adult and Continuing Education—Where We’ve Been

Sometimes toward the middle of the twentieth century it began to be evident that earning a degree in preparation for ordination and ministry was not enough to sustain creative activity through a whole career. What brought about this awareness is probably a number of social factors.

One factor was the adult education movement itself. The American Association for Adult Education (AAAEE) was founded in 1926 and the first Handbook of Adult Education appeared in 1934. In 1951, the Department of Adult Education of the National Education Association and the AAAE merged into the Adult Education Association. By the mid-twentieth century, there was a strong adult education movement; and by 1970, with the publication of the fifth Handbook, it was estimated “that in 1974 we shall have for the first time more adults engaged in vocational and adult education than young people attending the formal system at all levels.” By then, millions of adults were engaged in both formal and informal learning activities.

Another factor in the development of continuing education was the pace of social change. Writing in 1970, Malcolm Knowles estimated that the pace of key cultural changes in the past required several generations, whereas in the twentieth century several cultural revolutions have already occurred, and the pace is accelerating. Under this new condition, knowledge gained by the time a person is twenty-one is largely obsolete by the time he or she is forty years old.
This 1970 projection of a nineteen-year turnover in knowledge is dangerously quaint in our time! Now it is not unusual to hear that knowledge and computers are out of date in four to five years or less! The philosopher Alfred N. Whitehead anticipated this situation in 1926 when he wrote, "The fixed person for the fixed duties, who in older societies was such a godsend, in the future will be a public danger." Continuing education has become a necessity rather than a luxury for naturally curious personalities.

Where has the church been in this educational revolution? Kenneth Stokes quotes a 1962 article by Malcolm Knowles suggesting that religious institutions were not keeping up with other institutions in the education of adults. Although the churches may have been slower in picking up on the need for adult and continuing education, Connolly Gamble published a study titled "Continuing Theological Education of the American Minister" in 1960 that found "that 95 seminaries, 35 colleges and universities, 15 conference centers, and 10 pastoral institutes offered some sort of continuing education programs for clergy." Gamble's data would have been gathered in the late 1950s; so we know that continuing education for ministry was being offered by significant numbers of ecclesiastical organizations at least by the decade of the 1950s.

The Department of the Ministry of the National Council of Churches was concerned enough about continuing theological education to call together a consultation on the subject in 1964. A committee on continuing education was formed that year that eventually morphed into the Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry (SACEM) by 1967.

By the early 1960s, therefore, there was a growing consensus in churches that basic seminary education was not enough for a lifetime of service. Mark Rouch reports that in "the 1960s and 1970s, the major denominations all had at least one full-time staff person in continuing education, and, in a few cases, more than one." Rouch was one of the first, if not the first, Director of Continuing Education in the pre-merger Methodist Church Board of Ordained Ministry.

In a groundbreaking book, *Competent Ministry*, Rouch defines lifelong learning and continuing education for ministry and offers a guide to designing a "learning program which begins when basic formal education ends and continues throughout a career and beyond." He goes on to suggest that the "primary aim of continuing education is to produce growing competence."
Rouch's primary aim for continuing education for ministry raises a provocative question: after more than fifty years of working at continuing theological education, where are we in improving the competence and effectiveness of clergy and lay ministry in congregations?

At my first SACEM meeting in 1981 (and at every meeting since), I heard directors of continuing theological education ask whether there is any evidence that what is done in continuing education has any positive impact on leadership in congregations and other church organizations. I often have the suspicion that what we do is more a kind of entertainment than transformative education. I have frequently joked in my institution, only somewhat facetiously, that the development or advancement department should contribute heavily to the continuing education budget, since the brochures and events are a constant advertisement for the seminary. Most of the research on continuing education for ministry has been concerned with who does and who does not do it and for what reasons. I know of virtually no evidence suggesting that traditional approaches to continuing education have much if any effect on the actual practice of ministry and certainly little evidence that it improves competence.

In a recent publication, Robert E. Reber, former Dean at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, suggests that the value placed on continuing education has been declining in recent years. Part of the evidence for the decline is the decrease in staffing at denominational levels.

Consider that fifteen years ago most mainline denominations had a full-time staff person responsible for continuing education for ministry at the national level. Now only one . . . has a full-time person. In addition, directors of continuing education continue to be the last hired and the first to go at many seminaries.10

What has happened since the 1960s when, as Mark Rouch noted, most of the major denominations had full-time national directors of continuing education? Is the decrease in staffing for continuing education related to the lack of information about effectiveness? If we could show without a doubt that continuing education efforts were making a difference in church leadership and that participants were growing in competence, would continuing education still be marginalized in denominations and seminaries?
Where Should We Go Now?

Certainly there is still a pressing need for continuing theological education! "Mainline," or "oldline," Protestant churches are struggling with declining memberships. Many observers agree with Loren Mead, congregational consultant and founder and past President of the Alban Institute,

that the storm buffeting the churches is very serious indeed. Much more serious than we have admitted to ourselves, and much more serious than our leaders have yet comprehended. The problems are not minor, calling for adjustments or corrections. They are problems that go to the roots of our institutions themselves. What I am describing here is not something we fix. It is a state of existence in which we must learn to live even as we seek new directions for faithful response. The storm is so serious... that it marks the end of "business as usual" for the churches and marks a need for us to begin again building the church from the ground up.11

Mead suggests that church leaders at all levels need to face the reality of the storm and mobilize all available resources toward improving leadership. He wants to see "the structures that surround congregations—the judicatory, the national structures, the seminaries, and educational institutions—building skills in new ways, ready to help transform congregations from what they are to what they must be as centers of apostolic ministry."12

Why is this not happening? What is hindering the development of new kinds of leadership? Edwin Friedman suggested that what is needed in situations of uncertainty and high anxiety is exploration:

Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur, that spirit of adventure which optimizes serendipity and which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first. This is equally true regarding families, institutions, whole nations, or entire civilizations.13

We need leaders who are willing to risk exploring new social constructions of reality, new ministries, and new ways of creating energy in congregations. Mead and Friedman raise a primary question for continuing theological educators: what are the alternatives for lay and clergy continuing
theological education that will build new skills for transforming congregations, increase competence, and produce innovative explorers?

The first task will be to create an atmosphere for learning and exploration with a "no-failure" norm. A no-failure norm will mean that we are more interested in learning from our projects than in whether they succeed or fail. This means that whatever we do must be done with an eye toward learning more about the kinds of education that encourage innovation, exploration, and continued learning in leadership.

Let me suggest that a first step in the exploration and learning by continuing educators will be to sponsor adventurous learning in participants. That will mean planning intentional conversations with key constituencies aimed at discovering the practice-related issues and problems church leaders are facing. Working in conversation with constituencies creates energy and motivation to explore and learn further.

In an article on continuing professional education, Ronald M. Cervero proposes that the goal of professional practice in any field is "wise action" and that, although formal knowledge gained in traditional academic settings is important, "knowledge acquired from practice is necessary to achieve [the goal of wise action]." Based upon the importance of knowledge gained from practice, Cervero goes on to propose that

a model of learning from practice should become the centerpiece of systems of continuing education for the professions. . . . It is important . . . to involve groups of practitioners and a context of practice, [because] learning advances through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge within a community of practitioners and a context of practice.

There are several characteristics inherent in adult education theory that offer support for Cervero's suggestions. Elsewhere, I have summarized common characteristics of several approaches to adult education.

1) Persons are most motivated and energized to learn when they are working at finding answers to internal and practice-related questions and at discovering more adequate ways of thinking and working.
2) Adult learners need a climate of openness, a supportive and challenging team for learning, and a facilitator to help hold the process.
3) Great energy is released for learning when adults are involved in deter-
mining what they want to learn, in planning learning activities, and in evaluation as a process of deciding what to learn next.16

An example of research coherent with these characteristics is reported by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee in their recent book Primal Leadership, written for the purpose of articulating and advancing a new concept of leadership. The authors suggest that the "fundamental task of leaders . . . is to prime good feeling in those they lead," because "the primal job of leadership is emotional."17

This is a very provocative study for continuing theological education (and, indeed, for all of theological education generally), because it challenges the paradigm of leadership development inherent in most continuing education programs and curricula. To discuss the Goldman group's educational proposals, some summary of their research is necessary.

The glue that holds people together in a team, and that commits people to an organization, is the emotional resonance they feel with and for each other.

The key . . . to making primal leadership work to everyone's advantage lies in the leadership competencies of emotional intelligence . . .

These competencies can be learned and are:

2) Social competence: a. Social Awareness, and b. Relationship Management.18

To discover the personal capabilities that were key to outstanding leadership, the authors analyzed nearly five-hundred competence models in government, business, and not-for-profit organizations (including a religious institution).19 They were interested in the role that three categories of capabilities played in good leadership: technical skills, cognitive abilities, and emotional intelligence.

What they discovered is stunning. "Our rule of thumb holds that EI (emotional intelligence) contributes 80 to 90 percent of the competencies that distinguish outstanding from average leaders—and sometimes more."20 My guess is that most professional continuing education programs and theological schools assume just the reverse of this.
The good news in this well-documented study is that the competencies that distinguish outstanding leaders can be learned. However, the learning must happen in ways that are different from the ways traditional schools usually employ. According to the study, emotional intelligence, involves circuitry that runs between the brain's executive centers in the prefrontal lobes and the brain's limbic system, which governs feeling, impulses, and drives. Skills based in the limbic areas, research shows, are best learned through motivation, extended practice, and feedback.²¹

Although the neocortex—that part of our brains that make us uniquely human—is a quick learner and capable of learning from reading, computer programs, hearing lectures, etc., the limbic brain is a much slower learner—particularly when the challenge is to relearn deeply ingrained habits. This difference matters immensely when trying to improve leadership skills, habits learned early in life. . . . Reeducating the emotional brain for leadership learning, therefore, requires a different model from what works for the thinking brain: It needs lots of practice and repetition.²²

The educational research conducted by Goleman and colleagues concludes that the competencies most important for effective leadership are best learned through what they term "self-directed learning."²³ What they mean by self-directed or self-motivated learning looks a lot like what United Methodists for many years called "Laboratory Training" and what Malcolm Knowles calls "Androgogy."²⁴

According to the Goleman research, self-directed learning involves five movements. The first is answering the question, Who do I want to be? The second involves an assessment of who and where I am now and comparing that to the answer to the first question. The third movement is establishing learning objectives that address the gap between where I am and where I want to be. The fourth movement is the action of practicing new behaviors to the point of mastery. The fifth movement must be simultaneous with the first four and involves developing a community of support and challenge where honest assessment feedback makes change possible.²⁵

Primal Leadership has thirty-seven pages of notes documenting claims, with many references to empirical research studies. The book also has
narrative accounts of personal change and transformation from the use of the five-movement, self-motivating learning process and follows with accounts of organizational change in the second half of the book. The book is a provocative challenge for continuing theological educators interested in preparing leaders for the church in general and for congregations in particular. A couple of questions come to mind.

First, are we prepared to envision and experiment with educational alternatives that grapple with the results of research suggesting that only 10 to 20 percent of good leadership involves technical skills (knowledge of Bible, theology, church history, etc.) and cognitive abilities (native thinking capacity), while 80 to 90 percent of effective leadership draws on learned emotional intelligence?

Second, if emotional intelligence is learned slowly through communities of trust involving opportunities for practice and feedback, what changes will we need to make in our programs to help pastors learn creative leadership?

Recent Experiments in Continuing Education

A number of clergy peer-group projects have formed in several states, some funded by the Lilly Endowment. Although slightly different at points, these projects all involve church leaders in the development of peer communities that design their own study plans over a period of two to three years. The experiments incorporate the basic five movements advocated by Goleman and colleagues and are consistent with the characteristics of energy- and excitement-producing adult education. Elsewhere, I have described one of these peer projects, the Methodist Educational Leave Society (MELS).

In 1985, The Dixon Foundation in Birmingham, Alabama, began experimenting with the creation of clergy peer groups aimed at improving preaching in the North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church. Edwin M. Dixon started the project after finding a peer group program for business leaders extremely helpful to him personally. Early in 1996, The FCP Faculty (Facilitator/Convener/Process Person) of The Methodist Educational Leave Society (MELS) asked Dean Robert E. Reber to design an evaluation process for MELS to determine whether the program had been effective over ten years and to develop recommendations for the future. Bob Reber subsequently invited me to help with the evaluation.

The usual MELS pattern was for peer groups to gather themselves together
(they were self-selecting) into groups of six to eight pastors. Peer groups were assigned a "facilitator" who would assist the group in deciding what they wanted to learn, in developing plans for the learning, creating and submitting a proposal to the MELS Board, executing the plans, making applications of learnings in individual ministry practice, and evaluating at every step. Most of the groups ranged from 3 to 6 years in duration and met between 10 and 15 days per year, so there was a planned and sustained search for appropriate resources, experimentation in practice, and accountability in a lively community of conversation. The role of the facilitator was an important aspect of the program; FCP's were responsible for holding the process, for conflict management, and for asking critical questions at every point.

From what we heard in the evaluation interviews and read in the surveys, there is little doubt that the peer group process improved preaching in general as well as helped to create new energy in pastoral leadership. One spouse said of her husband, "When he got involved (in MELS) it was like someone built a fire under him!" A participant summed up many other perspectives saying, "I believe that MELS has been the most transformative educational experience of my life. Through my MELS experience, I have been forced to reexamine the foundations of myself, my ministry, and my future." Some of the judicatory-level leaders were convinced that MELS had improved the preaching in the whole North Alabama Conference, and one person reported that lay committees were now making participation in MELS one of the criteria in reviewing possible pastoral appointments to their churches.

When we asked MELS participants what had been most effective for their learning, there were two primary responses. First we heard, "my favorite and best instructors were the other folks in my group. We taught each other by interaction, honesty, critique, and love. They were by far my best teachers, the true experts." Secondly, participants mentioned about six resource persons in preaching who were considered to be excellent teachers primarily because of their style of teaching: "collegial, interactive, challenging, enthusiastic, upbeat, and passionate."

The study of MELS clearly documents that a peer group approach creates energy and innovation in participants. Critical factors involved were self-selection of groups; trained leadership; development by participants of a three-year study plan with goals and objectives; built-in accountability; support from church and family; and recognition.
Based upon the MELS model, the Lilly Endowment funded an experiment in Indiana in 1999 with a second grant to expand and extend it in 2001. The purpose of the Indiana Clergy Peer Group Study Program (PGSP) is to provide leadership consultation and to furnish resources for local congregations through the formation of clergy peer groups that focus on leadership in ministry. Clergy develop learning plans for a three-year period that involve developing learning objectives, study, experimentation in their congregations, assessment of results, and creation of new objectives from the experience of learning in practice. Peer groups meet regularly for worship, planning, study, reporting on congregational experiments, and identifying new learnings and directions in ministry. Meetings involve pastors in theological reflection, communal planning processes, shared leadership, travel, and peer reflection.

The PGSP peer group model utilizes specially selected and trained Learning Consultant/Facilitators (LCF) who are responsible for helping peer groups identify learning needs, develop learning objectives, discover and utilize resources appropriate to identified learning objectives, carry out learning activities in an attitude of experimentation and anticipation of new learning, engage in theological reflection, and gather feedback for evaluation of results. The peer groups monitor each member's experiments in ministry so that there is both direct learning and learning by association with others.

In late November 2002, PGSP reached capacity, with fourteen peer groups, all with approved proposals, involving 105 pastors and over 100 congregations in Indiana. As of October 2003, twelve groups have approved proposals, two groups are working on proposal revisions, and two groups have completed the three-year study.

We have been working to learn what impact the project has had on the pastors and the congregations. Although it is still too early to draw any final conclusions, we do have idiosyncratic evidence that the peer groups are making a difference. For example, a participant in one of the earliest groups—a group that has struggled with several conflicts over the three years—recently responded to this question on our Every Meeting Feedback Form: "From what you have experienced, what are you going to tell others or use in the life of the congregation between now and the next meeting?"

The participant wrote:

That community is worth the effort to build! Eight individuals who, in many
ways are very different, can develop trust, affection, and a common purpose. We are a microcosm of life in the church as I believe Jesus intends it to be.

The first peer group completed its three-year project in June, and we have some of the final evaluations. All members reported that the experiences were transformative. As one member put it, "Most of the experiences we've had will be with me for the rest of my ministry, as well as my life. It has deepened my sense of commitment to doing everything we can to minister to those in need."

Six of the seven participants mentioned their trip to Mexico City as particularly moving. Here is what two persons said about it.

We had an opportunity to meet and talk to some of the women and children in "Cartonlandia" while in Mexico City. At the close of our time we gathered in a circle for prayer. It was as sacred a time as I have experienced. I was deeply moved by the incredible faith of these folks who had so little materially, but yet were incredibly rich spiritually. Despite the many ways we're different, there was a deep sense of oneness as the people of God. The vision of us all gathered there is forever etched in my mind.

It would be hard for anyone on that trip to not come back home transformed. I witnessed poverty like I had never seen before. Yet in the midst of that, I witnessed hope that transcends the circumstances. The positive effect for me is that I have a greater appreciation for the blessings I have, as well as how some of our country's practices affect other nations.

Five of the seven also mentioned a trip to Oregon to meet with a retreat leader and therapist on family systems leadership as particularly helpful. In response to a question about how participation made a difference in congregations, the participants had similar answers. Several mentioned that they were more confident and mature in their leadership. One stated that the peer group support made it possible to stay in the congregation through conflict that led to change. Another reflected on a changed leadership style toward partnership in ministry with the congregation. All reflected on the power of the support in the group and the necessity of finding that kind of help in the future.
Conclusion

The challenge before us is clear. Are we willing to move away from traditional continuing education "events," which often embody the lone-ranger, shotgun approach for which there is little evidence of effectiveness? Are we willing to be innovative and move toward programs that involve participants in identifying learning directions, planning learning activities, and sustaining work and evaluation over time?

The peer group experiments are only one possibility among other alternatives that embody a growing understanding of the kind of education which, evaluation has shown, produces energy, competence, and change in participants and congregations. Another pilot project that is underway at the Center for Applied Christian Leadership at Methodist Theological School in Ohio involves development of specially educated and trained coaches who meet with pastors over a period of eighteen months. The purpose is to assist leaders in identifying what they need to learn, to develop a learning plan, to learn and practice new behaviors, and to find honest feedback. Preliminary indications are that this will be an effective process for assisting leaders in developing leadership competencies that help build energized congregations.

We are learning how to do more effective continuing theological education through a variety of experiments and pilot projects. Most of these projects are consistent with education that produces energy, positive change, and increased competence. However, many of these experiments have special funding. What remains for us to do is to complete the evaluation of these projects and experiments, compile our learnings, and then determine how to fund and support competence-building continuing education for ministry in denominations, seminaries, and conference centers. I am betting that demonstrated effectiveness from careful evaluation research will unlock motivation and funding for further innovations.

D. Bruce Roberts is Director of the Indiana Clergy Peer Group Study Program (PGSP) and Professor of Congregational Education and Leadership at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana.
Endnotes

2. Ibid., xxviii.
7. See ibid., 20-21.
8. Ibid., 28.
12. Ibid., 119.
18. Ibid., 20, 6, 39, and 254ff.
19. Ibid., 249.
20. Ibid., 251.
21. Ibid., 102.
22. Ibid., 103.
23. Ibid., 109.
26. D. Bruce Roberts, "Motivated Learning and Practice: A Peer Group Model," in Reber and Roberts, *A Lifelong Call to Learn*, 116-18. The MELS program has been replaced by the Institute for Clergy Excellence (ICE), which is a new peer program funded jointly for five years by The Dixon Foundation, The North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church, and the Lilly Endowment. The Lilly Endowment has also funded over 25 peer group projects across the nation through their "Sustaining Pastoral Excellence" programs (see *Lilly Endowment Annual Report* [Indianapolis: The Lilly Endowment, Inc., 2002], 49-52, 79).
Historically, Methodist rationales for continuing education for ministers, as for ministerial education in general, have tended toward the practical. Knowledge is meant to inform practice, and the value of knowledge is in its positive effects upon practice. A thoroughgoing practice-oriented approach to this subject may not only be in line with some characteristic tendencies of Methodist thought but may also have real benefit. Informed by an adequate vision of what practices are and of what participation in a practice involves, such an approach might yield a very productive understanding of ongoing education for ministerial leadership.¹

But practice-oriented approaches are not always so informed. At their worst, such practical rationales become merely technocratic: to “do ministry” is to deploy a set of skills that can be learned more or less discretely (in intensive short-term training modules, say) and that can be refreshed or strengthened through further training. At their best, perhaps, practical rationales have historically embraced or at least verged upon a professional model for ministry. On such a model, the professional identity and professional competence of pastoral leaders and others in specialized ministry rest upon a body of specialized, role-specific knowledge, initially gained through an extensive educational process (e.g., a professional degree program) leading to initial certification. This knowledge base needs to be augmented constantly to take account of developments in the field and of changes in the context in which the profession is exercised. Here, the technocratic impulse is overcome, at least to some extent, by considerations of such things as professional identity and public responsibility and by an awareness of the limits of professional knowledge and competence.²

Despite a number of difficulties with it, especially in face of the changing character of ministerial leadership today, I am not prepared simply to reject a professional model for ordained ministry—or yet to embrace one wholeheartedly. I suspect that the work of church leadership is more than a profession in some respects and less than a profession in others; but, in any case, there is, I think, much to be gained by thinking through the ways in
In a Wesleyan understanding of human beings, knowledge, like love and joy, is one of the things we are born for. Wesley’s “presupposed theology,” as John Deschner called it—the doctrinal substance that Wesley absorbed and appropriated and that informed his preaching and practice—included the principle that the image of God in which we are created is a triune...
image, an *imago trinitatis*. We "correspond" to God in our God-given capacity to know God and God's creation, as well as in our capacities to love God and fellow-creature and to rejoice in what is thus known and loved. In our knowing, we respond to (or even, in a way, partake in) the intelligibility of God and of all that God has made; we resonate with the *Logos* that is one of the ways God is God and that informs all of creation. In our loving, we respond to—or, better, find ourselves caught up into—the love of God, the love that God is and "that moves the sun and the other stars." Our joy and thanksgiving are evoked by the sheer gift of all this, and are a response to its ultimate source in the reality of God. The relations among these three capacities—knowledge, love, and joy (or, with Charles Wesley, "wonder, love, and praise")—are relations of mutual indwelling and reciprocity that mirror in creaturely reality the *perichoresis* of the three Persons of the Trinity. Each requires and sustains the others. Their common exercise constitutes the freedom in which our lives find their fulfillment, their true end.

According to an early sermon of John Wesley's on the image of God, in the state of integrity human understanding was "just," "swift," "clear," and "great." Apparently, we (or, rather, Adam and Eve) had no trouble apprehending and honoring reality: seeing things as they are, thinking clearly, and reaching sound judgments. They were eager to grow in knowledge; they delighted in the truth. In Wesley's reconstruction of the Eden scenario, it was not an inordinate thirst for knowledge that led our first parents astray. There is no suggestion in his account that they (and we) would have been better off had they only downplayed their intelligence, switched off their brains, and asked no more questions. Their free choice of evil over good remains, for Wesley, a mystery; but there is the strong implication that if they had thought things through when the forbidden fruit was proffered, using the intelligence they had been given, they would not have sinned.

The Fall devastated our capacity for knowledge, along with our capacity for love and for joy. Think of the opposites of those adjectives with which Wesley described human understanding in the state of integrity: now, post-Fall, our knowing is unjust, unclear, slow, and small. Rather than welcoming and delighting in reality, we fear it. We hide from it. We deny or distort the truth, constructing and cherishing lies in its place. We bear false witness against our neighbor. We suppress inconvenient facts and subvert the processes of discovery that may bring us face to face with them. We
Discussion of the church is often helped if we keep in mind a distinction between two common references of the term church. On the one hand, church may be used to refer to the totality of those who are being saved, i.e., who, by the grace of God in Christ and in the Holy Spirit are being restored to right relationship with God and fellow-creature. The church in this sense create modes of inquiry that will (we hope) enable us to define and deal with reality on our terms, to make it serve our desires. Even if we should decide that we really want to see things as they are, our fears and our illusions generally get the better of us. We live, as Wesley says, in "ignorance and error," largely self-imposed.

God's remedy in Jesus Christ for this state of foolishness, lovelessness, and misery in which we find ourselves is a healing and restoration of those created capacities that have gone wrong, a healing that includes our renewal in knowledge. One aspect of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration is "opening the eyes of our understanding." A recovery of our intelligence proceeds along with the recovery of our capacities for true love and for true joy and is inextricably linked with these. It is the disclosure of the reality and love of God in Christ that enables the opening of "the eyes of our understanding" and that simultaneously evokes our love and our delight. Had he known her work, Wesley might have recognized a kinship in the writing of the thirteenth-century Beguine mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg, although she thought and wrote in a decidedly un-Wesleyan idiom:

I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me.
If you want me to leap with abandon,
You must intone the song.
Then I shall leap into love,
From love into knowledge,
From knowledge into enjoyment,
And from enjoyment beyond all human sensation . . . .

In any case, it is clear that Wesley resonated strongly with Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 13:6, binding the three together: "Love . . . rejoices in the truth." Exemplifying and bearing witness to this possibility of "love rejoicing in the truth" is the task of the church.

Discussion of the church is often helped if we keep in mind a distinction between two common references of the term church. On the one hand, church may be used to refer to the totality of those who are being saved, i.e., who, by the grace of God in Christ and in the Holy Spirit are being restored to right relationship with God and fellow-creature. The church in this sense
is the "community of salvation." On the other hand, church may be used to refer to the totality of those who know about this saving activity of God and who are bearing witness to it explicitly in word and action. The church in this sense is the "community of witness," or, if you prefer, the "sign-community." Ideally, these two communities coincide, and in the fullness of time perhaps they will; but in our experience and history, they are probably best portrayed as overlapping. The community of salvation may be presumed to include many who are not part of the explicit community of witness, though they may in fact bear witness in other ways to the God we know in Jesus Christ, to their neighbors' benefit. At the same time, the community of witness may include persons who have not (yet) accepted the grace of salvation, or who have ceased to accept it. Further ambiguities mark both communities. The community of salvation is the totality of those who are being restored to their purpose in creation, as well as those who (as the "communion of saints") have been so restored. And the community of witness bears more or less genuine and effective witness, the degree of genuineness and effectiveness depending on a great many factors. The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr's remark that "the line between church and world does not run between souls, but through each soul" could be applied with both these senses of church in mind.

At its best, the church, as it is found in a local congregation, denomination, or ecclesial tradition is "church" in both these senses. It is a particular community in whose members the image of God is taking shape and in which that process is being manifest in some explicit and public connection with the gospel. Paul's favorite image for the church—"the body of Christ"—seems meant to convey all this, as does his way of expressing what needs to happen among the "foolish Galatians": "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..." (Gal. 4:19). We might say the church is coming to be wherever, and to whatever extent, this renewal and manifestation are happening.

Part of what is going on wherever the church is happening is a recovery of reason: people are coming into their right minds. This is not easy or simple. It is a matter of loss or relinquishment, as well as of gain and enhancement. Coming into our right minds involves leaving behind the lies and distortions with which we have simultaneously comforted and trapped ourselves. It involves overcoming our fear of and consequent hostility toward the truth. Bad habits in our thinking need to be broken, and good
ones learned. At the same time, this recovery of reason is a gift, intimately connected with the gift of the love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

Dealing with all this is a large part of the church’s ministry of the Word. The ministry of the Word is not just about proclaiming the gospel. It is also about being brought into a position to hear and understand the gospel and then learning to convey that good news to others honestly in ways that offer some chance of their hearing and understanding as well. But it goes even deeper. Basically, it is about being truthful. The church’s ministry of the Word is the church’s caring for the truth, and for human capacity not only to endure the truth but also to flourish in it and to let it flourish. The church exercises its ministry of the Word as, individually and in community, its members recover by God’s grace their human vocation to understand and bear witness to the truth. Linked with a ministry of Sacrament, which is about the rebirth and growth of joy and thanksgiving, and a ministry of Order, which is about the rebirth and growth of active love toward God and neighbor, there is this ministry whose focus is the gift of understanding. Its typical expressions within our own United Methodist history include such things as founding and supporting schools, colleges, and universities; sustaining a publishing house; working to foster good conditions for intellectual growth in the public educational system and to insure educational opportunity for all; and defending freedom of inquiry, as well as providing an environment in the local congregation that encourages the renewal of the mind.

III

As the reference to Word, Sacrament, and Order above may imply, and for reasons that may also be obvious by now, I find this threefold scheme for the scope of the church’s ministry not merely useful but also compelling. It has a significant history and a cogent theological rationale. It enables us to see some connections between the church’s ministry and a Christian account of such things as what human life is meant for, what has gone wrong with that, what God is doing about it, and what the church has to do with what God is doing. Furthermore, it is a point on which many different ecclesial traditions are apparently finding “convergence” (to use the term of the 1982 Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*). Not least in its favor, it is, I think, of great practical value as a guide to our thinking about the scope and coherence of the church’s ministry over the long haul and in any given situation. It
was used to advantage (and definitely with an eye toward future possibilities of ecumenical rapport) in official United Methodist statements on ministry prior to 1996. It was then rather abruptly abandoned in the 1996 Book of Discipline and its terms incorporated into other configurations, in the attempt to establish separate spheres of responsibility for deacons and elders.

A discussion of the current ordering of ministry in The United Methodist Church is outside the purpose of this essay. Any such structure has its strengths and its liabilities, and it may take quite some time for the consequences of the 1996 legislation, both positive and negative, to become clear to us. In the meantime, I think it would be unfortunate if we were to lose sight of the older triadic (or trinitarian) scheme just because it is absent from our current official language. Its value as a conceptual instrument for thinking comprehensively about ministry has not yet been exhausted. What I wish to sketch here by way of an understanding of ministerial leadership is compatible in principle with a great variety of polities, including some that do not recognize this terminology at all.

The first point to be made is that the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order is first of all the general ministry of the church. It is not to be identified simply with the specialized ministry of the ordained. Ordained ministry has this shape because it is the shape of the ministry of the whole community in which Christ is being formed, and ordained ministry exists to serve that.

A second, related point to keep in mind is that Word, Sacrament, and Order are not to be regarded as separate functions. Although distinct, they cannot be separated. Each involves the others, "perichoretically." Further, they are not merely functions. They are perhaps closer to practices in a strict sense of the term, and as such each involves "knowing" and "being," as well as "doing." In a way, this fact only underscores the point about their inseparability. There is a sense in which the church's ministry of the Word is centered on knowing, its ministry of Sacrament on being, and its ministry of Order on doing. But there is a "being" and a "doing" pertinent to the ministry of the Word and a similar relation of all three factors in each of the other aspects of ministry.

The task of the special ministry of church leadership, however it is configured or "ordered," is to assist the whole church to receive, affirm, and exercise its threefold ministerial vocation. The task of church leadership is not to minister on behalf of (or in place of) the people. It is to empower...
and lead the people in ministry. In her preaching and teaching, for example, a pastoral minister is (we would hope) both exemplifying the ministry of the Word and equipping her hearers to carry it out themselves. She is helping them to become bearers, as well as hearers, of the Word. She is enabling them to develop an understanding of God and the gospel that is pertinent to their lives and also helping them to learn what it means to awaken understanding in others. Her leadership in this regard is effective insofar as both the substance and the manner of her teaching and preaching serve this complex end. This will require of her not only knowledge and skill but also a set of dispositions appropriate in one committed to "rejoicing in the truth." It will require in her habits of self-criticism, self-transcendence, hospitality to new information and new insights, and radical faith.

IV

In light of these considerations having to do with the nature and aims of the church's ministry, perhaps the most apt form of continuing education for ministerial leadership is to participate with the laity in theological study. By theological study, I mean inquiry that is aimed at the knowledge of God and at understanding everything else in relation to God. Theological study in this sense can have a vast range of particular "subjects" (the Bible, Christian doctrine, our country's foreign policy, human sexuality, religious diversity, etc.) and a correspondingly wide assortment of potential texts or other materials.

Teaching is often a very effective way to learn. This phenomenon is acknowledged across many fields, and it plays an increasingly important role in many formal programs of study, including many in theology. We often come to understand something more fully—whether the "something" is a concept, a principle, a hypothesis, or a historical event—by explaining it to someone else. Their questions, objections, tentative inferences, and the like will often reveal the gaps in our own present understanding, will suggest new possibilities we had not considered, and will give us new ways of looking at the subject. We become teachers and learners together, engaged in a common inquiry into the subject matter. Good teaching often comes down to providing an environment and structure in which that sort of disciplined conversation can proceed. Opportunities for teaching become opportunities for learning, not only insofar as the one who is to teach must often extend or deepen his or her grasp of the subject before-
hand so as to be able to teach but also in that the event of teaching itself is an occasion for learning.

But it is not only on account of its effectiveness in this way that "learning by teaching" in a congregational setting is to be commended as a mode of continuing education for ministers. A still-more important reason is its contribution to the general ministry of the church. When, for example, the pastor and the members of the congregation are engaged in theological inquiry together, sharing questions and insights with one another, they are building one another up in the ministry of the Word, and, therefore, in the other aspects of ministry as well. Not only are they learning about whatever the particular subject matter may be—a doctrine, a biblical text, an issue in social ethics—they are also learning how to learn and how to teach; and in their interaction with one another and with the subject matter they are learning and strengthening the dispositions required in a life that honors the truth. Carried out in this way, in this context, the pastor's learning is itself an engagement in ministerial leadership.

There are other forms and other contexts of learning—in solitude, with colleagues, in formal academic programs—and these are not to be neglected. Each is valuable in its own way, and each may be more suitable than the congregational setting for certain educational purposes. However, leading the congregation in theological study is both an uncommonly rich and an unduly neglected opportunity in learning, and one that might commend itself particularly to the people called Methodists.

Charles M. Wood is the Lehman Professor of Christian Doctrine at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas.

Endnotes

1. I am thinking here of the attention given to practices and practical judgment in recent social philosophy, especially since Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). See, for example, Joseph Dunne, Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

2. For a thoughtful treatment of these issues, see William F. May, Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).


6. "My will and my desire were turned by love, / The love that moves the sun / and the other stars"—the last lines of Dante's Divine Comedy (here in the Sayers-Reynolds translation).


9. Wesley returns to the subject several decades later in a sermon "On the Fall of Man" (Works, 2: 400-12), to much the same effect.

10. Ibid., 410. As is common with Wesley's sermons, an interweaving of scriptural passages lies behind his wording, in this case Luke 24:45 and Eph. 1:18.


12. I am indebted to Schubert M. Ogden for the terms of this distinction.

13. The latter term is favored by the Roman Catholic theologian Juan Luis Segundo, building on the Second Vatican Council's portrayal of the church as a sacrament of the salvation of the whole world; see his The Community Called Church, trans. by John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973).

14. It might also be true to say that it is just about proclaiming the gospel, with all that that entails.


16. On the concept of a practice in this connection, see Craig L. Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," in Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Study of Theological Education, ed. by Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 35-66. Among the relevant features of practices as Dykstra portrays them, drawing on the work of Alasdair Maclntyre and others, are these: practices are cooperative and socially estab-
lished; the goods they generate are inherent in the practice itself; and practices "bear epistemological weight," in that through them "we may come to aware­ness of certain realities that outside of these practices are beyond our ken" (45). On the triad of knowing, being, and doing in education for ministry, see Gordon T. Smith and Charles M. Wood, "Learning Goals and the Assessment of Learning in Theological Schools," *Theological Education* 39 (2003): 17-29.

17. There are circumstances in which it may be appropriate for an ordained minister to "represent" the church and to engage in some aspect of ministry explicitly on its behalf. These circumstances may, however, be more rare and more limited than we are at first inclined to think, influenced as we still are by the centuries-old model in which the "clergy" really are the church, and the "laity" the objects rather than the agents of ministry.
Nurturing a Learned Clergy:  
A Survey of the United Methodist Clergy  
Probationary Process  

LOVETT H. WEEMS, JR.

In 1996, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church approved a new probationary process of at least three years for candidates seeking ordination in the denomination. Under the new legislation, a candidate seeking ordination would be commissioned following the completion of educational and other requirements. The commissioned minister then enters a probationary period of at least three years, and up to six years, under the supervision and guidance of the person's annual conference board of ordained ministry.

The concept of a probationary period is not new in United Methodism. In 1996, the standard probationary period was two years. A major emphasis of the advocates of the 1996 legislation was for a "new" understanding of the probationary period, not merely the adding of an additional year to the current probationary period.

A key component of this new understanding of the probationary process was found in what was expected to take place during the three or more years of probation. The current Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church describes the probationary process as follows:

¶317. Probationary Service of Commissioned Ministers—All persons who are commissioned ministers shall be appointed by a bishop (¶430) and serve a minimum of three years as a probationary member of the annual conference. During the probationary period, arrangements shall be offered by the board of ordained ministry for all commissioned ministers to be involved in a curriculum that extends theological education by using covenant groups and mentoring to support the practice and work of their ministry as servant leaders, to contemplate the grounding of ordained ministry, and to understand covenant ministry in the life of the conference. The specialized service of probationary members shall be evaluated by the district superintendent and
Probationary Process Research Project

In 2002 and 2003 a research project was conducted on behalf of the Division of Ordained Ministry of the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry through a Lilly Endowment-funded Program to Improve the Quality of Congregational Pastoral Leadership at Saint Paul School of Theology. For a number of years following the approval of the 1996 General Conference legislation, candidates could move to ordination with two years of probationary status because they began their process under the previous (1992) Discipline. Therefore, it took several years before the three-year probationary process was the pattern for all candidates moving toward ordination. By 2002, a significant number of clergy had been ordained following the completion of the new probationary process.

The purpose of this research project was to learn from the experience of those who have gone through the new probationary process in order to assist annual conferences in developing probationary programs more likely to assure that probationers would move from readiness for ministry at the beginning of the probationary period to effectiveness in ministry by the end of the period.

In March 2002 the Division of Ordained Ministry requested from conference board of ordained ministry registrars the names and contact information of persons who completed probation and became full-member clergy in 1999, 2000, and 2001. A survey instrument, developed in consultation with a taskforce named by the Division of Ordained Ministry and including deacons, elders, staff, directors, annual conference board of ordained ministry representatives, seminary representatives, and district superintendents was sent to each of the clergy named. Eight-hundred names and address were received, with 250 persons completing and returning the survey instrument.

The original plan was to base the research findings only on those respondents who indicated that they had been in the probationary process for at least three years. However, since there was a substantial number of respondents who noted that they had been on probation for only two years, a comparison was done of the two-year respondents with the three-
year or longer respondents. This process showed virtually no differences in
the patterns of responses between the two groups. It became clear that this
long after 1996, in almost all annual conferences, everyone (two-year
people under the 1992 Discipline and three-year or longer people) was
expected to participate in the same probationary process developed after
1996; and, thus, the two-year people were responding to the same process
with the exception of being in it for less time.

Therefore, because of the similarities in responses and to improve
statistical reliability, the results in this article reflect information based on
(1) the names of persons submitted by their annual conferences, (2) who
returned the survey, and who (3) indicated that they had been in the proba­
tionary process for at least two years. The breakdown is as follows: three­
year or longer respondents, 162; two-year respondents, 88; for a total of 250
respondents.

Overall Observations
While there are no key differences in results among the five jurisdictions,
there are variations in results among the various annual conferences. There
are no key differences in results between men and women probationers. The
only difference between younger and older probationers is that the younger
are somewhat more likely to have a mentor, and the mentoring is more likely
to be a positive and growth experience for them. Probationers generally
accepted the three-year length of the probationary process. The survey did
not ask a specific question regarding the length of the probationary period;
however, among those who spent three years or longer in the process only
seven named the length as a concern (six as a negative and one as a positive)
through the open-ended questions.

There are no key differences between respondents that spent more than
three years in the probationary process and those who spent three years or
fewer. Approximately 30 percent of those ordained in the three years under
review (and who returned surveys) spent more than three years in the
probationary process. While the survey generated a fair amount of overall
negativity about the probationary experience, it also captured deep appreci­
ation by many probationers for the formative value of the experience. In
addition to their growth in effectiveness in ministry, many probationers
reported that the probationary process was a time of spiritual growth and
centering, especially through retreats and covenant groups.
Key Themes

Trust
The establishment of trust among all participants is foundational for a positive and formative probationary experience. Where trust is established, programs are viewed as helpful. Without trust, anxiety and fear dominate the experience. Factors inhibiting trust between probationers and boards of ordained ministry are (1) lack of direction to the process; (2) inconsistency in dealing with candidates; (3) failure to name, train, and hold accountable the leaders; and (4) lack of regular communication with probationers. The board interview process itself was found to be helpful for some but problematic for many probationers.

Leadership
After the establishment of mutual trust, the quality of the leadership of the various components of the probationary process is critical. This is most true for mentors but also for covenant group facilitators, continuing theological education leaders, interview team leaders, and district superintendents. Selection of the right leaders for the right tasks is essential. More training and different training are needed. For example, virtually all mentors received training by their boards of ordained ministry. Yet, survey responses indicate that this training needs to be supplemented. It appears that training is most needed for those functioning in a supervisory (district superintendent, board of ordained ministry) or mentoring role. More guidance, direction, and structure are needed for covenant groups. Probationers want most and expect three characteristics from those functioning in any type of supervisory or mentoring role: caring, availability, and accountability.

Practical
Probationers want the probationary process to engage and utilize their actual ministry experiences during those years. This is a consistent theme. Some examples of practices affirmed by probationers include having the district superintendent and board of ordained ministry representatives spend time in the pastoral setting to observe the probationer interacting and functioning there; having specific topics for each mentor meeting related to the probationer's practice of ministry; and sharing in covenant groups about events and topics emerging out of their actual practice of ministry for reflection and feedback by other probationers.
Relationships
Building a community of support and friendship is seen as one of the most significant results of the probationary years. Retreats and covenant groups are repeatedly named as occasions for sustaining relationships to be established and developed. Important and lasting relationships with mentors and district superintendents are often established during these years.

The Four Components of the Probationary Process
The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry through its Division of Ordained Ministry was charged with establishing the recommended guidelines for annual conference boards of ordained ministry to use in developing their respective probationary programs. Principles and Guides for Annual Conferences recommends four dimensions—supervision, continuing theological education, mentoring, and covenant groups.

Probationers report experiencing these four components as dimensions of their probationary experience as follows: supervision by district superintendent and board of ordained ministry—88 percent, continuing theological education—71 percent, mentoring—69 percent, and covenant groups—58 percent. A different picture emerges when probationers are asked the extent to which each component contributed to their growth toward effectiveness in ministry. Probationers who had experience with the components indicated that the components contributed “a great deal” or “somewhat” to their growth as follows: continuing theological education—87 percent, mentoring—80 percent, covenant groups—74 percent, supervision by district superintendent and board of ordained ministry—66 percent.

Supervision
Supervision by a district superintendent and board of ordained ministry is the component most consistently present in the probationary process (88 percent). However, supervision ranks last of the components in the extent to which it contributed to the probationer’s growth and success. Where supervision does contribute, frequency of supervision was the most important factor in determining supervision’s impact on the growth and success of the probationer. Also statistically significant but less important were keeping a clear distinction between the supervision by the district superintendent and the board of ordained ministry and the annual reviews by the board of ordained ministry. Comments indicate a desire for the district
superintendent to be more involved with the probationers and the probationary process.

**Continuing Theological Education**

Most annual conferences include continuing theological education in their probationary programs (71 percent; second only to supervision). Those who experience continuing theological education find it to be, among the four recommended components, the most helpful in their growth (42 percent say "a great deal" and it increases to 87 percent when "somewhat" is added). Where continuing theological education does contribute, the most important factor in determining its impact is the extent to which opportunities are available. Continuing theological education opportunities are available (86 percent "frequently" or "sometimes"). Yet, 56 percent of probationers participate in continuing theological education only once a year or less frequently. Having time off for continuing theological education helps, and churches do allow time away for this purpose (95 percent). Frequency of participation in continuing theological education was not a statistically significant predictor of impact. Comments tend to indicate a satisfaction with seminary education but a reluctance to repeat the theological disciplines during the probationary period. Virtually all the suggestions for content focused on functional aspects of ministry.

**Mentoring**

Working with a mentor during the probationary process is fairly common (69 percent). Mentoring ranks second among the four components in the extent to which it contributed to the probationer’s growth and success. However, it is clear from the comments that, for many, good mentoring was the most important dimension of the probationary process. Mentoring generated by far the most comments for the question about what part of the process was most formative. At the same time, mentoring generated the same disproportionate number of comments about changes they would recommend. Mentoring is clearly important. Where mentoring does contribute, the most important factor in determining the impact of mentoring on the growth and success of the probationer was the clarity of focus on previously identified issues. Another statistically significant predictor for success of mentoring was frequency of contact with the mentor. Somewhat less statistically significant is the providing of an annual report by the probationer and mentor to the board of ordained ministry.
Younger probationers (whether defined as younger than 30, 34, or 35) are somewhat more likely to have a mentor and to experience the mentoring experience as a process of growth.

**Covenant Groups**

Participation in a covenant group is the least consistently present component of the probationary process (58 percent). Covenant groups rank third among the four components in the extent to which they contributed to the probationer’s growth and success. Where covenant groups do contribute, the most important factor in determining the covenant group’s impact on the growth and success of the probationer is the quality of the facilitation. Somewhat less significant is focusing on a specific topic. Virtually all covenant groups meet monthly. Meeting more frequently does not appear to make a difference. Factors that are not statistically significant predictors of successful covenant groups are having probationers assume a leadership role in the group and having a written covenant. Where covenant groups are utilized, they are appreciated. Where they are absent, probationers express a desire for them. Diversity within covenant groups is desired.

**Summary and Implications**

The establishment of trust among all participants is foundational for a positive and formative probationary experience. The building of trust among all participants must be the initial primary goal for the process since all else depends on such trust. A system to measure improvement in the trust level is needed. A part of the initial trust building is devoting adequate time to interpreting the probationary process as “a journey from readiness to effectiveness,” so that candidates come to see the process as something “for them.” From the beginning of the process, allow probationer input into the content of the program. Test every aspect of a conference’s program by the standard of moving candidates from readiness to effectiveness, thus viewing every component from the perspective of the probationers. Boards of ordained ministry need to monitor these key elements of trust building: (1) sense of caring and encouragement through stress on quality of relationships, (2) consistent quality in all aspects of the process, (3) regular and frequent communication, and (4) holding all leaders accountable.

The quality of the leadership of the various components of the probationary process is critical. This is most true for mentors. Selection of the
right leaders for the right tasks is essential, along with more adequate training. Probationers want most and expect three characteristics from those functioning in any type of supervisory or mentoring role—caring, availability, and accountability. Probationers want the probationary process to engage and utilize their practical ministry experiences during those years. Establishing a community of supportive relationships is seen as one of the most significant results of the probationary years.

Of the four recommended components of the probationary process, mentoring ranks high in contributing to probationer growth and success and was, for many, the most important dimension of the probationary process. Participation in a covenant group, where available, is appreciated and, where absent, desired by probationers. The most important factor determining the covenant group’s impact on probationer growth was the quality of group facilitation. Supervision is the most consistently present component of the probationary process, yet ranks last of the components in the extent to which it contributed to probationer growth. Supervision should be a much more positive contributor to the probationer’s growth than it currently is. While supervision is mandated and present, this component of the process appears to be the one that is least understood in terms of goals and responsibilities, as well as the least effective component.

There seems to be the most satisfaction with continuing theological education so long as it focuses on practical issues of ministry.

**Recommendations**

**Supervision**
District superintendents should plan periodic sessions with probationers throughout the year and visit their ministry settings at another time in addition to charge conference.

Boards of ordained ministry need to make sure that board members understand fully the entire process that leads to ordination, that the board has a clearly outlined program for the probationary process, and that the program and its rationale are communicated early and regularly to all probationers. Boards should strive for consistency in dealing with all probationers. They should give particular attention to the interview process in terms of preparation, communication, process, and training. They should give great care and time to the selection of all leaders who will work with
probationers. Boards should consider the feasibility of on-site visits, preferably at a time when the probationer could be observed engaging in ministry leadership. (At least one conference has used trained lay visitation teams quite effectively.)

The Division of Ordained Ministry can assist boards and district superintendents in gaining greater clarity about the meaning and purpose of supervision during the probationary process, including their related though different roles around formative evaluation (for growth) and summative evaluation (for decisions). They should consider what the role of the staff parish relations committee should be during the probationary process, assist in the clarification of the distinction in the roles of mentors and district superintendents, explore ways in which district superintendents and boards of ordained ministry can get enhanced training in supervision, and encourage the training for new district superintendents to include their responsibilities related to probationers.

**Continuing Theological Education**

Boards of ordained ministry should give thanks for how well this component tends to be going but should review the educational components to avoid duplication with seminary work and to put the emphasis on practical issues that relate to the probationers' needs. They should allow probationers to have input in the selection of topics, make sure that quality continuing education based on needs identified by the board and probationers is available, and see that probationers participate regularly throughout the probationary process.

**Mentoring**

Put mentoring front and center in the probationary process. By the account of survey respondents, mentoring is likely the area where the greatest difference can be made in the lives and ministries of probationers. The three keys to successful mentoring programs appear to be (1) selection of the right mentors, (2) adequate training, probably beyond what is done currently, and (3) accountability.

Boards of ordained ministry should make the mentoring process central to the probationary experience. Enhanced training for mentors is by far the need identified most. Make sure mentors are assigned, trained, and functioning from the beginning.

The Division of Ordained Ministry should make sure the manual used
across conferences includes guidelines for use in mentor sessions emphasizing frequency of meetings between mentor and probationer, the importance of a planned schedule of topics as a framework and focus for sessions, and a simple and clear set of “do’s” and “don’ts” for mentors. They should provide assistance to conference boards around the selection of mentors and the dilemma in many conferences of having a need for more mentors than conferences can staff with qualified mentors.

Covenant Groups
Effective covenant groups are very important to the probationary experience. Covenant groups most need quality leadership and direction. A model that appears to work well is a combination of the practice of spiritual disciplines along with reflection on topics and issues out of the probationers’ experience. For boards of ordained ministry currently utilizing covenant groups, keep them. For boards not currently utilizing covenant groups, start them. In either case, give greater attention to the selection, training, and support of facilitators and consider establishing a recommended structure and guidelines for the groups. The Division of Ordained Ministry can assist in developing and sharing with conference boards some models and guidelines for covenant groups based on the experience of conferences with effective covenant groups programs.

The Probationary Process and Nurturing a Learned Clergy
The probationary process is best seen as one part of an educational continuum that includes formal theological education as a prerequisite, with the probationary process being followed by continuing education through the Order of Elders and the Order of Deacons. It is also assumed that there would be a multitude of other educational experiences to ensure lifelong learning for continued effectiveness in ministry.

This survey indicates the importance of the integration of theology and the practice of ministry at each step along the way. While the integrating of theological education and one’s actual practice of ministry is done most logically and appropriately in the probationary process and beyond, the need for the integrative work during seminary is also essential.

As mentioned earlier, continuing theological education is one of the four components within the probationary process. Survey respondents affirm the effectiveness of formal continuing education experiences during
the probationary period. However, the survey results show that all of the components constitute various types of continuing education. In fact, probationers seek more engagement with substantive topics related to their ministries in the mentoring and covenant group components. Adding such topics also adds to the structure and plan probationers are seeking for all components of the process.

The goal of the probationary process is to help candidates for ordination move from “readiness for ministry” upon commissioning to “effectiveness in ministry” upon ordination. The reality is that achieving and maintaining such effectiveness is a lifetime endeavor. No matter how competent we become, God always has a “not yet” for our ministries. Continuing education is one important means to achieve the higher calling God has for us.

Lovett H. Weems, Jr., is Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership and Director of the G. Douglass Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

Endnotes


2. The full report, titled The Journey from Readiness to Effectiveness: A Probationary Survey of the United Methodist Church, is available online at http://www.spst.edu/Resourcing/ProbSurvey.htm or http://www.wesleysem.edu/centerleadership/Report2.pdf. Other contributors to the study included Amy Reiter, at the time coordinator of the Lilly Project to Improve Congregational Pastoral Leadership at Saint Paul School of Theology; Tana Brown, Ph.D., statistical consultant; Survey Instrument Advisory Group—Albert J. Bowles, Jr., W. J. Bryan III, Diane Wason Eberhart, Art Gafke, David Maldonado, Jr., Russell Richey, Cynthia Quillen, Ted Virts, and Anita Wood; and participants from conference boards of ordained ministry, seminaries, and division staff in a Probationary Process Consultation in Kansas City, Missouri, January 21-23, 2003.
The desire of knowledge is a universal principle . . . fixed in [our] inmost nature. . . . And it is planted in every human soul for excellent purposes.
—John Wesley. *The Imperfection of Human Knowledge*

Christian people yearn to feel close to God; and they also need to think about God, to attempt to unravel the divine mystery. One does not truly believe in something he or she knows nothing about or has not thought about in some way. That is not faith but fideism, or mindless assent. Lay theological education is one way that Christians engage in that thinking about God, which, in terms familiar in Wesleyan traditions, leads to holiness of heart and life. For John Wesley, learning was for the purpose of knowing and serving God and living the Christian life. His sermon, quoted above, is about the *imperfection* of knowledge. For him learning was not for its own sake but for the “excellent purposes” of serving and living out one’s faith.¹

Lay theological education can mean many things. Broadly understood, it is what hopefully goes on in local churches in Sunday school, in Bible study groups, in conference programs—anywhere there is clear and critical thinking about God. This article focuses on theological education for lay persons offered by United Methodist seminaries and other institutions of higher education. Although many theologians stress the inadequacies of education in the local church, theological education geared to lay people conducted by academic institutions neither diminishes the need for nor replaces theological and formational experiences in the church. Many of our schools, colleges, and seminaries, however, do provide learning opportunities for the “people in the pews” and see this as part of their mission. This has not always been the case, and the development of lay theological
education is an intriguing and important (if somewhat neglected) story.

The purpose of this article is to survey the history and current state of lay theological education in The United Methodist Church and to offer a rationale for the responsibilities and possibilities for the lifelong theological formation of United Methodist laity. Lay theological education is a far-ranging topic, and it would be impossible to describe every component here. Actually, very few details about its development have been documented. My hope is that this article can further discussion on positive ways to shape the future of theological education.

**Historical Context**

We have tended to divide people in the church into two categories, clergy and laity—those who minister and those to whom ministry is done. There does not seem to be widespread understanding, and even less actual practice, of the ministry of all baptized Christians, still a second-class status for the laity. A nearly universal complaint is that a few people in the church do everything.

The understanding of ministry as "us" and "them" did not always exist. There were no such distinctions in the earliest Christian communities. Laikos ("of or from the people"), from which the word laity derives, does not appear in the New Testament. Kleros ("lot, allotment, inheritance"), which is the source of the word clergy, refers in the New Testament not to a special group but to the whole people of God, as in "the whole lot of them." There were certain offices or roles in the church based on spiritual gifts and character. The story of how we got from this early understanding of the community of the faithful to the subordination of the laity is too long and complex for the space here, but the laity have always risen up in significant ways.

Changes brought by the Protestant Reformers initiated a new understanding of the laity and a new emphasis on personal piety. Luther taught that all Christians are joined by baptism and faith to Christ and share in the priesthood. One of the things that separated laity from clergy was education. In medieval times, clergy were among the few learned members of society because they studied theology, the "queen of the sciences," at the scholastic universities. German pietist leaders recognized that the New Testament call to discipleship applies to every Christian. Lay people figured prominently in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionary
impetus to spread the gospel throughout the world. Because industrialization and urbanization began to take its toll on the church, a new breed of evangelicals arose, determined to promote social holiness and cure the ills of society.

Within these movements, especially Methodism, lay preachers played a large part. Class meetings gave laypersons a more egalitarian leadership role. Harold Burgess noted that although John Wesley agreed with the need for an episcopal ministry, he did not "recognize any clerical monopoly on the ministration of grace—especially in the matter of preaching." Burgess suggests that his widespread use of lay preachers was one of the benchmarks of Wesley's ministry. The tradition of exhorters, or Lay Speakers, continues today.

John Wesley inspired a popular education movement that led to extensive reform in the English system of education. He worked to combat the widespread illiteracy of his day, and this concern for education was brought to America. The Sunday School movement, which Methodists embraced, beginning in England in the late 1700s and quickly transplanted elsewhere, also exemplified a surge in lay leadership. John Wesley's helpers were mostly laypersons. He was sure that these persons were called by God, but he was concerned about their lack of training. He gathered them often for study and devotion. Wesley's vast publishing enterprise provided them with reading materials.

In spite of Wesley's convictions on education, theological schools were slow to develop in America. Formal theological study was suspected of ruining evangelical zeal and taking time away from ministry. Most clergy were educated through the Course of Study, begun by the early conferences. Interestingly, it was laypeople who eventually called for a more educated clergy, urging John Dempster to open a theological school because they wanted pastors who were better educated than they. This did not mean, however, that they wished to remain ignorant. If they could not go to school themselves, perhaps they vicariously participated in education through an educated clergy. By the Civil War the Methodist Episcopal Church had founded more than 200 schools in 33 of the 34 states.

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century projected great hope for society. It was a time of progress and optimism about the accomplishments of human inventiveness and a time of potential for lay leadership in the church. The beginnings of an adult education movement,
with roots in Europe, began to take shape in the United States with the Chautaugua Movement, the YMCA and YWCA, and the extension services of Land Grant Universities. Ecumenical organizations formed to draw Christians together across denominational boundaries. These ecumenical organizations included the Student Volunteer Movement, the World Student Christian Federation, and the eventual development of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The laity's role in the church was a principal issue as the WCC established the Ecumenical Institute at the Chateau de Bossey in Switzerland. The institute became a focal point for laity worldwide. After 1945, many lay academies that operated outside church structure were founded in Europe as centers for renewal. Participants were commonly recruited from industry and labor unions.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the emphasis on lay leadership waned and other matters took precedence, such as concern for poverty and oppression. Societal turmoil and cultural dissatisfaction impacted the church. Still, some theologians probed again the issue of the role of the laity in the church with works such as Hendrik Kraemer's *Theology of the Laity* (1958) and Gibbs and Morton's *God's Frozen People* (1964). Notable among Methodists was Howard Grimes, a professor at Perkins School of Theology, who published *The Rebirth of the Laity* in 1962. These works prompted interest in lay church leadership and education for laity who wished to have a better understanding of the church and theology and of how to live faithfully as a Christian in a complex, modern world.

**Lay Ministry Professional Education**

In the early days of theological education, as the seminaries sprang up and grew, the focus was on educating clerics. Yet a distinct aspect of theological education was the training of persons for lay ministries, such as missionaries, deaconesses, church and community workers, and directors of Christian education. According to Rosemary S. Keller:

Religious training schools were among the most visionary Protestant educational ventures on the nineteenth-century American religious and cultural scene. Between 1880 and 1915, educators founded nearly sixty training schools where lay people, most of them women, prepared for professional service in churches and social agencies.
Methodists were among the forerunners in this enterprise. Two such schools warrant mention. Scarritt Bible and Training School, founded in 1872 by Belle Harris Bennett and supported by the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions, was established for the purpose of training for these ministries. It began in Kansas City, Missouri, and moved to Nashville in 1924. Another was the Chicago Training School for City, Home, and Foreign Missions, founded in 1885 by Lucy Rider Meyer. The deaconess movement was an important outgrowth of this school.

When the seminaries opened their doors to laypeople, the training schools were affected. Around the 1950s, many seminaries began to offer the M.R.E. or M.A. degree. With many more choices for lay ministry professionals there was less need for an institution devoted solely to their training. In 1935, the Chicago Training School became a part of Garrett Biblical Institute. Today the Scarritt-Bennett Center is a conference, retreat, and education center that focuses on cross-cultural understanding, education, creativity, and spiritual renewal.

In addition to lay theological education that grew out of the more liberal adult education movement, a number of Bible institutes sprang up from the evangelical traditions, such as the Moody Bible Institute for laity who wished to train for church-related or missionary work.

The Methodist Church began certifying directors of Christian education in 1948. The Evangelical Church and United Brethren also had a history of training and certifying Christian educators. Standards for certification included course work in theology, Bible, and church history. R. Harold Hipps, then on the staff of the Board of Education, was instrumental in the development of certification and certification studies. The development of professional lay ministry raised concerns about over-professionalizing the ministry, or clericalizing the laity, suggesting that only trained people can do ministry and thus diminishing the role of the laity. Professionalization led to the view that “if we want something done in the church, we hire someone to do it.” Yet the church continues to need lay leaders with a theological background.

**Initiatives and Efforts in Lay Theological Education**

The adult education movement influenced the development of lay theological education. Malcolm Knowles from Boston University became a key figure in adult education since the early 1960s. The emphasis on adult
learning prompted the proliferation of continuing education programs and
departments in colleges, universities, and theological schools and the
development of retreat and spiritual formation centers. The Society for the
Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry (SACEM) was
founded in 1967. The original name proposed was the Society for the
Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry, but the definite
article before "ministry" was dropped to prevent the impression that the
organization focused only on the ordained clergy.\textsuperscript{14}

In July 1968, the World Council of Churches published a bulletin on
the laity that dealt with theological education and lay training. It reported a
"changing vocational orientation" of theological students. This document
declared that the "content of theological education today is becoming
more and more oriented to the world, secular affairs and lay involvement."
The report cited a trend in the recognition of the importance of equipping
the laity for ministry in the world, noting that the church and its schools
have set up academies, lay training centers, mobile teams of teachers,
ecumenical institutes, and correspondence courses. The document stated
further that the aim of theological education cannot be limited to the
training of students for professional ministry. The WCC report on lay
education claimed that theological education should provide laity with the
tools necessary for Christian witness, breaking out of "churchy" isolation to
become an integrated part of society. The aims of theological education are
to (1) promote open dialogue and theological reflection on living and on
things that matter; (2) discover purpose and meaning in a complex world;
(3) pursue a deeper relationship with God and to enact that in the world;
(4) discern one's vocation and calling to ministry; (5) gain knowledge about
the Christian faith; and (6) acquire leadership skills and prepare for specialized
ministries.\textsuperscript{15} Many member denominations took this as their cue to
develop lay theological and continuing education programs.

In United Methodism, Wesley Foundations on college campuses began
to organize informal courses in Bible and theology for students and townspeople. According to Howard Grimes, several schools developed "Guilds of
Lay Theologians" that included a lengthy course of study.\textsuperscript{16} The mission
statements of some of the schools of theology evolved to reflect a recognition
of ministries beyond the pastorate and an expanded purpose to
educate church lay leaders.

I gathered the following information about current lay education offer-
lings from continuing education directors and websites of the thirteen United Methodist-related seminaries; but it certainly is not an exhaustive account of all lay theological education provided through United Methodist institutions. Most of the schools offer laypeople the opportunity to take classes as special students and often make no distinction between them and students preparing for ordained ministry. Many also offer courses to fulfill United Methodist certification requirements. Other schools also offer learning opportunities specifically geared to laypeople.

At Perkins School of Theology a Lay Advisory Council was formed in 1972. A guided-reading program was developed for clergy and laity and met regularly. In 1974 a prominent United Methodist federal judge, Woodrow Seals, was instrumental in founding “Laity Week,” which brought laity together for lectures, worship, and seminars. The attendance in 1974 was 78 people, but that number more than doubled the next year. Laity Week continues at Perkins today.

According to Deirdre Gordon, Director of Continuing Education, Duke Divinity School’s Lay Academy began during the 1988–89 academic year, with both morning and evening classes over a period of three to four weeks. Professor James M. Efird has been instrumental since the beginning. Duke also established Laity Weekends in 2001, recognizing that the ongoing class model fails to meet the needs of many laypeople, given responsibilities to work, family, and other commitments. Twice a year, between 100 and 150 laypeople gather for worship, a keynote lecture, and classes.

In A Lifelong Call to Learn: Approaches to Continuing Education for Church Leaders, Marvin T. Morgan tells the story of a “revolution” in African American churches that occurred when learning programs were developed for laity. One such program was developed at the Interdenominational Theological Center in which Gammon Theological Seminary is a participating institution. Offered through the James H. Costen Lifelong Education Center, this program is a two-year study for church lay workers.

Wesley Theological Seminary operated a Lay Resource Center from 1981–1994, and in 1999 began its Equipping Lay Ministry program—a certificate program in which laypersons take six courses in one of fourteen tracks or areas of lay ministry, such as Congregational Care, Hispanic Ministries, Christian Education, Youth Ministry, and Small Group Bible Study Leadership. The goal of Equipping Lay Ministry is to equip and prepare persons for ministry in the church and the world. This program is unique in
allowing students who qualify to take the courses for graduate credit. Wesley also provides studies of current books written by faculty using e-mail and videos.

Candler School of Theology, through its Office of Church Ministries Education, recently established the Bill Mallard Lay Theology Institute. Its goal is to "provide stimulating theological study to persons regardless of their religious or academic background." The Institute also sponsors a "Mini School of Theology," based on the graduate studies program and consisting of six condensed sessions that are designed specifically for the layperson.

Several schools offer theological education to youth. Candler has the Youth Theology Initiative. Saint Paul School of Theology has youTheologians, in which thirty youth are selected each year to gather over four weekends for intensive learning, service, and theological reflection, and then to make a pilgrimage to England to learn about John Wesley. Saint Paul stresses its role in resourcing the church and provides lectures and special events. Iliff School of Theology also has a summer youth program called Faith Trek. The Iliff Institute for Lay and Clergy Education, founded in 1987, offers lectures and summer continuing education at three sites and makes use of teleconferencing. Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary has begun Faith Passage, a year-long spiritual and leadership development program committed to nurturing and empowering thirty high school youth in making passage from adolescence to adulthood. Faith Passage is "committed to cultivating a community of young public theologians dedicated to incorporating Christian practices into the interpretation of their everyday lives." Garrett-Evangelical's website emphasizes "lifelong learners," and laypeople are invited to contact faculty directly about auditing their courses. The website provides links to sites for lifelong learners and will allow lectures and chapel services to be downloaded.

Drew University's Theological School offers a variety of programs and formats through its office of Continuing Theological Education, including online courses and courses at several sites, including Kirkridge Center in Pennsylvania. Common Ground is a program at Drew committed to the importance of a theological understanding of ecological issues. The Methodist Theological School in Ohio offers certificates in organ service playing and Black church leadership as well as in United Methodist certification courses and short-term programs and events. Our theological
schools are attempting to think creatively about how to resource lay theological education.

**Theological Education for All: Rationales for Lay Theological Education**

John Wesley believed that education enables people to grow in awareness and receptivity to God's love. Although Wesley had a great concern for the training of pastors, he did not limit theological education to them. Rather, it was part of the discipline required of all Methodists. Ironically, the theological schools' focus on clergy education did not reflect this desire. The development of programs for laity in our schools reclaims Wesley's understanding of theological education in Methodism.

A premise of the book *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century* is that everyone can become theologically literate at some level, because everyone is a theologian as he or she tries to find his or her place in the world and make sense of it. Education is entering into a "community of inquiry," to use David Tracy's term. Becoming educated is entering into a centuries-long conversation and occurs anywhere people are encouraged to think clearly, sharply, and critically. Robert Banks notes,

Theological education is not a higher stage of Christian education, but a dimension of everyone's Christian education depending on their stage in life and calling. . . . The presence of continuing education programs in seminaries in lay education suggests that theological education and Christian Education are not as separate as is generally thought.

Yet several barriers exist. Some clergy seem to think that laity's presence in theological education somehow diminishes its value. Clergy enjoy being the resident experts in their congregations. In the minds of some, the idea that theological education is for everyone cheapens it. Often, if a layperson expresses the slightest interest in theology, he or she is immediately encouraged to go to seminary to pursue ordination. Sometimes pastors view this as a star in their crowns. Yes, there is a need for clergy, but for those who are distinctly called to that ministry. As Barbara Brown Zikmund aptly notes, when we encourage every theologically curious layperson to pursue ordained ministry we are "subverting the potential of the gospel to transform the world." We ignore the need for effective
Christian witness in the world, where laypeople live and work.

Thomas Groome laments the profound lack of interest in theology on the part of the public at large and the people in the pews. Even though we have as much need for religious symbols and rituals as ever, theology is increasingly irrelevant and abstract. Theology, Groome says, must be taught in ways that engage people's lives and speak to their realities. There is a difference between learning about theological concepts and learning theology for living. Likewise, John B. Cobb, Jr., calls theological literacy "a monopoly of professional theologians." He claims that we live in an age of specialization where most of us are blissfully ignorant of one another's professions. Occasionally some theological discussion, such as the Jesus Seminar debate, arouses interest or concern in the public sphere; but, says Cobb, while controversies may spark interest, they do not provoke sustained participation. According to Cobb, the liberal rejection of essential doctrine that all members must hold in common and the emphasis on free, independent, thinking has led to little thinking of any kind. The alienation from theology has severe consequences for the church. Christian communities that do not engage in critical, theological reflection and that do not relate theology to life will neither keep their young people nor attract new members. For Cobb, we should think of theology as "intentional Christian thinking about important matters"; and we need to find a more effective approach to lay theological education.

Another outspoken critic of theological education, Edward Farley, rejects the university system of departmentalization, where faculty members are very "guild oriented" and protective of their disciplines. This fragmentation serves to overspecialize theological education and discourages mutual exploration of commonalities and implications for daily life. The fragmentation makes theology abstract, because it emphasizes contribution to one's own field rather than to the good of the whole endeavor and conceives of knowledge as mastery of a particular subject rather than as respect and appreciation for how the subject matter shapes one's life. Life is not so neatly partitioned and soundproof.

The technical knowledge of theological disciplines makes them seem inaccessible, quaint, or irrelevant. Some pastors and some theological faculty are guilty of a form of gnosticism. Faculty who have worked hard on their degrees sometimes like to be viewed as experts and possessors of a secret knowledge.
Farley has cautioned against a “clergy paradigm”—the clerical captivity of theological education and the assumption that ministry is best understood as various functions to learn, such as preaching, counseling, administration, and teaching. Clergy education does not exhaust the purpose of theological education, since every follower of Jesus Christ is called to be a practical theologian—to think, reflect, inquire, and act.\textsuperscript{24} Despite Farley’s criticisms, the fragmentation of theological education and the notion that seminary is for training clergy persist. The primary purpose of most graduate theological schools is the preparation of pastors, priests, deacons, educators, and missionaries. Most of them do recognize the ministry of all God’s people, and some are increasingly involved in their education.

Thomas Groome points out that theological schools have relied on a formal, schooling approach to education, which contributes to the abstraction of theology. He calls for new pedagogies and proposes that theological education for the public ought to inform and form people to think for themselves. Moreover, it should connect life and faith and bring about personal, communal, and global transformation.\textsuperscript{25} All this requires that we abandon or greatly reduce our lecture-bound imparting of knowledge methodology. There is a growing understanding that seminaries are not forbidding places where only “theologese” is spoken; rather, they are wall-less, permeable places where people can go in and out with ease. Extension sites for lay theological education may allow laity to learn in the settings in which they live and work. Currently, however, most extension sites are in churches or church agencies. A new frontier for lay theological education is in offices and homes, modeling the understanding that theology is not just for the church but also for the world. Increasingly, seminaries and schools of theology are being discovered by people outside the established church. Several studies indicate that more and more seminary students have no plans for ordination.\textsuperscript{26}

There is a fundamental human need for theological education—a hunger for God and a yearning for guidance from the wisdom of the tradition. T. H. White wrote in \textit{The Once and Future King},

\begin{quote}
The best thing for being sad, replied Merlyn . . . is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling . . . you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, . . . you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics. . . . There is only one thing for it then—
\end{quote}
to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.27

Conclusions

It seems odd to have to justify lay theological education and continually to have to vie for resources when a passion for learning for all people is so much a part of our tradition. While there is definitely a trend toward more laypeople attending seminaries and toward more inclusive understandings of theological education, we still have a long way to go. Our theological schools struggle and many have only enough faculty to meet the needs of degree students. Continuing education programs often are seen as an added burden and become peripheral. The high cost is a definite factor. If our understandings of theological education and ministry are indeed expanding, we should establish scholarships for laity.

In summary, I believe that we should increase our commitment to lay theological study for the several reasons discussed in this article. Theological education is for everyone. Not a “higher” form of Christian education, it can take place in churches and seminaries and in the world. We can reclaim our Wesleyan commitment to the education of all people. Elitist education or lack of lay theological education separates clergy and laity, contributing to the “us and them” mentality and the pacification of the laity. The student bodies of our seminaries already reflect an inclusive understanding of theological education, since there is a growing number of students who will not pursue ordination. As Cobb and Groome suggest, there is a need and a hunger for thinking about things that matter. Furthermore, the needs of the world are many, and the world is our parish. Theology as a practice intersecting faith and life and not as an abstract concept can be brought to bear on the needs of the world by laypeople who live and work there. Last, because learning is a joy, it is the very thing for United Methodists. We should assure that that desire in every human soul may be pursued for excellent purposes.

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Susan Willhauck is Assistant Professor of Christian Formation and Discipleship at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.
Endnotes


3. For some, even the words *lay* and *clergy* are increasingly obsolete.


7. In 1866, The Methodist Episcopal Church founded the Freedman’s Aid Society, which supported a commitment to education for all regardless of race. In 1868, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church created the Board of Education in an attempt to coordinate systems of education. The Evangelical Church had prohibitions against theological schools but repealed them in 1868. The United Brethren began plans for their first theological school in 1869. The question of whether laity should be given a voice in General and annual conference also caused considerable debate during this time. From the time they organized in 1830, the Methodist Protestants had granted the laity representation. The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, The Evangelical Association, and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ were slower in granting the laity representation. See Robert H. Conn, *United Methodists and Their Colleges: Themes in the History of a College-Related Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1989), 20, 31.

8. Chautauqua was founded in 1847 by Methodist Bishop John Vincent and Lewis Miller in New York originally to educate Sunday school teachers for the
Methodist Church. It became a center for learning and broadened to include adult education of all kinds, as well as a correspondence course.

11. Ibid., 20. For a history of Scarritt, see Alice Cobb, *Yes, Lord, I'll Do It: Scarritt's Century of Service* (Scarritt College, 1987).
26. A study conducted by Ellis Larsen and published in *Theological Education* (31 Supplement, 1995) reported that 92.3 percent of seminary students surveyed in 1991 were pursuing ordination. However, a subsequent study conducted by Auburn Theological Seminary in 2000 surveyed 10,254 entering master's level seminary students. Eighty percent said that their goal is a religious profession; fewer (60 percent) plan to be ordained, and fewer still (less than one-third) said that ministry in a parish is their goal. See *Is There a Problem? Theological Students and Religious Leadership for the Future* by Barbara G. Wheeler (July 2001); online at http://www.auburnsem.org/studies/8_problem.
From the 3Rs to the 3Ws: Continuing Education in a Digital Age

THOMAS R. HAWKINS

Awash in a "Sea of E"

According to a Sloan Consortium survey, American colleges and universities enrolled approximately 1.6 million students in online courses during the fall semester, 2002. These students represented about 11 percent of American higher education's total student enrollment. Over one-half million of these learners took all their coursework online. These numbers were expected to increase 19 percent between fall 2002 and fall 2003.1

For better or worse, American higher education has embraced the digital revolution. Colleges and universities continue to expand the number of courses and programs made available in an online format. According to the same Sloan Consortium survey, 81 percent of all higher education institutions offer at least one online or blended (face-to-face and online) course. About one-third of American colleges and universities offer one or more degree programs online.

These numbers are still higher if one looks only at public higher education. Fully 97 percent of all public colleges and universities offer at least one online or blended course. Nearly half offer one or more degree programs in an online or blended format. As one university official said to me a few years ago, "Our goal is to be a click and a credit card away from every resident of this state."

Online learning also represents an increasing share of corporate training. About 20 percent of all corporate training is now delivered via learning technologies. These numbers are projected to rise significantly in coming years.2

These trends reflect the phenomenal growth of digitalized electronic communication in our society. According to some researchers, Internet traffic doubled every 100 days in the late 1990s. The number of webpages on the Internet increased from 320 million in December 1997 to 800 million in February 1999.3 Within less than a generation, a system origi-
nally designed to link together a handful of research computers has evolved into a major societal force.

The genie is out of the bottle and will not go back in. Web-based learning has become part of the essential fabric of higher education, continuing education, and corporate training. A critical mass of technologies and strategies have emerged and have become self-sustaining. As a result, we are awash in a "sea of E": eBusiness, eCommerce, eBanking. And, of course, eLearning—the topic of this essay.

E-Learning and Theological Education

Theological education has always had one foot in the church and the other in the academy. Like other academic institutions, theological schools and seminaries are being transformed by the current digital revolution. Some statistics suggest that theological education may be slower to adopt these new technologies than the rest of higher education, however.

The website for the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the United States and Canada states that it is not possible to earn a degree in an ATS-accredited institution solely by distance education courses. Even apart from other considerations, this standard discourages the plunge into online courses and degree programs that one sees elsewhere in public and private higher education.

According to statistics available on the ATS website, 53 institutions report involvement in distance education, the rubric under which member institutions report online programs and courses. These schools and seminaries represent only about 20 percent of ATS's member institutions—a percentage far below that reported in the Sloan Consortium survey of public and private universities.

Admittedly, distance education encompasses several delivery methods ranging from correspondence to telecourses. Consequently, the presence of distance education itself does not necessarily indicate the offering of online courses or programs. Furthermore, these are self-reported data. The actual number of schools utilizing some form of web-based learning may be much higher. A quick perusal of several schools' websites found them using either Web CT or Blackboard—two common electronic course management tools. Nonetheless, the ATS statistics do give some indication of the limited extent to which theological schools are experimenting with electronic delivery of learning.
Theological education's lower commitment to online education may reflect financial concerns. Creating the technological infrastructure to support online learning requires substantial investment of time, money, and personnel. While it is assumed that the major investment is in equipment and software, the real investment is in faculty time and training. Like other private institutions, theological schools often have resource constraints that limit investment in online education.

Private higher education is also likely to believe that what they "market" as their "product" is a particular college experience unavailable at public universities. This "product" usually includes the residential experience. Online courses and programs thus potentially undermine how private universities want to position themselves to attract prospective students. Theological schools likewise emphasize their residential experience as a time of formation in ministry.

This consideration may be particularly important for continuing theological education. Clergy are frequently isolated in ministry. Some isolation is geographic and physical. In other cases, it stems from the "lone ranger" culture that exists among pastors and churches. Continuing education events are some of the few settings where clergy give themselves permission to socialize, connect psychologically or emotionally, and experience spiritual support. Continuing theological education, like private higher education, is not simply delivering information. It is offering a particular residential experience that pastors may have few opportunities to obtain elsewhere.

Online learning can deliver new knowledge and information. But it cannot provide the opportunity to leave town, step outside the everyday practice of ministry, and experience a different pace, perspective, and connection in ministry. Yet these qualities—more than the information or knowledge itself—may be what attract pastors to continuing theological education.

The Sloan Consortium survey nonetheless suggests that theological schools and seminaries cannot afford to ignore online education. Increasing numbers of students entering theological education will anticipate online options based on their own undergraduate experiences. Laity accustomed to corporate online training will expect theological seminaries and denominational agencies to provide web-based learning. Theological schools and seminaries will find themselves caught in a rising tide of e-learning expectations.
Beyond Hyperbole and Suspicion

Some educators have announced the arrival of online learning with enthusiasm and excitement. These educators see digital electronic media as the panacea for all of higher education's ills. Other educators have welcomed these innovations with suspicion and mistrust. They fear online education will degrade the value of learning, turning higher education into one vast electronic diploma mill. The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes.

Like every previous technological innovation, digital communication technologies present educators with both philosophical and practical challenges. Such challenges are nothing new. Contemporary educators overlook how even pencils and printed books were once technological innovations that transformed the teaching/learning process. They forget how cherished traditions were once revolutionary developments resisted in the name of protecting the quality of education.

Ironically, institutions dedicated to learning and growth often demonstrate strong resistance to change. As a teenager I remember using an overhead projector when I went to the bowling alley. I began observing them in classrooms only twenty years later. It took nearly a generation for a simple innovation like the overhead projector to move from the bowling alley to the classroom.

In many instances, the introduction of new technologies prompts a reassessment and reappreciation of older technologies. Emerging alternatives encourage people to recognize more clearly the attributes and consequences of existing technologies. New technologies cast older ones in a fresh light, highlighting benefits not previously apparent before new ways emerged.

In the same way, online educational technologies provide a dual opportunity for continuing theological education. They introduce new tools that may be more effective in reaching a specific audience or conveying a particular content. They also permit a reassessment and reappropriation of traditional classroom practices. Online technologies allow theological educators both to discover new educational practices and to sharpen their usage of existing ones.

The question is not whether new technologies will change how we teach and learn. The answer is already clear: they will. The more important questions focus on how these new technologies will be shaped to cultivate richer personal lives and a healthier global society.
Cyberlearning Places New Demands on Learners

Research consistently has shown no significant difference in learning outcomes between online learning and the traditional classroom. Yet online technologies are obviously a better match for some students than for others. They are also more suited for some bodies of knowledge or disciplines than others. How does continuing theological education assess these multiple effects?

First, web-based learning places a high demand on the ability to read and write. Indeed, written communication skills are the portal through which one enters the world of online education. On the other hand, oral communication skills play a crucial role in the traditional classroom. Electronic classrooms strip away these oral skills. When learners sit at a computer and type words onto a flickering screen, only their written skills matter. Web-based environments privilege the written word in a society characterized by what Walter Ong describes as a “second orality.”

Face-to-face communication skills are vitally important, particularly in pastoral ministry. Pastors use a wide repertoire of communication skills that go far beyond writing alone. Does theological education—particularly continuing theological education—have as either an explicit or implicit goal the strengthening of these oral communication skills? Group facilitation skills? The capacity to deliver effective group presentations not just in the pulpit but in the classroom and in the boardroom?

Simply sitting in a traditional classroom may not necessarily mean acquiring and improving one’s oral communication skills. How different is an online course from one in which learners experience only lectures and textbook readings or are assessed solely on the basis of written exams and a research paper? Face-to-face classrooms may actually perform no better than online education in this regard if instructors emphasize only written skills and fail to include the intentional development of oral communication or group facilitation competencies in their learning objectives, regardless of the course’s subject area. From this perspective, online learning challenges traditional classroom instruction to reconceptualize and deliver what it is best positioned to provide.

Second, web-based learning environments are usually created from building blocks of individual pages or screens. The graphic nature of web-based communication means that each individual page contains only
minimal textual information. The instructional designer creates an elec-
tronic link that combines these building blocks into sequences or patterns
of learning episodes. Learners click and surf from one page to the next,
navigating their way through multiple pages and screens.

This process increases the number of documents that learners must
integrate as they encounter new information. It requires learners to hold
multiple pieces of information simultaneously in their minds and then
combine these data into the expected or anticipated pattern of meaning.
Online education thus places a high cognitive demand on learners. Some
students do well under these conditions. Others perform poorly in this
environment.

Web-based courses also advantage learners who are more adept at
reading nonlinear mass media than in scrutinizing linear texts. Online
environments are essentially nonlinear and ephemeral. They favor graphics
over words. Consequently, these environments are well suited to draw
learners into brief, episodic learning. Readers take in information from one
page. They then point and click on a button that carries them to another
page containing new information. Later, they may return to the original
webpage and follow another sequence that takes them to alternative infor-
mation. Such learning requires active, strategic, and intentional processing.
Not all learners have mastered these cognitive skills.

Consider the language we use to describe online experiences. We
“browse” or “surf” the Web. But we “read” or “analyze” a text. Recent research
suggests that online environments are extremely effective in representing the
same information in multiple ways. Text, sound, and graphic images present
learners with different representations of the same knowledge. But these
presentations are extremely heterogeneous in their verbatim details.6

As a result, web-based environments help learners remember key
themes and general concepts. But they potentially interfere with verbatim
recall of specific information. They decrease exact recall of specific knowl-
edge and increase the transfer of general conceptual understanding. If
learners are seeking general knowledge or a new conceptual framework, then
online learning may be highly effective. If learners want to master specific
information and detail, then these environments may be much less effective.

Planners of theological continuing education need to think carefully
about what learning goals they have for a particular content area. They
need to analyze what learning environment will best support these
outcomes before assuming all content is appropriate for online education.

Pastors seeking continuing education opportunities likewise need to be clear about what type of experience they are seeking, what they hope to learn, and what prior skills they can bring to an online environment. Web-based learning is clearly appropriate and effective for some content areas and learners. In other situations, online learning may be a mismatch for the content, the learner, or both.

One sign of this mismatch is the high attrition rates in online courses. In my own experience as an online instructor, the dropout rate can be quite high. The nature of adult learning accounts for some of this attrition. Adult learners are motivated by practical needs, not grades. Once they learn what they need from an online course, they may not complete it because the grade is less important than the information.

On the other hand, the online environment may be mismatched to the student’s learning style. According to Gardner, some individuals learn best intrapersonally while others are better interpersonal learners. Intrapersonal learners—those who learn best by going inside their own thinking processes—may find cyberlearning more congenial than interpersonal learners, for whom interaction and interpersonal communication are crucial. These differences may also partially explain online education’s high attrition rates.

Such pedagogical issues go beyond social and political concerns of access to computer equipment or the Internet. Differential access to cyberlearning is a quite different but also serious issue. It is more than a fair criticism that online education runs the risk of excluding large segments of the population from participation. Computers and Web access are expensive, particularly to pastors whose salaries are low relative to other professions.

Ironically, these technologies simultaneously both include and exclude. While the Internet may exclude the impoverished, it also allows for the inclusion of older adults who are less mobile, pastors living in rural areas or far from theological institutions, and female clergy isolated from other women pastors. We cannot underestimate the positive impact that bulletin boards, chat rooms, and other synchronous or asynchronous communication has on these pastors. To dismiss online learning because it potentially excludes some populations is to overlook how it includes other previously isolated groups.
Online Community—From Topos To Chora

Learning is not a spectator sport. It requires active involvement with a body of knowledge. It also depends on mutuality and partnership within a community of learners. Learning is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated.

What happens to this community of learners in an online environment? Can community really exist if we are not face-to-face in a classroom? Is community possible in a virtual environment?

The ancient Greeks had two words for "place": topos and chora. Topos referred to physical location or the actual geographic features of a place. Chora, on the other hand, was an older term that described more the subjective meaning or "feel" of a place. According to Plato, chori unifies the physical and moral. It captures the sensuousness and energy of a place. Plato believed that chora could be known only through myth and story, not through pure reason.8

Community, for Plato, is not completely a matter of shared physical place. We all know congregations that share the same topos but lack any sense of genuine community. Chora as a place of community is about narrative and story. It encompasses the sensuous feel and energy of a particular place. It has more to do with story and narrative than physical proximity.

Our English language hints at this same phenomenon. The root for the English word relationship is the Latin word relatio. One of the earliest meanings of relatio is "to narrate, account, or tell."9 Its suffix comes from the Anglo-Saxon scipe. Scieppan means literally "to create or make."10 A relationship is the creation of a narrative or a telling. Community occurs as people gather stories together. We create community through the stories we share.

Ultimately, community is more about what people do together than where they are physically. Online learning communities are at least a theoretical possibility, even when their actual realization may yet remain partial and incomplete. Online community happens when learners tell stories or narrate experiences so as to generate shared energy and meaning.

Paradoxically, web-based environments both connect and isolate people. The impact of online learning environments is no simple matter. Virtual community has complex and contradictory effects.

When I discuss the issue of community with my own online students,
the underlying theme is often "alone, but together." I suspect one reason for these responses could be a failure to understand community as chora or relatio-scieppan. Learners use the Internet primarily as a tool of North American market capitalism. They access it as consumers of goods and services. Consequently, they approach online learning as consumers of information, not as constructors of shared meaning.

Electronic learning environments challenge educators to hone their skills in creating communities of learning. Perhaps we have assumed so long that shared topos is equivalent to shared community that we have lost the capacity to cultivate chora. Online learning becomes a field of play where we can rediscover how to create communities of shared meaning and collaborative learning. These discoveries could, in fact, have transformative consequences for traditional classrooms.

I actually have more contact with learners in an online course than in a traditional classroom. The web-based environment requires email and chat session contact with every learner on a weekly basis. In some larger traditional classrooms, students can come and go without ever making personal contact with the instructor.

I am more apt to become acquainted with the shy or introverted student when teaching an online course. The traditional classroom privileges the verbally facile student. These students always have a comment and are quick with an answer. Introverted learners can be easily overlooked. But online environments actually allow the shy or introverted student to flourish. Introverted learners have time to think through their answer before responding. The asynchronous nature of threaded discussions and bulletin boards creates a space where their thoughts and observations can be shared.

In a traditional classroom, I may leave feeling we had a terrific discussion. But if I examine the interactions carefully, perhaps only 25 percent of the class actually spoke. Online environments, on the other hand, allow the quieter 75 percent of students to find their voices.

Classroom discussions are fleeting. The words hang momentarily in the air and then disappear. It is impossible to capture all the thoughts, observations, insights, and feelings shared by participants. The sensuous feel, the energy, the insights, and illumination flicker momentarily between us and then disappear.

Online discussions, on the other hand, are text-based. Threaded discus-
sessions or chat sessions can be archived so participants can go back and review them. Text can be analyzed. Insights can be captured and preserved. More perspectives can be genuinely entertained. Cyberlearning permits a depth of processing that remains unavailable in most traditional classrooms.

I have a wider array of tools to assess student learning in an online course than in a traditional classroom. An online course’s text-based environment allows me to review student participation rates and study interaction patterns between students. I can quantify the level of participation and the quality of responses. Web-based environments allow me to monitor who is contributing to each group project. I can observe how often a particular student has commented or contributed to a threaded discussion. I can count participation rates and observe whether someone logged in late or signed off early.

Navigating through online learning has the potential to make every theological educator a better instructor in traditional classrooms. Having taught in a digital environment, I am much more intentional about how I create a community of learners. I have an additional repertoire of teaching strategies. I watch for different patterns and interactions.

Creating a learning community does not come easily or automatically in an online environment; neither can it be taken for granted in the traditional classroom. Instructors must intentionally cultivate a hospitable space—a *chora*—where community can emerge and flourish. Facing the paradoxical and elusive challenge of community formation in a web-based classroom may actually enable us to foster more genuine expressions of community not only online but in the traditional classroom’s *topos*.

**Theological Implications**

Cyberlearning is not just a practical or technical issue. It also poses important theological questions.

Some researchers have described the Internet as the ultimate identity tool. Much of what we do online involves the presentation of self. How we present ourselves comes sharply into focus when we create a course webpage introducing ourselves or add a self-description to an electronic bulletin board or contribute to a threaded discussion. One dark side of the Internet is its capacity to mask identity or to allow us to assume alternative identities. Gender, for example, can be concealed or bent.

As Internet usage increases, the church cannot afford to leave unexam-
ined its impact on the construction and presentation of self. The Internet contributes to what postmodern philosophy identifies as the shift away from a stable self toward a more problematic, fragmentary, and kaleidoscopic personal identity. In such an environment, what does our baptismal identity mean?

Web-based pedagogies also reinforce a strict Cartesian duality. Body and mind, flesh and spirit are separated. We become disembodied words on a screen. My body sits here, in this chair, typing. But somehow my essence, my thoughts and feelings, are separate from me. They appear on a screen somewhere in cyberspace. Web-based environments can create an unhealthy separation of mind and body. They reinforce the assumption that learning happens only inside our own heads. They make it difficult to learn by doing or by reflection-in-action. In a medium that separates body from mind, what does it mean to profess that the Word becomes flesh?

Cyberlearning also presents the church with epistemological questions. In a virtual world, what is knowledge? Online learning favors a cognitive constructivist philosophy of education that draws heavily from the work of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and John Dewey.\textsuperscript{12}

Cognitive constructivism asserts that knowledge is not something already prepackaged, which learners discover "out there." Instead, learners construct knowledge mentally as they process and structure information or experience. Knowledge is not so much given as it is discovered. Online environments provide an ideal seedbed for this self-directed deconstruction and reconstruction of experience.

Constructivist education also emphasizes the communal production of meaning. We construct knowledge through the give-and-take of dialogue and shared reflection-in-action. Teachers themselves are part of the learning community. They are not experts, whose mastery of content allows them to stand above and outside the learning process. They are co-learners with students. While it would be a vast oversimplification to say that cyberlearning challenges educators to be a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage," this statement contains a germ of truth.

A cognitive constructivist philosophy of education comes into immediate conflict with the Platonic idealism embedded in much of Christian theology. Platonic idealism sees truth as a set of timeless, unchanging principles rather than as temporary constructs of the mind. It places the teacher in a uniquely powerful role. The teacher is indeed a "sage on the
stage." Teachers stand closer to the truth than do learners because they have worked diligently to obtain more knowledge of timeless truths. The teacher's role is to pass on these truths, not to be a co-learner who serves as the "guide on the side."

Many strands of Western Christian theological reflection have been intertwined with Platonic idealism since at least St. Augustine of Hippo. Resistance to online education stems, in part, from a natural reluctance to embrace new technologies. It also arises from the Platonic idealism of the Western theological tradition. How the church embraces online learning may depend on how Christian thinkers critically assess these Platonic roots and explore how cognitive constructivist philosophies of education contribute to Christianity in a postmodern context.

\* \* \*

Thomas R. Hawkins teaches in the Career and Organizational Studies Program of the School of Technology, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, Illinois.

Endnotes

10. Ibid., 1675.
The Discussion since 1996

In 1996, the United Methodist General Council on Ministries and the United Methodist Council of Bishops submitted reports to General Conference dealing with the question of the global nature of The United Methodist Church. Both reports stressed that the church had come to a crucial point in history. In their report, the bishops observed,

We believe that the next step in the pilgrimage of “the people called Methodist” is to become a global Church. . . . By becoming a global church, The United Methodist Church is only being consistent with its self-understanding, its membership and fellowship, its identity and polity, and its commitment and witness to the Christian faith. If it does not take this step of becoming a global church, it will most likely face the danger of becoming fragmented into autonomous churches in various nations of the world, with the American segment becoming merely that—an American fragment of the once future global United Methodist Church.2

A Connectional Process Team was set up during the 1996–2000 quadrennium. It was the first denomination-wide study group in which delegates from each of the three areas outside the United States (the central conferences in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines) had an equal representation to the five U.S. jurisdictions. The study report, presented in 2000, made bold proposals for restructuring the church on almost all levels—too bold to be acceptable to
General Conference. With the resolution *Living into The Future*, General Conference gave the General Council on Ministries a mandate to continue the search for a new structure on the level of the general church. During the 2000–2004 quadrennium, debate went on whether The United Methodist Church should become more global or whether all parts outside the U.S. should become autonomous Methodist churches.4

Few Methodists are aware of how old the debate is and how many times in its history The United Methodist Church and its predecessors have oscillated between these two options. In this article, I present some major elements of this story.

**The Radical Change to Autonomy in the 1960s**

At the General Conference of The Methodist Church in 1964, the Commission on Structure of Methodism Overseas (COSMOS) presented its report about the history and future of the Central Conferences outside the United States. The report was smooth reading but hid dynamite. In the early 1960s, an outspoken proposal for radical change would have been considered as a threat to the mission of the church. Therefore, the COSMOS report presented its solutions as if they were in line with the tradition of the church; but, in fact, they would have changed the tradition radically. It proposed that all parts of The Methodist Church outside the U.S. consider becoming autonomous. These autonomous Methodist churches could then decide whether they would like to remain in an affiliation with the "mother church" in the U.S. or unite with other churches in their countries.

Until the mid-1970s, all central conferences and annual conferences in Central and Latin America and in Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, became autonomous and sometimes entered church unions. The church in Africa was still too dependent on the U.S. and chose to remain in the central conference structure. In Europe, only one annual conference—Belgium—decided for autonomy and church union. Thus, The United Methodist Church, established in 1968, united two Methodist traditions in the U.S. and in German-speaking parts of Europe but began its mission as a church more American and less global than ever before in the twentieth century!

As far as figures are available, the following comparison for 1972 shows the percentage of United Methodists still in central conferences outside the U.S. and the percentage of Methodists outside the U.S., including those who have become autonomous (percentages related to the total number for
United Methodism inside and outside the U.S.). Keep in mind that almost half of the Methodists living in central conferences—those in India—would become autonomous at a later date, thus further reducing the percentage of those remaining in central conferences after 1976:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1972—United Methodist Church</th>
<th>Total UMC</th>
<th>% outside the U.S. in UMC central conference</th>
<th>% outside the U.S. including new autonomous churches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bishops in activity</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual conferences</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>37,243</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church membership</td>
<td>10,797,366</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many reasons have led to the dramatic changes in the worldwide connection of United Methodism in the 1960s. It was a time of decolonization. Churches in countries that entered a new phase of political independence did not want to remain "dependent" on mother churches in foreign countries. Self-determination was an important watchword. There was also a quest for adapting the church's mission to the local culture. American influence should no longer prevail. The Board of Missions of The Methodist Church had always been heavily U.S.-managed, and now it pushed the idea of autonomy. Partnership in mission was not yet the policy. And then there was the ecumenical ideal of the unity of the church in each place. Thus, in many countries Methodists entered into unions with other churches.

The dramatic change toward autonomy and church union sometimes came out of local initiatives, especially in Asia. But more often than generally acknowledged, the Board of Missions of The Methodist Church actively pushed non-U.S. annual conferences toward autonomy and church unions. It did not see any future for the connectional structure established through central conferences. The Board of Missions wanted to promote liberation paradigms, and it applied them even in the face of opposition in central conferences. I had the privilege of interviewing one of the former bishops in Europe about his experiences around 1970 when the Board of Missions promoted its policy behind the back of the episcopal leader in the area. It was this kind of interference that European Methodists criticized as too
much American influence. European Methodists had indigenous leadership and financial self-support. They viewed their relation to the U.S. part of the church as a partnership. World War II had shown them the danger of any church established along national borders. They kept to the “old” model of a connectional structure of conferences. When Europe was deeply divided into two models for society—Western free-market versus Communist state-market—the international conference structure helped them remain connected beyond what some saw as an insurmountable “iron curtain.” The connection built up earlier in the century was confirmed in its ability to build bridges and maintain function.

The Awareness of a Worldwide Connection in the 1920s

In the midst of World War I, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, prepared the centenaries of their missionary societies. Both churches launched tremendous campaigns to collect money to strengthen the mission of the church, domestic and foreign. The campaigns set goals of over $100 million! The experience of the Great War challenged the churches in their call to evangelistic, social, and medical outreach. The response to the campaign immediately after the war was tremendous. Problems came later in the 1920s when the economy weakened and finally crashed. But in both churches, the first General Conferences after World War I gathered in a spirit of enthusiasm to enter a new age of global mission. And they took far-reaching actions.

The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, decided to begin mission in several new countries, including three European countries. It coordinated its effort with its sister church so as to choose countries where the Methodist Episcopal Church had not yet been present. The latter denomination went even further: its 1920 General Conference elected more new bishops than ever before and almost half of all bishops were assigned to central conferences outside the U.S. Several of the new bishops were indigenous church leaders and, for the first time, received the same status of general superintendents as their American colleagues. General Conference created new central conferences and delegated more authority to them for organizing the ministry of the church within their boundaries. The following figures, limited to the Methodist Episcopal Church, show a mission that had a wide outreach already at the beginning of this phase of becoming even more global.
The episcopal addresses to the General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, before and after 1920, repeatedly insisted that the main goal of mission is not to export an American way of life. Here is one example from General Conference in 1924:

Ours is a "world church". Unity in diversity is a watchword congenial with the temper of historic Methodism. We do not seek to establish in other countries a church which in organization and control shall be American. . . . To Christianize and not to Americanize or to Westernize is the object of our endeavour.5

Looking back, one still has to deplore a too-strong American domination; but primary sources show that church leaders were aware of the danger even if they could not entirely shed their cultural background.

Throughout the 1920s, the discussion went on whether and in which ways the structure of the church, especially of General Conference, should be adapted to its global outreach. This debate overlapped with the ongoing consultation about a union with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. It was the Board of Foreign Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church that reminded delegates to General Conference in 1928 that further structural changes needed to be made.

The logic of this position is that the Church in the United States should be governed by a Central Conference for the United States. . . . These various Central Conferences, through representative delegates, could then be organically united into a real ecumenical Conference, the function of which would be to discuss and legislate on the increasingly vital world issues of interna-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1920—Methodist Episcopal Church</th>
<th>Total MEC</th>
<th>% outside the U.S. in MEC central conferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Bishops in activity</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual conferences</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>19,244</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church membership</td>
<td>4,492,401</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tional relations, race and other problems, all of which have to edge their way to the front, at the present time, amid a jam of local interests.  

In 1928, the planned union of the three U.S. Methodist churches took precedence for the U.S. delegates. They did not want to enter into any remodeling of General Conference. Instead, they adopted changes for the non-U.S. part of the church. General Conference delegated more power to the central conferences, e.g., for electing their own bishops. But these central conference bishops no longer had the same status as the bishops elected by General Conference. Over time, episcopal leadership in central conferences was relegated to a second-class status. Therefore, self-determination and autonomy became a welcome option for central conferences, especially in Asia.

In the churches that later came together in the Evangelical United Brethren tradition, the percentage in membership residing outside the U.S. around 1920 was even slightly higher than in the above-mentioned figures. But the mission fields outside the U.S. were encouraged to enter into unions with other churches at an early stage of the ecumenical movement. When the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) was formed after World War II, only a few non-U.S. annual conferences were still part of it: in Africa (Sierra Leone) and Europe (Germany and Switzerland). In the early 1960s, the EUB collaborated with more than sixty different boards and agencies for ecumenical ministries in foreign mission.

I spoke earlier about the ways in which the 1960s encouraged a wave of autonomy in The Methodist Church. Therefore, after the union between the EUB and the Methodist Church, the newly formed United Methodist Church was less global than its predecessor churches had been in earlier parts of the century.

**The Progress toward a more Global Connection in the 1980s and 1990s**

In all the discussions about structure in the 1960s it became obvious that the church had remained an American institution for too long. In establishing The United Methodist Church in 1968 great care was given to ensure adequate representation for all kinds of minorities—but only among the U.S. branch of the church. With the exception of the General Board of Global Ministries, the general boards and agencies had their mandates only
for the U.S. church. Central conference delegates had a tough time at General Conferences to ensure that their issues were not eclipsed by the mass of "more important" issues brought by the U.S. delegates. Progress came only in the 1980s.

Since 1980 at least one of the episcopal members of each general program board had to come from a central conference. In 1984, the General Board of Global Ministries included three additional central conference bishops and three additional members from each central conference. In 1988, a further step was taken. The board of directors of each general board now had to include at least three persons from outside the United States. Also, other boards, not just the General Board of Global Ministries, were allowed to work outside the United States. These were important steps toward genuine partnership between the U.S. church and the central conferences.

It was an African bishop who challenged the church to build an institution that can offer quality higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1988, General Conference accepted the project of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to establish Africa University. Africa had come to the forefront of interest at General Conference. Eastern Europe followed a quadrennium later, after the fall of Communism and the renewal of mission in Russia. The 1992 General Conference asked for a study about the global nature of the church. In 1996, the General Council on Ministries and the Council of Bishops each reported to General Conference. Both reports made suggestions for a structural change that would include General Conference itself. There is no evidence in the reports that the authors were aware of the global outreach the church had in the 1920s and relinquished in the 1960s. But both reports stressed that the church had come to a crucial point in history, as the quotation at the beginning of this article shows.

**The Theological Implications of a Connectional Structure**

When the Methodist revival began, Wesley had no intention of establishing a new or more biblical form of church. For him, the Church of England was the best in the world. But in building up a connectional structure, with different levels of conferences and mutual accountability among those in leadership, Wesley formed a new model. Methodists in the United States continued to develop this model. In order to ensure unity among the annual
conferences. American Methodists established a General Conference.

Through foreign mission, annual conferences were created on other continents; but they remained in connection with the General Conference. Since the 1880s the establishment of central conferences in regions outside the U.S. helped them to organize their work on their own. Thus, a connectional structure of global outreach came into being in American Methodism. British Methodism did not develop such a connectional structure beyond national borders. Mission fields either remained dependent on the Missionary Society in London or became autonomous annual conferences in their countries.

In the early twentieth century, the leadership of the Methodist Episcopal Church prided itself on being the only Protestant church that could rival the Roman Catholic Church in forming a unity on a global level and yet maintaining democratic principles. Of course, behind these claims lay exaggeration and "church marketing" in favor of the church's influence in American society. Nevertheless, to this day, the Methodist connectional structure is studied with interest in ecumenical circles, including the Catholics.

There is no such thing as the biblical model of a church. Already in the New Testament, one can find different models of structuring the church and of conferring authority to persons set apart. But all biblical texts emphasize the unity of the church. And this unity is seen as more than a spiritual reality. It is lived out through concrete mutual relations among persons and local churches. The spirit of unity takes flesh in a mutual connectedness. One of the most powerful New Testament images is that of the church as the body of Christ, in which each member is connected with every other member. The image applies not only to the connection within a local church but also to the relation between local churches. Paul confines with the brethren in Jerusalem in order to maintain the unity of the church in the mission to the Gentiles. Later he collects money and brings support to the poor in Jerusalem. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the ideal of self-determination or autonomy as a model for the church (nor do we find the ideal of being determined by others). For the biblical texts, individuals, local churches, and church leaders confer in a relation of partnership and mutual accountability for the sake of a common mission.

In my opinion, the connectional structure of Methodism, with its different levels of conference, is a very appropriate expression of the biblical witness to the interrelatedness and unity of the church. I value it all the more as it connects conferences beyond the boundaries of nations, languages, and
cultures. It is a unique chance to exchange faith experiences and to be enriched by it. It also reminds those in the Western hemisphere of their material privileges and their obligation to share with those in need. And in a world where people move around easily and where willful or forced migration grows, ministry in new languages and to people of other cultures is needed in many countries. The interrelatedness of a connectional church beyond national borders may help Methodists to be up to the task. Thus, they live an important dimension of the unity of the body of Christ.

Inevitably, such a global understanding of unity creates tensions with other understandings of ecumenicity. As mentioned above, the ecumenical movement promoted the ideal of the unity of the church in one place. According to this ideal, there should be but one, united church within a certain territory. Interestingly, all church unions were planned along political boundaries. Why is church unity subject to political categories? It might well be that old, European traditions of state churches influenced ecumenical discussions and shaped the ideal of the unity of the church within one nation. But what about the unity of the church between the nations? Originally, the word ecumenical meant the “whole inhabited world.” United Methodists have lived this worldwide unity within their connection. This is also an ecumenical sign of value! If it had been lived out with more conviction and in a better partnership, there would not exist seventy-four denominations within the World Methodist Council today, all tracing their roots to Wesley. In creating autonomous Methodist churches in other parts of the world, the Methodists have multiplied the number of existing churches. And if these autonomous Methodist churches, in a laudable missionary spirit, begin ministry outside their boundaries, the multiplication of denominations advances; and neither the unity of the church in general nor of the Methodists in particular has gained from it.

Like every human structure, the United Methodist connection is far from perfect. It needs to be continually (re)-formed by grace. Some reforms have been made in the past; others have been refused. And new challenges will require further reforms.

The Present Challenge for United Methodists in a Global Perspective

Despite the losses to the autonomy movement during the 1960s, The United Methodist Church is growing rapidly in many parts of the world,
especially in Africa. The figures in 2000 show a percentage in membership outside the U.S. comparable to the peak attained earlier in the twentieth century, despite the fact that the regions where United Methodist annual and central conferences exist today are much more limited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2000—United Methodist Church</th>
<th>Total UMC</th>
<th>% outside the U.S. in UMC central conferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bishops in activity</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual conferences</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>47,293</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church membership</td>
<td>9,693,770</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As membership outside the United States grows, delegations from central conferences to General Conference will steadily increase. If the percentage increases further, it creates a structural problem. It would be a pity if the church reverted to a push for autonomy as a solution. Moreover, the mandate given to General Conference increases the structural problem. Most of the decisions taken at General Conference affect primarily the U.S. church and do not lend themselves to adaptation by the central conferences for their regional needs. Understandably, there is a risk that major American issues would be of more interest to U.S. delegates than the need to overcome language barriers in order to live in an enriching cross-cultural unity and mission as the body of Christ.

Twice in the past the process towards union within American Methodism (before 1939 and 1968) consumed so much energy that issues of needed reform of the General Conference and general boards and agencies were delayed. Therefore, the challenge to restructure General Conference so that it deals primarily with the issues of the general or global church remains unsolved. Such a General Conference would also be shorter and more cost effective. Probably it would mean creating for the U.S. a kind of a central or regional conference.

The different levels of conferences in The United Methodist Church help adapt the mission of the church to its context. Forthcoming reforms have to escape the danger either of centralizing affairs or of breaking the
connectional ties. On the general church level, there is a tendency towards centralization and on the local church level towards self-determination. Both dispositions are nourished by the fear that the opposite inclination could win. But, happily, the mission of the church is forwarded by general boards as well as by local churches and individuals. The 2000 statistics cited above do not contain the regions and countries where the General Board of Global Ministries and the boards of mission in central conferences have started or supported new mission initiatives during the past decade. The European boards of mission are a living example that a central conference does not need to become autonomous in order to be a missionary sending church. Some years ago, annual conferences in Africa also began mission initiatives in adjacent countries. Therefore, another challenge will be to develop an effective partnership between the general boards and agencies and the boards and agencies in central conferences.

New mission initiatives have often been started by laypeople among their compatriots—today as much as in the nineteenth century among Germans, Scandinavians, and other immigrants to the United States. Cambodia is a recent example. Refugees who became United Methodists while in the U.S. and in Europe started churches on their return to Cambodia. Today, five different mission boards from four Methodist churches—United Methodist and autonomous Methodist—work cooperatively in building up a unified Methodist Church in Cambodia. The challenge for United Methodists will be to find new, creative ways in order that such initiatives can continue in a truly ecumenical cooperation without destroying the connectional link. By severing the connectional link we would only create one more autonomous Methodist church. What the Book of Discipline allows for ecumenical partnership on the local church level could inspire us to find new ways for ecumenical partnership on the annual or central conference level.

Working in a global context requires long-term strategies. Of course, the economic difference allows small amounts of U.S. currency or expertise to make a huge impact in poorer countries. Yet it may take decades for these churches to reach self-support—as in the case for Methodist mission in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. In 2000, the General Conference established a fund for theological education in the post-Communist countries of Europe. However, it is not possible to build up sustainable institutions in one quadrennium. Similar requests for assis-
tance with theological education and higher education flock in from other continents. In many countries in the southern or eastern parts of the world, the challenge will be to train not a new but a first generation of leaders, lay and clergy, for fast-growing Methodist churches! The church needs to strengthen higher and theological education on a global level.

New and captivating challenges await The United Methodist Church at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is a unique chance to live an enriching partnership within a global connection and through a mutually beneficial solidarity in mission.

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Patrick Streiff is a pastor in Biel and the director of the Centre Méthodiste de Formation Théologique in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Endnotes

4. See, for example, “I'm Glad to Be with You for a Change,” by Daniel K. Church, the General Secretary of the General Council on Ministries, delivered to the Council during its October 2001 meeting, in which he sets forth the option of autonomy for United Methodists outside the U.S.
5. Episcopal Address in the Journal of the General Conference–1924 (Methodist Episcopal Church, 1924), 159-60.
8. Ample illustrations could be given on both sides, from General Conference
decisions to affairs put before the Jurisdictional Council. One example may be the above-mentioned report to the October 2001 GCOM meeting (see endnote 4), where a proposal for uniting the boards of directors of the general boards and agencies was supported by the question "Is this vital work uniquely advantaged by having a quasi-autonomous board of directors?"—to which the answer was no. Thus, on the level of the general church, "quasi-autonomy" seems to be considered in a negative light, while recommending autonomy for conferences outside the U.S.! Mutual connectedness in partnership would be a better option on both sides.

9. It may be helpful to add that, within the connectional structure of United Methodism, the European annual conferences long ago established and coordinated their own boards of mission. Their work is highly appreciated by the partner churches, which are either United Methodist or autonomous Methodist churches in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

10. Official representatives from the Methodist Church in Korea, the Methodist Church in Singapore, the World Federation of Chinese Methodist Churches and The United Methodist Church (General Board of Global Ministries and the Board of Mission of the Switzerland–France Annual Conference) work together.

11. When the first legislation for central conferences was written in the 1880s, the possibilities for ecumenical cooperation were among its aims, but the paragraph was not used and was soon deleted!
What is good and what is bad about General Conference?

GRANT HAGIYA

We all have our likes and dislikes about General Conference. These perceptions are colored by our subjective experience and thus stretch over a wide range.

I polled my own General Conference delegation and also the heads of my (Western) jurisdiction’s delegation about what they found positive and helpful about General Conference and what they thought needed changing. Here are the top responses:

Positive and helpful:
• Great worship experiences and preaching
• Gathering together and reflecting the diversity and character of the global church that we are
• The vitality of our mission to the world and a chance to shape that mission for the future

Negative/Needs Changing:
• Tendency to polarize between ideological positions and a system that reinforces rather than mediates such polarization
• Self-centeredness and lack of trust, continued on page 195

ROBERT C. SCHNASE

When United Methodists describe General Conference as the primary locus of church authority, they invest this event and process with significant expectations. They anticipate that leaders confer on how more effectively to fulfill Christ’s mission at local, conference, and global levels and to adapt to a changing world. They hold one another accountable, encourage new ministry, and re-establish their identity as part of the Wesleyan family. They expect leaders to set direction, vision, and goals; to moderate internal conflict; and to mobilize against threats that undermine mission. How does General Conference measure up against these expectations?

Establishing Direction. General Conference does not serve well for articulating a common vision, coherent goals, or effective strategies for mission. The process does not lend itself to reflective thought, thorough consideration, or creative alternatives. The delegates’ most time-

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leading to an inward rather than outward focus

- Lack of faith and trust in the Holy Spirit to move us beyond our divisions, disagreements, and pettiness

I agree with these assessments and would add the following reflections. First, General Conference provides the opportunity to worship, work with, and enjoy the presence of committed United Methodists from all over the world. As already mentioned, the worship and preaching at General Conference represent our denomination at its very best, and God must smile upon us as we lift our voices in praise and thanksgiving as a global community. There are always sacred moments at General Conference where culture and ideology are transcended and where we live grounded in the triune God who lifts us to the heights of our faith. Nothing can replace those special moments, and we need to be reminded that they come most often when we are about the task of worship and prayer. John Wesley knew that holy living must always be the central focus of our work as the church of Jesus Christ. In the words of Netscape's CEO, Jim Barksdale, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing!" We know what our main thing is as United Methodists!

The second positive element about General Conference is reflected in the people who assemble there. Generally, these are the most gifted and committed people the church has. On the whole, I have experienced General Conference delegates as those who really love the church and who are willing to give their all to the mission and the purpose of our church.

Historically, Christianity has been at its best when it is persecuted. For example, in Japan Christianity has always been suspect, and practicing Christians have been treated accordingly. However, it is when a person's faith makes a difference in life and death that Christianity shines. We who live in places where Christianity is the majority religion quickly forget this truth.

"What are you willing to die for?" becomes the operating question here. I firmly believe that those delegates who assemble at General Conference can answer this question and its reverse "What are you willing to live for?" with a resounding yes: "I am willing to die/live for the church of Jesus Christ!" I have witnessed the commitment and love of the church to this degree at all levels of our United Methodist Church, and especially at General Conference.

In terms of what needs changing about General Conference, I am struck
by the complexity of the issues that confront us. One major concern has to do with the process by which we work at General Conference. For the most part, that process involves a legislative form dominated by *Robert's Rules of Order*. Obviously, with 1,000 delegates, there must be a form of order that enables the body to move forward; but a strict parliamentary procedure is not the best process to work out differences and resolve conflicts. Honest dialogue and mutual sharing work best in resolving differences. The process would be helped greatly if we could model in our deliberations and decision-making what goes on in our worship experiences. Behind the concern with process is obviously the deep ideological tensions that exist in our church. Homosexuality, abortion, sexism, and racism represent but a few of the myriad of issues about which we hold deep and conflicting feelings and attitudes. Our diversity as a church means that we represent a wide range of opinions about such issues. Tensions are high enough that talk of schisms and disenfranchisement are far more the norm than should be expected for the church of Jesus Christ. It is perfectly normal that we should have honest ideological differences. But when tensions run so high that there are political strategies leading to disenfranchisement and separation, something is wrong and needs to be addressed.

Another negative factor is the deep lack of trust at all levels of the church. Mistrust runs rampant across our denomination: progressives vs. conservatives, laity vs. clergy, delegates vs. bishops, local churches vs. the bureaucracy, general agencies vs. general church. Lack of trust breeds fear and suspicion, which in turn breeds repression and negative actions. Parliamentary procedure provides a framework of order that controls such tensions and mistrust, but it cannot resolve differences. A more appropriate approach involves dialogue, discernment, and mutual sharing. The California-Pacific Annual Conference has had tremendous success in bringing progressives and conservatives together in mutual dialogue, where the first priorities are understanding and mutual respect. General Conference can be improved by spending time in dialogue and discernment.

Another change would be to better utilize our bishops at General Conference. To see the bishops sitting passively on the stage has evoked the observation, "Our bishops are like potted plants." One rule change accepted by the General Conference Rules and Plan of Organization Committee has the bishops chairing the legislative committees. This is a move in the right direction. However, as a clear check on their power,
bishops will not be able to bring any legislation to the floor of General Conference, where it will be the duty of the vice-chair and secretary of the legislative committee. Also, this involves at most eleven bishops; and it is a far cry from enabling them as a group to take a more active role.

General Council on Ministries General Secretary, Dan Church suggested that we form a bicameral legislative body where the Council of Bishops forms a distinct and separate legislative body from the elected delegates. Although innovative, for many Church's proposal seems too radical a change at this time.

My suggestion would be somewhere in the middle. Why not enable bishops to take an active part in the formation of doctrine for the general church? According to the Book of Discipline, bishops are the central figures in defending and teaching United Methodist doctrine. Why then do we not include them in the formation and creation of our doctrine? Historically, this has been a central role for bishops; we would do well to restore this important episcopal function. I do not think we do a very good job in our legislation of doctrine. The wordsmithing of doctrine takes time and patience; attempting to put it all together during General Conference is not feasible. Why not enable the Council of Bishops to work on this throughout the quadrennium and present it to General Conference for a vote? Bishops could take on a role in the Faith and Order legislative section, but the hard work will have been completed and well thought through ahead of time. Keep in mind, through the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools (AUMTS), our bishops have at their disposal the best theological minds that the church offers. Often resident theological experts are called in for dialogue with the Council of Bishops. Suffice it to say, there are practical ways our bishops can be more effective at General Conference than just looking pretty on the stage!

United Methodists need to practice the continuous sanctification that John Wesley so insisted upon in our private lives also in our corporate lives. As a church, we need constantly to grow toward love of God and neighbor. General Conference enables us to model this for the entire connection.

Grant Hagiya is the Los Angeles district superintendent in the California-Pacific Annual Conference and was a clergy delegate to the 2004 General Conference.
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A consuming task is to respond to petitions prepared outside of and prior to conference, placing delegates in a reactive posture and focusing their work on slivers of church polity instead of directional change.

For instance, a subcommittee may deal with the ordination process—a complex series of choices, pathways, and requirements that covers dozens of Disciplinary paragraphs. The piecemeal process of perfecting individual paragraphs militates against substantial reevaluation, narrows debate, reduces innovation, and fosters a systemic organizational conservatism that allows incremental change at best. Adapting to a changing world becomes difficult and unlikely. Conference provides no forum for informed, well-studied, carefully prepared presentations on alternative plans, with consideration of purpose, theological significance, and analysis of anticipated effect. Like laborers on Ford’s early assembly line, the delegates focus on tightening the bolt in front of them, without meaningful participation in the discussion about whether they are building a racer, a sedan, or an army tank. Delegates pour themselves into legislative tasks with resolve and intensity, yet walk away frustrated by the inability to influence change. Unfortunately, many delegates believe that the one way they can influence direction in the church is through funding decisions as they respond to competing requests from boards, agencies, and special initiatives.

Moderating Conflict. One can discern a rhythm at General Conference. Those present move from moments of profound communion to times when they feel palpable mistrust. On the one hand, they use organic models for community to describe and celebrate their relationship to one another—body of Christ, members, communion, bread, family, sisters, brothers. On the other hand, they use adversarial strategies for deciding most of the business, experiencing conference as a cauldron of competing self-interests, regional alliances, and caucus agendas. Primary connection for many delegates comes through the mutual support they find in affinity groups based on theology, board affiliation, race, gender, or cause. Rather than a gathering to listen, discern, and decide together on goals of the church, General Conference seems a collection of people elected to win advantage in their effort to represent an idea, protect a project, or pursue an agenda with little regard for competing claims. Many groups depend upon the cohesive quality of fear to mobilize response. Delegates find it difficult to moderate conflict when they are motivated to win.
Some compare General Conference to a political convention; however, Conference is more like a meeting together of the Democratic and Republican conventions with the object of agreeing on common priorities. This places upon delegates great responsibility to foster the unifying elements of their life together in Christ.

Connectionalism is a spiritual reality that allows our purpose, task, and responsibility for Christ's work to extend beyond our own locus and point of reference. Like communion in Christ, connection is at once persevering and resilient while also fragile and easily fragmented. General Conference does better at reminding United Methodists of their common history than binding them to a common future. An intensely political organization that aspires to communion requires intentionality in how the members pursue passions with humility and accept limits to their will with grace.

Mobilizing against Threats. For many delegates the greatest threat to the church's mission is the theology or social agenda of other United Methodists. Intense internal debates distract from discussing many of the substantial threats to the church's mission and block meaningful response.

What threatens our mission is the difficulty of recruiting pastoral leadership, the aging of congregations, the failure to develop ministry models that reflect the diversity of communities, unmanageable insurance costs, lack of clarity about the role of ordained ministry, the unchallenged assimilation of the dominant culture's values into church life, outside groups defining issues and influencing direction, lack of consensus about the church's global nature, and an increasingly evident regionalism that threatens unity. General Conference seems ill-equipped to hear, accept, adapt, and respond to these threats. Incremental amendments to Disciplinary paragraphs and heated debates among competing claimants on apportionment dollars do not help delegates respond to these threats. General Conference remands to conferences and churches the hard work of resolving the most complex systemic issues that confront the church.

Reestablishing Identity. General Conference does amazingly well at reestablishing identity as United Methodists, even when marked by conflict and little forward movement. The same process that makes Conference resistant to meaningful change also protects the church from extremes and maintains United Methodist culture as a moderate, open, diverse, global denomination, at once progressing and conserving, adapting to the present while adhering to the past.
Comparing how Conference exercises authority to the processes of sister denominations, United Methodists realize that the fact that they have a Conference that is elected, representative, global, involving full participation of laity and clergy, and widely diverse in gender, race, and language is a greater witness to the church's vision than any particular Disciplinary changes resulting from conference decisions. General Conference derives its efficacy and impact less from legislative efficiency than from the act of conferring together—a visible expression of our view of the priesthood of all believers and of the body of Christ. United Methodists are conflicted and slow to act, and they avoid many threatening issues and fight over money. But they confer in a way that displays a remarkably profound sense of connection and grace.

Through worship, preaching, praying and singing; through keynote addresses, committee work, and hallway conversations, stories are shared of remarkable courage, sacrificial service, changed lives, and transformed communities. Each story replicates the capital challenges of the centuries. The history of faith consists of successive excursions from the same starting point—lives shaped by grace; called by God; persevering against resistance, doubt, and injustice; sustained by community; and affecting people's lives.

At General Conference these personal stories are received and blessed by a global family in a manner that validates ten thousand untold stories in local churches, campus ministries, mission projects, and educational and medical endeavors throughout the world. They remind United Methodists that there is a distinct identity in the way we articulate and define our experience and in the manner we work in the world. These stories have an ameliorating effect that reveals the character of a Methodist and of the historic Wesleyan ability to reach across broad differences to hold hands for common cause.

John Wesley, gathering clergy to confer on what they were to teach and to do, wrote, "While we are in Conference, let us have an especial care to set God always before us." He had a profound desire for the well-being of the church and commended an intentionality in the objectives we seek and the manner in which we pursue them. General Conference no less today requires "an especial care to set God always before us," so that the manner in which we confer bears witness to God's grace at work among us.

Robert C. Schnase is Senior Pastor at First United Methodist Church of McAllen in McAllen, Texas.
The Letter to the Hebrews might appropriately be labeled “the riddle of the New Testament.” It is perhaps the most challenging writing in the New Testament to understand from a critical perspective. We lack many of the usual historical details, and the literary genre is unique in the New Testament. Furthermore, a meaningful translation from the original language requires a working knowledge of classical Greek rhetoric and Platonic philosophy.

The reward is well worth the inordinate labor. In Hebrews we find the most highly developed Christology in the New Testament, and the presentation of faith is as provocative as that of the apostle Paul. The preacher who perseveres will find the exhortatory material in chapters 11–13 to be as substantial today as it was in the days of nascent Christianity. The exegetical task begins with the scant introductory information that is available. Although insufficient to provide a full understanding of the writing, the details offer a lens so that we may view Hebrews from various angles.

From a historical perspective, we know neither the identity of the author nor the audience he addressed. From the evidence of the writing itself, the author seems to have been schooled in the art of composition. The structure and logic are rigorously worked out and the writing as a whole is carefully constructed. It is reasonable to assume Italy was either the place of writing or the location of the audience. The date cannot be known with any degree of specificity. The references to the Temple and its sacrificial cultus are figurative and need not indicate a date prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. We do know that Hebrews must have been in circulation before the end of the first century because Clement of Rome referred to the writing in his letters (1 Clement 36:2-5; 17:1).

Hebrews addresses concerns that surfaced among early Christians in the post-Pauline period when a belief in the imminent return of Christ gave way to questions and concerns about discipleship. The recipients of...
This writing were suffering hardships, and the author wrote to encourage their faith and offer hope.

It has been suggested that the author/the recipients were at least conversant with Hellenistic Judaism because the Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture (LXX) is frequently quoted. Each reference to the LXX points to Christ as the fulfillment mentioned in the Old Testament text. The author uses these references to make a christological statement concerning the superiority of Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

From a literary perspective, Hebrews does not fit neatly into any formal category we use to describe other New Testament writings. The writing is titled "The Letter to the Hebrews." However, a comparison with other New Testament letters shows the writing to lack basic formal elements, such as a salutation. New Testament letters are usually written to address practical issues; so the tone is personal. Although Hebrews does address practical concerns, its tone is impersonal, much like that of a theological contract. The author himself describes Hebrews as a "word of exhortation" (13:22).

Structurally, Hebrews falls into two general sections. In chapters 1-10, we find a rhetorical development that is theological in nature. Chapters 11-13 contain the writer's exhortatory remarks, which apply the principles of the first ten chapters to the current circumstances of the readers' lives. Although the lectionary readings do not include passages from the first ten chapters, it is important to grasp the import of the writer's reasoning concerning Christ and faith. One must understand these two themes in order to interpret adequately chapters 11-13. An essential point to bear in mind is that the author casts Christology and faith as one theological category. When a person has faith in Jesus Christ, it is not in the personage of Jesus Christ. Instead, she or he is taking on the faith that Jesus Christ exhibited during his lifetime. Using various rhetorical methods, the author develops and reiterates a principle paramount to the understanding of the writing as a whole: for disciples of Christ, the Christ-event and the ability to "have faith" are not mutually exclusive. The principle is elaborated upon throughout the lectionary readings, as the impact the Christ-event holds for the readers is succinctly and clearly stated.

Ecclesiology is the primary theological theme of chapters 11-13, and the author bases his remarks on his earlier statements concerning the sufficiency of faith in Christ. In the earlier theological discussions (chs. 1-10), the author presents Christ as the One who is exalted above angels (1:5-14); supe-

These descriptions about the significance of Christ are held together in two summary statements within chapters 11–13: Christ is the inaugurator and perfector of our faith (12:1-3); and Christ's sacrificial suffering makes possible a heavenly home, the goal of the faithful (11:13-16). Therefore, Christ's disciples are to stand firm in faith so that they might endure the race set before them. They must keep in mind that their faithfulness requires them to live in the manner of Christ. Because Christ suffered, they too will suffer (12:7-11). In fact, members of the community have already endured suffering. Physical injury, imprisonment, and confiscation of personal property were some of the hardships of which the writer was aware.

The subject of suffering becomes increasingly sensitive among congregants who suffer oppression due to race, ethnic origin, and/or other socio-economic reasons. The call to suffer in Hebrews is a call to suffer if that is necessary in order to remain faithful. The author does not advocate suffering as a virtue in its own right.

For the sake of clarity, it is helpful for the preacher to define a starting point before beginning sermon preparation. The construction of Hebrews is such that each section is logically connected to the writing as a whole, making tangents and circular arguments a real possibility. Once a starting point has been identified, two avenues of approach seem reasonable. The first option is a generalized historical approach suggested by Helmut Koester. Koester classifies Hebrews as a "theological treatise written to address practical concerns." This approach would allow the preacher to begin with the concerns addressed in the lections and refer back to pertinent sections of the writing for theological rationale. A sermon calling the congregation together for social action or a decisive communal faith commitment would be well served by Koester's approach. Such a call would then be grounded in the principle to have faith in Christ.

The second option is primarily a literary approach, conducive to a more evangelical appreciation of biblical theology. Edgar McKnight classifies Hebrews as a "particular type sermon." By introducing this category, he hopes to preserve more of an evangelical flavor to the exhortations of chapters 11–13. This approach especially suits a sermon urging individuals to grow in their Christian faith and in their relationship to Jesus Christ.

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McKnight's approach, the theological tenets of chapters 1–10 are more personally intertwined with the applications outlined in chapters 11–13. Each approach aids in the understanding of the other. One's understanding of a personal relationship with Christ has implications for the ways one pursues active faith commitment and social action. By the same token, the way one is called to actively express faith has implications for what it means to be a disciple of Christ on a personal level. Insights from each perspective could be included in the sermon, if the preacher identifies clearly a beginning point and a consistent means of approach. Indeed, the readings that have been chosen for this lectionary period can provide rich possibilities for preachers calling their congregations to examine their own personal faith. They can also offer seeds to facilitate an understanding of the correlation between personal faith and inevitable conflict with current social values.

August 8, 2004—Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Heb. 11:1-3, 8-16; Isa. 1:10-20; Ps. 50:1-8, 22-23; Luke 12:32-40
Chapter 11 is probably the best-known section of Hebrews. The preceding chapter urges the readers to be steadfast and warns them against apostasy. It concludes with a contrast between faith and fear that forms the introduction for the theme of this chapter. The author encourages the readers to stand firm by reminding them of examples in earlier days. Before recalling the heroes and heroines of the past, the author posits a working definition of faith that is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Rather, the definition found in 11:1-3 is a summary of the main aspects of the faith manifested by the faithful of the past. For this author, faith is the paramount Christian virtue. It is the orientation of our whole life and will give our life new purpose. Based on faith, we can obtain certain entrance into the promised land, as did our predecessors. Their faith consisted of taking God at God's word and acting accordingly. Things they could not see outwardly were visible to the inward eye, so that faith was the hypostasis of things hoped for. Hypostasis can mean substance or assurance, and either translation of the term is a valid option. The term is used earlier in the writing (1:3) to mean "substance," i.e., "the Son is the very image of God's hypostasis." Here and in 3:14 the term is usually taken to mean "assurance." (RSV, ARV). The KJV and NEB translate the term as "substance," and this rendering is consistent with the author's general statements about faith. Faith as substance would mean that faith makes real (substantial) that
which would otherwise not exist. The word rendered "conviction," elenchos, is synonymous with assurance. In the same way that physical eyesight produces conviction of visible things, faith is the means that equips us to see the invisible order of things (cf. v. 27). The invisible order of things refers to spiritual things as well as that which belongs to the future.

The record of the men and women of old is surveyed in vv. 4-38. They are set in historical sequence so as to provide an outline of the redemptive purpose of God. The sequence advances through the age of promise until at last, in Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfector, the age of fulfillment is inaugurated.

Before beginning with the history of the ancestors, the author uses Platonic reasoning to pose an interesting theological idea. Without faith, we might believe the visible world to be eternal, and the world of appearances could be explained by itself. However, our faith in God's creatio ex nihilo ("creation out of nothing") allows us to understand the visible world as transient. Critiquing several terms will shed light on the idea. Aiones, translated as "worlds," refers to the universe of space and time. In 1:2, the author states that God created the worlds through the Son; here the worlds are created through God's word.

The term rendered "word" is not logos; so the import of this statement is not precisely the same as that found in John's prologue (John 1:1-14). God's word is not identified as God's Son. The term translated "word" is rhema, which means the utterance by which God brought into existence that which was previously nonexistent. The author's intention is not to address identification of the word with the Son but to make a statement about faith grounded in the biblical account of creation (Gen. 1//.). It is his general tendency, when using philosophical reasoning to make a theological point, to reference Scripture in support of his argument. Having presented this idea about the significance of faith, he proceeds to cite examples of faithful men and women.

Abraham is the prime example of Old Testament faith mentioned in the New Testament (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23; cf. Acts 7:5). The author already referred to Abraham's faith in God's promise and his patience as he waited for the fulfillment of the promise (6:13-15). Here the theme is expanded. Abraham's faith is first manifested by his obedience. God called Abraham "to go out," and Abraham left his homeland to inhabit a land he had never seen. The land to which he was directed was only later promised to Abraham as an
inheritance. The promise was not an incentive for Abraham to obey God’s call but a reward for his obedience. The second manifestation of Abraham’s faith is endurance. Abraham received the promise of his inheritance but not the visual possession of the land. Based on God’s promise alone, he oriented himself to the future, living as though the promise had been fulfilled. In fact, he lived as a stranger and an outcast, on the fringe of the population—in some respects as an immigrant. The earthly land of Canaan is only part of the promised land. According to the author, living in the present as if it were the future was possible for Abraham because he fixed his hopes not on the earthly land of Canaan but on the heavenly commonwealth ordered by God. Using allegory and Platonic reasoning, the author discerns that the promise to Abraham concerning the earthly Canaan included an underlying promise of a richer and eternal inheritance.

The reasoning concerning an eternal inheritance is expanded upon in vv. 13-16. The promise of eternal, heavenly rest compared with the transitory nature of earthly life is an important theme for the author (cf. 3:1ff; 13:14). He underlines the security of heavenly rest by stating that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob “died in faith” as they had lived in faith. They had lived by the firm conviction that God would fulfill the promise given to them, and in death they continued to look forward to this fulfillment. The true home on which they had set their sights was the heavenly home, not visible to the physical eye.

This example of the patriarchs is intended to guide the readers to a true sense of values. Faith encompasses obedience and endurance. Like the elect sojourners of the Dispersion addressed in 1 Peter, the readers are exhorted to live in this world as “aliens and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11) and look to heaven as their true home.

August 15, 2004—Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Heb. 11:29–12:2; Isa. 5:1-7; Ps. 80:1-2, 8-19; Luke 12:49-56

The author continues his exhortation concerning faith. The faith of past heroes and heroines he cites is meant to provide his readers with both an example and a stimulus to inspire their steadfast endurance.

After citing the role of faith in the Red Sea crossing (Exod. 14:21ff), the collapse of Jericho’s walls (Josh. 6), and the protection offered Israel’s spies by Rahab the harlot (Josh. 2), the accounting takes on a more summarizing style. The names of six heroes who lived in the period between the settle-
ment of Canaan and the early monarchy are listed together, and a list of feats accomplished through their faith follows.

References to the judges in the Hebrew Scriptures are Gideon (Judg. 6–8), Barak (Judg. 4–5), Samson (Judg. 13–16), and Jephthah (Judg. 11–12). These are meant to be representative of the judges as a whole. Scriptural references to David and Samuel appear throughout Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. "The prophets" include, at least, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, and Jeremiah. The feats accomplished through faith are more interesting than the list of names. Through examples of glorious and unpleasant consequences of faithful endurance, the writer shows his audience the paradox of faith. The glorious consequences are related first. Three sets of triplets stress different outcomes of faithful living (33-35a). The first triplet mentions accrued social advantage: kingdoms were overthrown, justice was exercised, and promises were obtained. Bear in mind that "promises" is not the same promise in v. 39. The second triplet focuses on personal deliverance. Through faith, they muzzled the mouths of lions (1 Sam. 17:34//; Dan. 6:22), quenched the force of flames (Dan. 3:25), and escaped the edge of the sword (1 Sam. 18:11). The next triplet cites instances of faith bringing strength and vigor. Some who had been weak were made strong (Judg. 16:28); some became strong in war (1 Sam. 17); and others turned back armies of foreigners. This last instance could apply to any of those who defeated armies of the enemy, although the language is most like that used in the accounts of the Maccabean revolt (cf. 1 Macc. 3:8, 15; 4:10). That would indicate that the author extends his illustrations beyond those whom he mentioned earlier. (It should be noted that 1 and 2 Maccabees were included in the Greek version of Hebrew Scripture.)

The next feat of faith stands alone as a single expression of the highest conquest of faith. "Women received their dead by resurrection" (v. 35a; cf. 1 Kings 17:22; 2 Kings 4:34).

Living by faith can also cause unpleasant consequences. The remaining examples portray the hardships of the faithful. Those who suffered were able to endure by their faith in a resurrection better than a return to life. A "better resurrection" (v. 35b) refers back comparatively to the resurrection of children in the previous sentence.

The point of this impressive sweep of history is summed up in the last two verses of the reading. The ancestors in the faith deserve our attention because they were faithful. Even so, they did not receive the promise. Promises were fulfilled, but the final reward of their faith was not realized.
because God had a better plan. The term better (v. 40) signifies the new dispensation throughout the writing. In this case, the better plan is the new covenant (cf. 8:6, 8). For the sake of Christ’s followers, the Jewish heroes had to wait, “so that without us they should not be made perfect” (v. 40).

Although the point seems to favor Christians, that is not the author's intention. He thinks of God’s elect along the lines of a city or household. If a single member of the family is absent, then the household of faith is incomplete. He is not interested in explaining the waiting period before the promise can be realized. His point is that the nature of perfection is inclusive. At last, Christ was given so that Christians might be included among the faithful (cf. 12:22ff).

Stadium imagery is used to complete the author’s summons to steadfast endurance (cf. Phil. 3:12; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:5). The audience is being watched by those who have successfully run the race, even though they did not receive the final reward. Using imagery from early Christian baptismal practices and the athletic milieu, the author urges his audience to remove garments that would impede the ability to run the race with endurance. Inspiration for the race ahead is to be drawn not from the cloud of witnesses but from Jesus himself, who endured the suffering and shame of the Cross.

August 22, 2004—Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

This week’s lectionary epistle reading includes a comparison between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion and a warning to heed the voice of God. The two themes flow together seamlessly, since in Near Eastern cultures mountains were believed to be holy places. Although it is not mentioned by name, Mt. Sinai is surely the mountain characterized by visible and tangible phenomena. The events described in vv. 18-24 refer to the giving of the Law and God’s self-revelation in the wilderness (Exod. 19:12-19; Deut. 4:11-14). Mount Zion was believed to be the place of eschatological hope for all humankind (Isa. 2:2ff; 11:9ff; 25:6; 66:20). It is the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. Note that the readers have only “drawn near” (my translation) to Mt. Zion. This is consistent with the writer’s future-oriented eschatology.

The writer uses the two mountains as symbols of the Old Covenant and New Covenant, respectively. The natural phenomena associated with Mt. Sinai signify theophanies (Judg. 13:20; 1 Kings 18:38, 8:12; Nah. 1:3), and the sound of the voice of God caused the Israelites great fear. In
essence, the holiness of the mountain caused it to be dangerous if touched, and a taboo was imposed to avert the danger.

Because it was the dwelling place of God, Mt. Zion must be both an earthly and a heavenly reality. The writer's Platonic style of reasoning serves his future-oriented eschatology well. He can say that the readers have only "drawn near" to Mt. Zion, because the heavenly resting place is the heavenly copy of the earthly Mount Zion.

The imagery used to describe the heavenly Jerusalem is like portions of Daniel and Enoch (cf. Dan. 7:10; 1 Enoch 40:1). The picture of God presented by the author is one of a judge. Myriads of angels, Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant, and the souls of righteous people who have been made perfect are members of the heavenly city. Future eschatology breaks down here, since there are righteous spirits already in their heavenly rest, presumably before receiving the promise. Suffice it to say that the author's intention had more to do with making a statement about the faithful receiving eternal life than with consistent eschatology.

The admonition in vv. 25-29 to listen to God's voice should be understood as a comparison of Moses, the mediator of the Old Covenant, to Jesus, mediator of the New Covenant. Through both mediators, God's voice had spoken. The Israelites had refused to listen to Moses in the desert and as a result died before entering the promised land. Since Jesus is greater than Moses, and the New Covenant is better than the Old Covenant, not to listen to Jesus is more serious (cf. 3:3; 8:6). This is the writer's warning against apostasy, the act of not remaining steadfast in faith. The warning is followed by a quote from Hag. 2:6, "He has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." In the LXX, this prophecy is an apocalyptic sign of consummation. Using apocalyptic themes and imagery, the writer builds an argument to remain faithful in order to hold on to God's grace and receive the reward of an unshakable kingdom. The New Covenant alone will remain standing when the material world disappears. The readers are further urged to worship God appropriately, i.e., "with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire" (12:28-29).

August 29, 2004—Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Heb. 13:1-8, 15-16; Jer. 2:4-13; Ps. 81:1, 10-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Chapter 13 is the only section of Hebrews that simulates the literary style of a letter. Lists of moral responsibilities befitting the faithful replace the
flowing Greek rhetorical style of chs. 11-12. The most reasonable explanation for the difference in style is that the writer adapted his original writing to the needs of an epistle. It is not necessary to assume ch. 13 was written by a different person at a later time.

The writer lists basic Christian social responsibilities. The call for the continuation of love among fellow Christians underlines the author’s theology of the church as God’s household. Love was to be practiced by offering hospitality to strangers and expressing solidarity with those in prison.

All aspects of the married state are to be honored, and the “bed” (a euphemism for sexual intercourse) is not to be defiled. Although asceticism was practiced in early Christian communities (1 Cor. 7:36-38; 1 Tim. 4:3), the context suggests that the author is directing his remarks toward those who may have been practicing sexual promiscuity.

In both pagan and Jewish circles the attitude of being content with present possessions was valued. Warnings against the love of money abound in the New Testament literature (cf. 1 Cor. 6:8ff; Mark 4:19; Acts 5:1ff; James 5:1ff; Eph. 5:3). The author also warns the readers about the moral consequences that a love of money could cause. The final Christian duty enumerated in the reading is to remember the leaders of the church community. It is reasonable to assume that they were suffering not only for their faith but also for their leadership status. The author urges the readers to regard their leaders as sources of inspiration. Finally, the readers are urged to regard Jesus as the ultimate source of inspiration. The importance of fulfilling these responsibilities is stated in v. 16: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

*Judith A. Stevens is Pastor at Patchogue United Methodist Church in Patchogue, New York.*

**Endnotes**

The idea and practice of interreligious dialogue have been features of the history of Christianity from its very beginnings. The birthday of the church saw the apostle Peter engaging in dialogue with the people who were puzzled by the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples (Acts 2:5-42). Even though Christians are quick to name this dialogue as Peter's "Sermon," it was, in fact, an instance of interreligious dialogue. What is interesting to note here is that this interreligious dialogue was coupled with and followed by the proclamation of the gospel and the invitation to join the fellowship of the church. Such a linkage between proclamation and interreligious dialogue has continued until the early part of the twentieth century. However, by 1938, when the World Missionary Conference took place in Tambaram, Madras (currently renamed Chennai), interreligious dialogue was beginning to be decoupled from the proclamation of the church. This was primarily through the influence of Christian theologians in India, who challenged the theological position that did not see any continuity between the religions of the world and the gospel and thus viewed dialogue simply as a preparation for evangelistic witness. From then onwards, the idea and practice of interreligious dialogue began to be developed as a way of relating to people of other religions that is not limited to viewing them merely as objects of our evangelistic concern. Of course, interreligious dialogue was and continues to be viewed as part of the overall mission of the church.

A significant milestone in this process of decoupling dialogue from evangelistic witness was the establishment of the subunit on Dialogue with People of Other Faiths and Ideologies in the World Council of Churches in 1971. Quite fittingly, Stanley Samartha, a Christian theologian from India, was invited to set up and lead programs of interreligious dialogue as the first director of this subunit. On the Roman Catholic side, the deliberations of Vatican II had opened doors for engaging in dialogue as part of one's
Christian discipleship. A new momentum to interreligious dialogue resulted in a number of conferences, programs, and meetings organized at local, national, and international levels, which promoted bilateral and multilateral conversations between Christians and others. As one traces the history of the engagement of Christians in interreligious dialogue, one could detect at least three major theological issues. While one may find a certain chronological order to the emergence of these issues, it is important to acknowledge that these three issues are present in every period and in every situation.

**Theology for Dialogue**

Why should one engage in interreligious dialogue at all? This is a crucial question for anyone who wishes to participate, or actually engages in, interreligious dialogue. The answer to this question often motivates and sustains Christians in their commitment to and engagement in dialogue. There are two aspects to this question. First, is there sufficient biblical warrant for interreligious dialogue? In the early years of its existence, the subunit on Dialogue in the World Council of Churches spent its energy on producing documents that argued the case for interreligious dialogue. The *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* has an opening section that places the biblical warrant for dialogue. Wesley Ariarajah in his book *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* deals precisely with the issue of both biblical and theological rationale for engaging in dialogue with people of other religions.

Discovering a theology for dialogue is an ongoing activity. Every new generation has to discover its own rationale and mandate for interreligious dialogue from the biblical and theological heritage of Christian faith. One of the biblical texts that is often quoted is John 14:6, where Jesus claims that he is the way and the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him. There have been attempts to reinterpret John 14:6 so that it will no longer function as a damper to all interreligious dialogues.

The second aspect is a much broader question. What is the place of religious plurality in the economy of God? In other words, what is the theology of religions that may hinder or promote interreligious dialogue? This question has occupied the minds of many theologians from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. Over the past twenty-five years, a significant number of books have been published that address the theology
of religions. Some of these are academic writings; others are autobiographical and pose the question of theology of religions from an experiential vantage point. One of the early books that attempted a new theology of religions is Kenneth Cracknell's *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths.* Cracknell traces the various ways by which Christians have related to people of other religions and suggests a relevant and meaningful way for today. Other academic writings include works by John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter. Some of the more autobiographical reflections include Diana Eck's *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares* and Judith Berling's *Pilgrim through Chinese Culture: Negotiating Religious Diversity.*

Beginning with the work of John Hick, there have been several positions taken with regard to the place of world religions in the economy of God. Thanks to the work of British theologian Alan Race, these theological positions came to be classified under three headings, namely, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. *Exclusivism* views other religious traditions as in total error in light of the absolutistic truth-claims of either Christ or Christianity. Theologians of evangelical persuasions often opt for this position, and many would place Karl Barth's "Revelation as the Abolition of Religion," as an illustrative piece. *Inclusivism*, on the other hand, recognizes the work of Christ, the *Logos*, at work in other religions and thus includes all goodness, beauty, and truth within the Christian categorical scheme. Karl Rahner's writings, together with other Roman Catholic theologians, represent this viewpoint. Jacques Dupuis's *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* is representative of this approach to religious plurality. *Pluralism* values the distinctiveness and integrity of each religious tradition and searches for a common ground to locate interreligious dialogue. Within each of these typologies, one finds a variety of theology of religions. For example, the exclusivism of Karl Barth is very different from that of Ronald H. Nash, whose thinking may rightly be called "restrictivism." Similarly, the inclusivism of Karl Rahner differs significantly from that of Gabriel Fackre or John Sanders.

Furthermore, one finds variety within pluralism as well. Mark Heim discusses the peculiarity in each of the pluralistic theologies of John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter and proposes a theological approach he calls "orientational pluralism." There is a new interest in delving into the doctrine of Trinity for grounding theologies of religions.
and for promoting interreligious dialogue. Mark Heim and Gavin D'Costa have explored this move in creative ways in their books.¹⁷

**Theology or Dialogue**

The phenomenon of interreligious dialogue could itself be seen as a theological issue or problem. This is very different from constructing a theology that offers a rationale for our engagement in dialogue. It is primarily a discussion of interreligious dialogue in relation to mission and evangelism. The Vatican document "Dialogue and Proclamation" treats interreligious dialogue as a theological issue, outlines various types of dialogue, and explains the relation between dialogue and the evangelistic proclamation of the church. Such a discussion of interreligious dialogue includes an exposition of the guidelines and methods of dialogue. The World Council of Churches' document, *Guidelines on Dialogue*, presents such an exposition. Leonard Swidler's writings abound in the discussion of dialogue as a theological question, and his "Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue" is well known.¹⁸

**Theology in Dialogue**

Engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths ultimately leads to constructing one's own theology in light of interreligious dialogue. This might happen in two ways. First, one may employ interreligious dialogue as a theological method. For example, in his book *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*,¹⁹ Gordon Kaufman argues for employing conversation, or dialogue, as a theological method. He writes,

> Since theology is principally concerned with what is ultimately mystery—mystery about which no one can be an authority, with true or certain answers to the major questions—I suggest that the proper model for conceiving it is not the lecture (monologue); nor is it the text (for example, a book); it is, rather, conversation. We are all in this mystery together; and we need to question one another, criticize one another, make suggestions to one another, help one another... It is imperative that theological conversation be kept open to and inclusive of all human voices.

Our experiences of interreligious dialogue clearly point out to us that dialogue is not only a method but also a source. Theologians, in general,
have listed the sources of theology as Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason (to use the Methodist quadrilateral). Dialogue as a source brings new knowledge and opens our minds into newer ways of thinking and knowing. Conversation, as a serious engagement with the other, leads one to fresh and novel knowledge. There is an increasing number of writings that depend on interreligious dialogue as an epistemological and methodological resource.

Second, to speak of theology in dialogue implies engaging in what one might call, for want of a more appropriate term, "comparative theology." Francis Clooney's writings, especially *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* and *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children*, exemplify this approach. My own work on Christology, *The Crucified Guru*, is an example of such dialogical theology that engages in interreligious dialogue in the process of christological construction. Similarly, one may find my attempt at a Christian theology of mission in *The Common Task* as another illustrative piece. A recent work by Marjorie Suchocki titled *Divinity and Diversity* reconstructs some of the major Christian doctrines—such as creation, incarnation, and mission—in light of the idea and practice of interreligious dialogue. Her book is a marvelous example of what interreligious dialogue can do to the revitalization and renewal of Christian theology.

The World Council of Churches' Office of Inter-Religious Relations has constituted a group of theologians from Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist traditions to engage in theological reflection in the presence of one another. Called "Thinking Together," the group has been in sustained dialogue for the past three years. Some of its reflections are published in *Current Dialogue*, a journal of the World Council of Churches. The Roman Catholic counterpart of that journal is *Pro Dialogo*. Furthermore, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* is a journal that offers creative theological reflections on the theology for, of, and in dialogue from varied perspectives and religious persuasions. One would find surveys of trends in interreligious dialogue in this journal as well.

Even though I have mentioned the three kinds of theologies involved in the idea and practice of interreligious dialogue (theology for dialogue, theology of dialogue, and theology in dialogue) in a sequence, one does not think and construct these theologies in a sequential or chronological order. Every time we engage in interreligious dialogue we are compelled to think through the theological rationale for that activity and its own theological
import; and, in turn, such engagement transforms our theologies into "dialogical" theologies. Claude Geffré names this movement as "From the Theology of Religious Pluralism to an Interreligious Theology." Specifically, Christian congregations that venture into the area of interreligious dialogue need to attend to all these theological activities in their life.

Interreligious Dialogue after September 11

To conclude, let me highlight some of the challenges to interreligious dialogue posed by the events of September 11, 2001, in which the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York were destroyed by a group of terrorists who claimed religious motivations for their dastardly action. We can no longer afford to be ignorant of other religious traditions or practice mutual indifference. Interreligious dialogue is no longer an option but a mandate to all those who desire peace and harmony in a world of many religions.

September 11 has not only brought a renewed commitment to interreligious dialogue among people of all religions but also has compelled religious people to consider the dangerous potential for violence present in all religions of the world. It is no longer possible for partners in dialogue to maintain uncritically that the pure or essential core of each religion is love, harmony, and nonviolence and that acts of violence in the name of religion are only distortions or deviations from the core. One should look carefully at the textual, cultic, and cultural sources of each religion to recognize the propensity to violence and therefore intentionally highlight and strengthen those sources that promote understanding and harmony. As a renowned Muslim leader from South Africa maintains, each religious tradition now has to discover "intrinsic reasons" for dialogue and solidarity and nurture them. Moreover, it has become forcefully clear to all lovers of peace that interreligious dialogue should be an ongoing and sustained activity during times of peace and should not be taken up only in times of conflict.

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M. Thomas Thangaraj is D.W. and Ruth Brooks Associate Professor of World Christianity at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Endnotes

1. By the phrase *interreligious dialogue*, I mean the mutual engagement of one another among people of various religious traditions such as Christianity,
Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., and not among the various subtraditions of any one religion, e.g., Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and so on.


15. Ibid.


In an important sense, both of these volumes center on the centrality of hospitality as foundational for faithful Christian living in what Walters aptly calls "an anxious age." As such, both books offer pastors and congregations rich resources for rethinking their nature and mission in our unsettled and unsettling times.

For Richard, the biblical command to show hospitality to the stranger "offers an originating paradigm for the Christian community's orientation in and perspective on the world" (1). Hospitality connects with "home"—that space that provides a sense of belonging, identity, selfhood, and worth. As such, "home" implies boundaries—an inside and an outside and thus insiders and outsiders, kinfolk and strangers. Hospitality is a willingness to share the home with the stranger and is thus forever a transgressive activity, breaking down the barriers that divide and exclude. Yet, the aim of hospitality is not to dominate or subvert the other's selfhood but rather to invite both guest and host into a partnership "where each accepts responsibility for the other's well-being" (13). As fundamentally a relational reality, hospitality encompasses, eschatologically, the cosmic "household"—the kingdom of God—in which the "new humanity" is "joined together without distinction in the people of God" (42).

The heart of the book is the notion of hospitality as kenosis—a loving dispossessing of the self for the sake of the poor, the stranger, the outcast, modeled on Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and ritualized preeminently in the Eucharist. As celebration of God's hospitality, the Eucharist portends a transvaluing of values and the end of domination and exclusion.

"Living the hospitality of God" provides the church with conceptual and practical resources for construing itself as a countercultural community, assuming a "critical stance toward present forms of existence and order in the social world" (2). Such a paradigm shift will not be easy for those of us
for whom the wealth, consumerism, and narcissism of U.S. culture have become benignly commonplace. All the more reason to read this book as a prophetic summons to a promising vision of Christian faithfulness in the twenty-first century.

Jacob's Hip is an attempt to interpret the meaning of Christian living in response to the anxiety, fear, and insecurity unleashed by the events of 9/11. These horrific events, contends Walters, have brought us face to face with our “essential vulnerability” as human beings—that “primordial and utterly threatening suspicion that life is unfixably unpredictable and unstable, that each individual must wage continuous battle against deadly dangers, and that each of us loses in the end anyway” (5). This “spiritual wound” presents us with two mutually exclusive responses. We could opt for a “spirituality of security” and spend our lives building walls in our frantic efforts to feel safe. Or we could accept Jesus’ “invitation to vulnerability” and so embrace a “spirituality on the edge,” grounded in a disposition of “spiritual poverty”—a sense of utter dependence on God—and “temporal provisionality”—a recognition of “a necessarily incomplete present and uncertain future.” A spirituality on the edge is turned not inward but outward in radical openness to others. It finds its life “on the margins,” amid the rubble of the walls it works to break down, drawing its sustenance from the God it meets precisely there, “on the other side of the fortress wall.” In thankfulness to the God who in Christ is the essence of vulnerable, kenotic love we seek to overcome the estrangement with fellow human beings and with creation brought on by our fear and anxiety. Thus, a spirituality on the edge invites us into a life of hospitality. Hospitality “propels us out of the enclave mentality encouraged by our wounded anxiety and allows us to facilitate personhood in others instead of estranging them” (69-70). Like for Richard, for Walters, the way of hospitality is the way of the Cross, which invites us to live in dispossessing love on the margins, with the poor and the outcast, and so to offer the world—and the church—a radically different way of responding to the precariousness and vulnerability that constitute human existence.

Both of these books offer profound theological and spiritual resources for congregations and believers longing for more faithful and authentic ways of being the body of Christ in our insecure and vulnerable world.

Reviewed by Hendrik R. Pieterse. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review.
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