Quarterly Review
A JOURNAL OF THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY

The Orders of Ministry: Problems & Prospects
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## Contents

**Editorial**
A Call to Order, Once More ........................................ 335

**Issue Theme:**
The Orders of Ministry: Problems and Prospects

What is an Order? Reflections on the Vocation of Elders and Deacons
   Mark W. Stamm .................................................. 337

The Order of Elders: Doomed to Failure or Hope for the Future?
   Grant Hagiya .................................................... 350

The Oral Roberts Option: The Case for Ordained Local Elders
   (and Local Deacons?) in The United Methodist Church
   Ted A. Campbell .............................................. 358

Connected and Sent Out: Implications of New Biblical Research
   for the United Methodist Diaconate
   Benjamin L. Hartley ........................................... 367

United Methodist Ordained Ministry in Ecumenical Perspective
   Jeffrey Gros .................................................... 381

**Outside the Theme**
The Grace of Letting Go: Theological Reflections on Forgiveness
   from a Space In-Between
   Michael Nausner .............................................. 399

**The Church in Review**
The Place of the General Agencies in The United Methodist Church
   Russell E. Rickey ............................................. 411
   Norman E. Dewire ............................................. 411
A Word on The Word

Lectionary Study

Osvaldo D. Vena .................................................. 419

Issues In: Online Resources in Theology and Religion

Bryan Stone .......................................................... 432

Book Review

The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of our Children, by Danna Nolan Fewell (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003)

Reviewer: Patricia Barrett ........................................ 439

Index for Volume 24 ........................................... Inside back cover
A Call to Order, Once More . . .

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

The 2004 General Conference voted to refer to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry a petition calling for the establishment of "a four-year study commission to theologically discuss and clearly define the ordering of our shared life together in The United Methodist Church" and to report its findings to the 2008 General Conference. For anyone familiar with the protracted and often convoluted history of quadrennial "ministry studies" in The United Methodist Church (beginning already in The Methodist Church, in 1944), the reasons given for the new study are sure to evoke a sense of déjà vu: lingering "questions, concerns, and uncertainty" regarding the theological and practical meaning of the orders of ministry (created in 1996) and "continued ambiguity in the denomination's understanding of lay, licensed, and ordained ministry." It is instructive that the salient issues that triggered this latest study on ministry are also the "crucial areas of concern" that Richard Heitzenrater identified as dominating the denomination's ministry studies from 1944–1988: the appropriate number of orders; the nature and purpose of ordination; the doctrine of the church; and the meaning of key theological terms in the debate.

The stubborn persistence of these "questions, concerns, and ambiguity" undoubtedly will exacerbate the sense of "ministry study" fatigue regnant in some quarters in the church, while deepening the cynicism of others at what appears to them a prolonged exercise in futility. Yet both the gospel and the times call for a response that is theologically and missionally appropriate. In the final analysis, fatigue and cynicism are the fruit of a subtle yet pernicious expectation that these theological engagements with the church's ministry deliver a final answer—the solution that would once-and-for-all put an end to "continued ambiguity" and lingering "uncertainty." This expectation displays a hubris that betrays the utterly contingent and
historically and linguistically bounded nature of the church’s existence. And such hubristic betrayal fundamentally distorts the church’s obligation continually to rethink the nature and meaning of its witness for a new context, including the historical and institutional shapes that faithful witness should take. Thus, far from prompting fatigue and cynicism, this latest study on ministry is nothing less than a summons to do what the church always must do: precisely amid the uncertainty and ambiguity, the messiness, of its life in the world—indeed, for the sake of it—to fashion, in creative continuity with the past, a form of ministerial leadership that has the boldness and courage to lead the church in discerning the forever-unpredictable winds of the Spirit (cf. John 3:8) for this day and this time.

The essays in this volume take up this challenge. Not surprisingly—indeed, appropriately—Heitzenrater’s “crucial areas of concern” resonate throughout the essays. So Mark Stamm provides a profound theological meditation on the very meaning of an “order” in United Methodism, while Grant Hagiya reflects on the challenges and possibilities of instantiating such an ordered existence among United Methodist elders. Ben Hartley’s exposition of John Collins’s provocative biblical research on the diakon-words opens up startling possibilities for refiguring the work of the United Methodist diaconate. Ted Campbell addresses the thorny issue of ordination and sacramental authority in a way that honors both the intentions of the tradition and the demands of the present. Finally, Jeffrey Gros situates the discussion in an ecumenical context, thus helping United Methodists see the larger context that both our contributions and our failures will impact.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review.

Endnotes

1. The call for this ministry study was presented as a substitute for Petition 41007, “Order of Associate Members and Local Pastors.” The full text is available on the General Conference website at http://www.gc2004.org.

What is an Order? Reflections on the Vocation of Elders and Deacons

MARK W. STAMM

The practice of holy orders should be rooted in the discussion of baptism, spiritual gifts, and the worship of the church. We find such a discussion in 1 Corinthians 12–14. According to St. Paul, "[I]n the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). All members are called to serve one another within the Body and to serve the common mission of proclaiming the gospel through word and loving action (1 Cor. 14:20-25). Although members hold this common mission, they are given different ministries. "God has arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose" (1 Cor. 12:18). Some are apostles and some are prophets. Some are teachers or healers or leaders. Some work miracles and some are given the ability to speak in strange tongues. Some interpret those tongues (1 Cor. 12:27-30). All of the gifts should be cherished yet used in a disciplined manner, in love and humility, without pride and envy. God gives these gifts and ministries for the common good, to be employed "decently and in order," in the way of love (1 Cor. 13:1-14:1, 33, 40).

This principle of distinct vocations is also illustrated in the sixth chapter of Acts. The very success of the church’s mission had caused a problem—caring for the widows was overwhelming the Twelve. They were neglecting the proclamation of the Word and instead were spending their time "wait[ing] on tables" (Acts 6:2). Their dilemma helped them see the need for a new ministry—the deacon—and thus the apostles chose seven persons, setting them aside through prayer and the laying on of hands. Here we see...
the fledgling church doing its proper work—they discerned a need and called specific persons to meet it. By doing so, other servants—the apostles—were set free to do their particular work. Such ordering of ministry is done prayerfully, according to the church’s best wisdom. It responds to the movement of God’s Spirit but does not try to limit God. Thus we hear about Stephen, one of the Seven, a wonder-worker “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:8). He waited on tables and much more besides, proclaiming the Word as forcefully as St. Peter had done. In the process he became the church’s first martyr (Acts 7). As with the Seven, the faithful church regulates and shapes its ministry through ordination, while watching for the extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit. In each case, the church attempts to put fire to constructive use, but it must never forget that it is, in fact, working with fire.

What then, is an “order”? According to this biblical model, orders consist of baptized Christians in whom the church has discerned gifts and graces for particular forms of ministry. They are set aside for such ministry and admitted to the order through the laying on of hands and through prayer. Within The United Methodist Church, we recognize two orders, the Order of Elders and the Order of Deacons. Although we do not regard ordination as a sacrament, it is not an empty sign. We pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the office and work of our elders and deacons, and we believe God answers that prayer. Through this ritual act, we believe God empowers the ordained minister to do what he or she has been called to do. The laying on of hands also functions missionally, as a dismissal rite from the relative safety of the ordaining assembly into the work of ministry. Through the laying on of hands the church says to its ministers: “Get moving! Go do the task God has given you.” United Methodists send their deacons to a ministry of Word and Service and their elders for a ministry of Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order.

Both orders exist for the sake of the body of Christ and they are accountable to God and to the church. At the same time, members of the orders must hold one another accountable for the particular ministerial tasks that they have been given. They should insist that their colleagues be good stewards of those gifts, and they should help them do so. They should insist, perhaps even fiercely, that the church and its congregations give them opportunity to exercise their ministries.

In the remainder of this article, I will respond to the question, “What is an order?” in the following three ways: (1) The work of the orders is rooted
in baptism. (2) The orders are given distinct tasks. (3) Orders serve the Spirit and its mission, and they do not limit either one.

**The Work of the Orders Is Rooted in Baptism**

The United Methodist ordinal begins with a vivid reminder of baptism. The bishop proclaims the following:

**Ministry is the work of God,**

*done by the people of God.*

Through baptism

*all Christians are made part of the priesthood of all believers,*

*the church, Christ's body, made visible in the world.*

We all share in Christ's ministry of love and service

*for the redemption of the human family and the whole of creation.*

Therefore, in celebration of our common ministry,

*I call upon all God's people gathered here.*

As the bishop scoops and pours water from the font, he or she says,

Remember your baptism and be thankful.

The congregation responds,

*We remember our baptism and affirm our common ministry.*

The ritual then proceeds to the ordinations. Such remembrance of baptism is no mere consolatory bone for the laity but is a fundamentally important theological affirmation. All Christian ministry flows from the font, with baptism as the primary marker of Christian identity. This theology is consistently asserted within our United Methodist rites: besides ordination, baptism is recalled at Confirmation, at Christian marriage, and even at the Service of Death and Resurrection.

Beginning the ordination service with a remembrance of baptism reflects a significant ecumenical consensus. The World Council of Churches' document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* expresses a similar theology when it precedes its discussion of ordained ministry with the assertion, "All members are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the
In like manner, when the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the Episcopal Church celebrated their intercommunion agreement on January 6, 2001, they began their liturgy with a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. It is interesting that, in coming to their agreement, the two communions worked through significant differences in ordination practice. The font was a key source of reconciliation.

This ecumenical liturgical consensus is not a new idea but is rooted in ancient models, like the well-known second-century text, The First Apology of Justin Martyr. One sees there a variety of roles within the liturgical assembly. A “reader” proclaimed the Scriptures and the “president” instructed the assembly in their meaning. The whole assembly stood up and offered prayers. The president received offerings of bread and wine from the people and then made a thanksgiving over them. Members who were able made offerings for the poor. All present received Communion, and then deacons took the elements to those who were absent from the service. Each person had his or her own ministry to fulfill, and each ministry was essential. Such texts remind us that when we discuss ordination practices, the needs of the eucharistic assembly must be the primary consideration.

A hierarchical model of ministry stands in contrast to the type of assembly witnessed in First Apology. I saw this hierarchical model illustrated in a pre-Vatican II chapel that had formerly served a Catholic minor seminary. Moving up the center aisle toward the altar, one passed first the symbol for acolyte, then the symbol for lector, then, in succession, the symbols for sub-deacon, deacon, priest, and bishop. Here was illustrated a hierarchical ladder that one might ascend to the very top of ecclesiastical rank. Lest we believe that our Catholic brethren were the only ones who held such a concept of the hierarchy, we Methodists had constructed a similar ladder. One became a member of the church through baptism, albeit as a relatively powerless preparatory member. Confirmation brought one to full membership and admission to Communion. When ordained a deacon, one was given probationary membership in the annual conference and some limited authority to preside at the sacraments. Elders gained full Conference membership and full sacramental rights. One might ascend the ladder even further, perhaps becoming a superintendent or a bishop. Denominational executives and seminary professors were believed to reside on one of the higher rungs of the ladder.

This model of accumulating rank remains with us to some extent, but
the more circular baptismal model challenges it. Instead of a ladder mentality, this alternative model places baptism at the center of church life, with the various gifts and vocations radiating from that center. According to this model, most clergy are bi-vocational. For instance, my vocations are husband and father along with elder and scholar. In theory, neither vocation outranks the other. Such a vocational understanding leads many clergy to insist that the church allow them to balance commitment to itinerant ministry with commitment to marriage and family. In the hierarchical model, family concerns were often subordinated to the needs of the appointive system; but it makes less sense under the baptismal model.

The baptismal model of ordination is manifested in the altered arrangements of our worship spaces. The character of the assembly has changed in those congregations that have moved the altar-table from the back wall of the sanctuary and closer to the people. In the ritual for Holy Communion found in the 1964 Book of Worship, the rubric called for the minister to face the Lord’s Table during the Preface and the Prayer of Consecration. During that prayer the people would “kneel or bow,” probably looking down and averting their eyes. Thus, the elder knelt between the Table and the people, usually with his back to the people, in the role of a priest interceding before God on their behalf. When the work of consecration was finished, he would return from his visit to the holy place and serve Communion to the people. One finds a world of difference in the rubric of the current rite, which calls the pastor to stand behind the Lord’s Table and face the people while she takes the bread and cup, leads the Great Thanksgiving, and breaks the bread. Under this form, elders and their congregations gather around the Table, a family enjoying fellowship at its primary meal.

Moving the altar-table away from the wall has done more than reduce the spatial and relational distance between pastor and congregation. It has also made room for others to stand there. Thus, deacons can take their place beside the elders and the laity prepared to take Communion to the unwillingly absent are not far away. Of course, the ordination of deacons is nothing new for United Methodists; but their ministry was obscured in the previous paradigm. When American Methodists began ordaining ministers, they assumed the pattern that the Church of England had inherited from the Catholic Church. All of our elders had previously been ordained as deacons. Those ordained under this pattern were not asked to renounce their deacon’s orders when they were ordained elders. In this sense, the ministry of the
deacon continued in the church but it was not emphasized. Indeed, in the years between my two ordinations, the church called on me primarily to do the work of an elder—I was appointed to preach, to preside at the sacraments, and to order the life of local churches. My experience was typical. I was not expected to develop an identity as a deacon. Under the current paradigm, we make room for the ministry of the deacon. The deacon takes his or her place beside the elder, looking across the altar-table at the congregation, and beyond, to the doors of the church. In this baptismal model, we now have two distinctordained orders, and the church gains much in that recovery. In the next section, I outline some implications of maintaining the distinction.

The Orders Are Given Distinct Tasks

The orders are given distinct tasks, along with the freedom to focus on them. The church is called to support their work with its permission, its blessing, and its encouragement.

The Benefits of Focus and Emphasis

Church members, ordained and lay, should resist the temptation to do the tasks that have not been assigned to them. Under normal circumstances, therefore, the elder should not be asked to mow the church’s lawn, or, for that matter, to run its pledge campaign. She should, however, make her own pledge and be willing to share about the reflection process related to it. The church should not only permit her to teach about stewardship but also expect her to do so. The church encourages her vocation by guaranteeing freedom of the pulpit, while, at the same time, expecting her to work within the broad outlines of the biblical narrative. That we do not allow local churches to fire elders allows them to do the work that God has called them to do.

Indeed, the church should affirm and magnify the teaching office of the elder. The hierarchical understanding of ministry described earlier encouraged elders to lose focus and to assume more and more tasks that were not particularly theirs. Many of them spent considerable time visiting sick and shut-in members and doing various types of social service work. Such work remains an appropriate function of their general calling to Christian discipleship; but members of the Order of Elders should ask themselves how such work can become a peculiar expression of their vocation as elders. At the least, they should do more mentoring of lay visitors, and the church should encourage them to do so.
Elders should also focus on their work of presiding at the sacraments. The adoption of *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* by the 2004 General Conference again has called the church to consider practicing the ancient norm of the weekly Lord’s Day Eucharist. Essentially, the resolution reiterates John Wesley’s instruction to the fledgling American church: “I... advise the elders to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lord’s Day.” Having received this charge both from our founder and from our General Conference, United Methodist elders should be engaging their congregations in discussions about it. Laity should encourage them to lead such conversations. Making a successful journey to weekly Communion will require much teaching, along with a critical refining of liturgical practices. The church may need to confront the fact that its oft-stated need to complete individual Sunday services in one hour is a false barrier. If we gave ourselves permission to worship for an hour-and-fifteen minutes or so, would we still complain that the Lord’s Supper cuts into the time allotted for the sermon? Elders need to ask these questions of their congregations and the Order of Elders could profitably spend time conferencing about them.

How should deacons shape their work? According to the ordinal, the church calls its deacons to the following work:

- to relate the life of the community to its service in the world . . .
- to interpret to the church the world’s hurts and hopes,
- to serve all people, particularly the poor, the sick, and the oppressed,
- and to lead Christ’s people in ministries of compassion and justice, liberation and reconciliation,
- even in the face of hardship and personal sacrifice.

Of course, such a commitment may take various forms; but traditionally it has been expressed in the work of intercessory prayer. Just as the elder diligently studies the Scriptures for her work of preaching, so the deacon studies the mission field in light of the Word, that he may more effectively lead the prayers of the people. For the well-being of the church and the world, the church needs the deacons to spend considerable time doing so. I am often dismayed by a lack of intercessory fervor and imagination that I witness in the worship of the congregations. While the Scriptures teach us to offer “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings . . . for
everyone" (1 Tim. 2:1) and to pray "your kingdom come ... [y]our will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10), many times prayer leaders hardly do more than ask God to comfort the hurting members of a local congregation. Do we remember the victims of injustice and abuse, the homeless and the hungry? Do we remember the other congregations and churches in our community, nation, and world? Do we remember teachers and farmers and truck drivers, our friends, and our enemies? Many times we do not. Perhaps our elders, focusing on their many other tasks, do not have adequate time to think about intercessory prayer. What if we assigned this task to its traditional stewards, the deacons, who guide the outreach of the church and spend much of their time among the needy? The Order of Deacons would do well to spend time in holy conference, discerning how they might better lead their congregations in prayer.

Distinct Tasks and Mutual Ministry at the Lord's Table

When the elder speaks the Great Thanksgiving on behalf of the whole congregation, he or she embodies his or her responsibility to gather the congregation around the Table. Periodically, however, students will ask me which parts of the Great Thanksgiving may be spoken by the deacon and which must be spoken by the elder. While the Book of Worship clearly calls for "the pastor" to speak the prayer, thus reserving the whole prayer to the elder's role, more than a few students have been told that the elder must speak only the words of institution and the epiclesis. Perhaps those who make such claims believe these to be the magic words that make the Eucharist really happen. Such questions reinforce a minimalist theology of consecration left over from the eucharistic controversies of the sixteenth century. Martin Luther was trying to strip the canon of the Mass to its essentials—which he believed to be Christ's promise proclaimed in the words of institution (1 Cor. 11:23-26; Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-22)—so that the church might break away from a superstitious, quasi-magical, understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrificial offering for sins. The longer narratives found in our current Great Thanksgivings are not like those lengthy offertory petitions that Luther rejected; rather, they are an attempt to proclaim more of the biblical narrative—an agenda that Luther, given his high regard for the Bible, most likely would have approved.

What is going on in such questions about roles at the Great Thanksgiving? Regardless of why they are asked, notions about minimum
standards make poor guides for liturgical practices. In this particular question about the roles of deacons and elders, we seem to be dealing with a misplaced understanding of the priesthood of all believers. Sometimes, as in the odd tradition of Laity Sunday, we try to affirm this priesthood by asking laity to serve in a pastoral role, even though they have not been called to it. In like manner, some deacons lament the fact that they are not given the responsibility of presiding at the altar-table. I see several factors at work here. We have failed to define an adequate role for deacons. Thus, wondering what to do with them liturgically, we give them part of the elder’s role. In a sense, those who take this solution unwittingly revert to the old hierarchical model, suggesting that the really important work is that done by the elders. In like manner, we have not magnified the role of the laity, especially their role of working with the deacons to extend the Lord’s Table by taking Communion to shut-in members, as well as their work of serving the Communion elements within the congregation. Quite properly, the elder should receive Communion from a deacon or a member of the laity. In an assembly in which baptismal equality is magnified, one should always be given the elements by another sister or brother.

At the end of the day, dividing the Great Thanksgiving increases our confusion about the ministry of deacons and the laity. We remain overly focused on the questions of hierarchical privilege—the ongoing debate about “who gets to do what”—and thus we fail to see that the Eucharist is an offering of the entire community in which each order makes its own unique contribution and offering. Nevertheless, the question persists, especially in our church. In some ways, our need to wrestle with it is rooted in the very beginning of the Methodist Episcopal Church, a potentially creative dilemma that I will discuss in the final section.

Orders Serve the Spirit and Its Mission, but They Do Not Limit Either One

Consideration of ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church must account for John Wesley’s 1784 ordinations for America. We find there an intriguing mix of traditional and pragmatic arguments. He acknowledged England’s heritage of apostolic succession through the historic episcopate, but then set it aside in favor of a Presbyterian view of succession. Yet, in the 1784 ordinations, he practiced a polity that was neither Episcopal nor Presbyterian. Indeed, Presbyterian ordination assumes the consent of the
presbytery; and Wesley acted by himself. We are more honest when we admit that Wesley justified the ordinations on missional grounds. Explains Wesley:

(In England) there are Bishops who have a legal jurisdiction. In America there are none, neither any parish ministers. So that for some hundred miles together there is none either to baptize or to administer the Lord’s Supper. Here therefore my scruples are at an end: and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order and invade no man’s right, by appointing and sending laborers into the harvest.  

Faced with a need and a gospel mandate that called him to respond, Wesley did so using his best insight. Such a habit of mind was present in the Wesleyan movement prior to 1784, and it remains part of our thinking today. It is more traditional than some realize.

Indeed, an emerging consensus within the liturgical studies discipline asserts that there was no one pattern of liturgy and ministry in the early church; thus, there exists no pristine pattern to which all faithful Christians should return. Early sources show a mixture of patterns, not unlike our present situation. For instance, The Didache, a late first- or early second-century document, witnesses to a tension between itinerant prophets and the bishops and deacons of the settled community. In his letter to the Smyrneans, written early in the second century, Ignatius of Antioch condemned those who were celebrating “love feasts” without the presence of the bishop or one of his authorized ministers. The fact that he addressed the situation so forcefully suggests the existence of significant disagreement. We may assume that some liturgical assemblies did not follow the Ignatian threefold ordering of ministry of bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Perhaps they followed a more charismatic pattern. The threefold pattern represents a venerable tradition—even the dominant one—but we are not historically justified in calling it “the tradition,” as if no other possibilities exist.

What does all of this have to do with John Wesley and modern Methodists? First, we should realize that there is no one pattern of faithful ministry that must be restored by the modern churches, and we should resist any pressure toward such a solution. Second, it is important for Methodists to understand that the creative tension between formal, catholic structures of ministry and charismatic flexibility existed within John Wesley. He expressed it in his discussion of the 1784 ordinations and his
logic persists with us. This creative tension encourages us to maintain continuity with traditional catholic practices while allowing us to remain flexible in the organization of our work. At the least, this tension allows us to offer a revised historical understanding of the episcopal office. According to American Methodist history, the episcopacy is an apostolic ministry not because of its historic continuity with the Twelve but because of its commitment to the apostolic work of itineration. Francis Asbury redefined the meaning of the *cathedra*—the bishop’s chair that traditionally symbolizes the authority of the episcopal office. Asbury’s saddle was his *cathedra*. His witness can help the ecumenical church remember that the word *apostle* is rooted in the word *send*. Thus, the apostles were “the sent ones,” and apostolic succession involves continuing in that dynamic.

The Methodist narrative encourages us to hold together the charismatic and the catholic for the sake of the wider ecumenical church; yet doing so can be messy. Witness our continuing use of local pastors and the newer category of the “commissioned minister”—each arguably an extension of the missional logic manifested in 1784. Methodists continue to ordain deacons and elders, and we acknowledge a deep catholic tradition by ordaining only after exercising a lengthy discernment process. In the midst of our ordination practices, however, we insist that encouraging the mission of the church is our most important tradition. Thus, we license or commission nonordained persons to administer sacramental functions in many of our congregations. Are we contradicting ourselves by doing so? Not necessarily. In its own way, our system is biblical and traditional. We could, I suppose, stop appointing licensed or commissioned ministers to serve as pastors; but that would mean closing many of our churches, including many in which English is not the primary language. On the other hand, we could simply ordain all of the clergy that we appoint, giving them but a cursory examination prior to ordination. Some congregational polities follow such a pattern. Neither option—wholesale closing of churches or ordaining hastily—adequately reflects the Wesleyan vision. Until we can develop a better system, we should boldly support the forms we have developed. That means we should openly acknowledge that our local pastors and our commissioned ministers are not yet ordained.

Do we not already acknowledge this fact? Yes and no. From time to time my as-yet-nonordained student ministers will ask me about wearing stoles and clergy collars. May they do so? Some will appeal to the obvious
fact that stoles and collars are worn by many of the nonordained persons they see ministering in United Methodist congregations. I tell them that they should wear neither until they are ordained, because I refuse to apologize for our ecclesiology. By the very clothes we wear, we should insist that some Methodist congregations have laity serving in roles normally reserved for elders and deacons, and we should present that fact as evidence of our missional commitment. Our lay pastors and commissioned ministers should be passionately committed to fulfilling their calling within the parameters set by the church. The rest of the church, including the deacons and the elders, should support them and hold them accountable. Each fulfills his or her baptismal role within the body of Christ. If, in good conscience, we cannot ask them to serve in this way, then we should cease the practice altogether. By ceasing such practices, however, we would forsake a central dynamic of our Methodist identity.

Mark W. Stamm is Assistant Professor of Christian Worship at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas.

Endnotes

5. Book of Worship, 92, 117, 141, 150.
10. Minor seminaries are, essentially, high schools for prospective priests.
13. While commissioned ministers and local pastors are allowed to preside at the Table in the congregations to which they are appointed, in an ideal sense, presiding at the Table is the particular responsibility of elders.
The Order of Elders:  
Doomed to Failure or Hope for the Future?

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In 1996, The United Methodist Church changed the foundation of its ordained ministry in fairly dramatic fashion. One small addition that is often overlooked was the establishment of "orders" for elders and deacons. For deacons, this was a natural step toward the depth of their own fellowship and support of one another. However, for elders, the order has proved quixotic and somewhat elusive. In this article, I explore the dynamics of the problems and hopes for the Order of Elders.

There have been many quadrennial studies on United Methodist ministry. While General Conference has not always received them well, these studies have added to our background reflections on the denomination's ministry. The Council of Bishops' advocacy in 1996 for the establishment of the orders was fueled in part by the need to create a setting in which clergy could participate regularly in accountability and peer support. One of the aims for the Order was to continue the Methodist tradition of the "class meeting." The fact that the Council of Bishops divided its membership into accountability and support groups provided clergy with a model.

We are at a stage in our denominational history when elders are struggling. Despite numerous scholarly studies on the ordained ministry, we lack a central and agreed-upon theological focus of the ministry of elders. In some annual conferences, clergy morale is at an all-time low. Clergy cynicism and disrespect are up, while support and accountability are down. There is a general lack of cohesion and unity among elders. For example, until quite recently, when a fellow clergy member died, nearly all the clergy members of the annual conference would attend the funeral. Even if you did not know the person, you showed up out of loyalty to your peers. Now, only those who knew the person are likely to show up to pay last respects. True, the number of clergy has increased significantly in recent decades. Yet, mutual support has been dwindling rapidly and might just be at an all-time low.

Compare this situation with the Order of Deacons. Deacons are a
small-enough group to gather regularly. Their relationship with one another was forged already while they were diaconal ministers. They have a specific mission and purpose. Although recently divided on the need for limited sacramental authority, deacons have a specialized niche in The United Methodist Church. And a robust theology of the deacon is emerging. In short, deacons seem to have much of what elders currently lack.

There is no doubt that the intent of forming the Order of Elders was to address some of the same concerns that deacons have addressed. Whether the orders were doomed from the start or rather from the point at which they were "legalized" by General Conference remains an open question. A case certainly can be made that legalizing the orders made their ultimate success problematic.

It is a structural dilemma in The United Methodist Church that the moment something is "legislated" clergy automatically react to it with suspicion and cynicism. The creation of the Order of Elders did not escape this dilemma. In the Western Jurisdiction, clergy tend to reject anything they perceive as forced upon them, especially if it comes from the "top." Thus the dilemma confronting the Order of Elders: On the one hand, it holds the promise of helping to ease elders' cynicism and suspicion toward perceived top-down actions, while, on the other hand, it risks outright rejection precisely by being declared mandatory. This dilemma might very well explain the mixed results the Order has had across the denomination. While duly called and organized according to the Discipline, the success of the Order has varied greatly from conference to conference.

One problem is the sheer number of elders. In the United States, there are approximately 33,000 elders and 1,190 deacons. My annual conference has 1,000 elders and 60 deacons. It is relatively easy to establish affinity and fellowship with sixty colleagues, many of whom met often in retreats as diaconal ministers. However, how does one go on retreat with a thousand colleagues? Elders do gather once a year in clergy session for a half day, but this time is largely spent on business matters and reports.

One answer to this problem is to utilize the genius of our connectional system. Why not divide the elders into clusters along district and geographic lines, as is happening in many places around the country, and making the gathering voluntary? In my experience, clergy who are spiritually healthy and well-balanced are already in very strong covenantal or lectionary study groups; caring for their spiritual health has dictated such
affiliations. These clergy often do not feel the need for an additional covenant group (the Order of Elders). My greatest worry is for clergy who want to "go it alone" or who have a major dysfunction of some kind in their lives. They desperately need the benefits of a covenant group; but they are the least likely to seek out such a group. In theory, the orders are intended to support and undergird such clergy; but we have yet to activate this mechanism across the connection.

A further problem is geographical location. In some areas, many clergy live great distances from one another, making meeting on a regular basis impossible. Often in isolated locations, these clergy must make do with practicing their ministry craft without the regular support of fellow United Methodist colleagues.

Finally, there is a trend among local churches to become self-enclosed entities, thus exacerbating clergy isolation. Often, the church's structure is set up in a way that rewards those clergy who succeed at going it alone. We United Methodists pride ourselves on our connectional ties; yet at the basic level of the denomination—the local church—we frequently reinforce individualistic and isolationist behavior. The trend in many local churches is to be a self-contained community, complete with programs, services, fellowship, and recreation. In some urban settings, congregations have become fortresses, walled off from their surroundings with sophisticated surveillance systems, alarms, and other defense mechanisms. Once the local church becomes isolated, it is easy for clergy to follow suit. Why go to a United Methodist clergy gathering when you have ample ecumenical or interfaith gatherings in the local community in which you serve?

The problems I have identified add to the current dilemma concerning elders. However, precisely at a time such as this, the Order of Elders provides hope for the future of the ministry of the United Methodist elder.

Amidst the growing cynicism, poor morale, burnout, and depression afflicting so many of our clergy, has there ever been a more appropriate time for the community of accountability and support that the Order of Elders makes possible? Time and time again in my professional life, I have found strength and motivation in meeting with my clergy colleagues. We fool ourselves when we think that we can attempt the journey of ministry alone. The nature of our Christian ministry is at its core communal and collaborative. Was this not Jesus' strategy also when he sent out the disciples two by two? Facing ministry leadership alone means that our prob-
lems get magnified and our workload insurmountable, leading to low morale. However, when I am supported and held accountable with trusted colleagues who are traveling the same journey, the burdens seem lighter and the pathways clearer. All this to say, elders need one another in the journey of ministry. We need the covenantal relationship that enables us to draw strength from one another, to deepen our collective spirit, and to hold us accountable for our thoughts and actions.

During the past four years as district superintendent, I have been intentional about placing all the clergy on my district into some form of covenant group. Some of these groups have evolved into different ministry directions. One of the strongest groups on the district started with the purpose of being a Wesleyan "select society." John Wesley envisioned "select societies" to consist of his core leaders, those who were spiritually mature and sophisticated in the ways of the movement. D. Michael Henderson writes:

He (Wesley) needed a "home base," an intimate fellowship of likeminded companions to share his failures & defeats, progress & victories, frustrations & hopes. He needed a forum of friends in which to work out the implications of his own personal quest for holiness, a strategy group who could sharpen the focus of his own thinking. . . . In the select society he found that ultimate executive committee, a company of peers who were totally committed to each other, sharing a common goal, and were willing to "speak the truth in love." 1

With this in mind, I pulled together some of the strongest clergy on the district and balanced the group in terms of ethnicity and gender. Initially, I had hoped that each participant would start his or her own covenant group, so that every minister on the district could be in some form of accountability group. This original group would model the covenant for everyone else. While this goal has not been fully realized, this group remains one of the most valued communities in my ministry. Like Wesley, I need a group where I can share deeply, exchange ideas, and reflect on the local church, the district, and the annual conference. The sharing is deep and intimate; but there is always a time of mutual accountability when we report on our engagement in "acts of piety" and "acts of mercy."

All elders, whether they are bishops, district superintendents, or local church pastors, need this fundamental support and accountability in their
ministry. As leaders of an annual conference, a district, or local church, we need the opportunities to stay spiritually grounded, to be challenged to act prophetically in our daily lives, and to reflect on our own leadership in our respective areas of ministry. This seems to me one of the fundamental purposes of the Order: to organize us into covenant groups and keep this Wesleyan spirit alive.

Further, it is important that the Order of Elders become a key locus for support, morale building, counseling, and guidance. In the California-Pacific Annual Conference, where I serve, the chair of the Order of Elders has proposed to the board of ordained ministry that the orders assume the primary responsibility for providing clergy with counseling and guidance, morale and support, and continuing education. My experience as a chair of the board of ordained ministry has convinced me that we have not done a thorough job in these areas. To be sure, subcommittees were assigned these responsibilities; but these tasks always ended up being secondary to other obligations. The primary tasks, as the board of ordained ministry saw them, always focused on issues of candidacy, mentoring, ordination interviews, and conference relations. Oftentimes, our plates were so full with these primary functions that these other areas were given short shrift. Therefore, it makes sense for the Order of Elders to assume primary responsibility for the above-mentioned areas, collaborating closely with the board of ordained ministry.

The Order of Elders in my annual conference has been drawing on the gifts and assets of retired clergy by assigning them as mentors to active colleagues, especially younger elders. This cadre of seasoned, experienced clergy (known in the conference as “Wise Guides”) is available to other elders for counseling, mentoring, and support. They have been a tremendous resource for the conference. My only concern is that we have not utilized them enough. Yet (and symptomatic of the problems I described earlier), the majority of elders do not feel they need this mentoring and support, viewing such a need as a sign of weakness or, perhaps, even failure. Somehow we must find the ethos that readily accepts mentoring at all levels of our ministry profession.

Finally, the most important task for the Order of Elders, and that which holds the most hope for the future of the Order, is to model and teach elders what it means to belong to an “order.” It seems to me that our colleagues in early American Methodism had an instinctive sense of what
it means to "be" an order. As young, single, and marginalized males, their first dedication was to Jesus Christ. Running a close second was the fraternal order of other clergy members, who gathered in quarterly and annual conference. Their sense of commitment and connection to one another far surpassed anything we experience in United Methodist clergy circles today. It was this mutual commitment that enabled many of them to walk days on end to get to annual conference in order to be in fellowship with their peers. As, with time, elders became more educated and more settled, their understanding of connection with one another began to break down, and, consequently, their commitment to other historic Methodist values, such as itinerancy. Today, when United Methodist elders meet in a nonchurch context, they experience a sense of friendship and affinity but not the deep bond that comes with belonging to an order.

Here, the Roman Catholic Church can teach us much about the meaning of "order." When someone enters into a specific Roman Catholic order, he or she enters into a sacred bond of fellowship with fellow members of the order, a connection that extends throughout life. Belonging to an order is not just a matter of friendly affinity; rather, it is an abiding bond of mutuality. When I was doing my doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Union in the early 1980s, most of my ethics professors were from the Jesuit School of Theology. Each afternoon, they would gather to share in the Eucharist, to pray, and to support one another. I could only imagine what communing with intellects like William Spohn, Michael Buckley, and Thomas Shubeck must have been like. I could envision the richness of their discussions and reflections. At the time, I was in my first full-time appointment, and I remember being very envious of this gathering, for two reasons. First, I longed for the chance to interact with such learned theologians. Second, and perhaps more important, I wanted to have an opportunity to meet with my United Methodist colleagues in a similar group. I have yet to have such an opportunity, after all these years as a United Methodist elder. I am probably romanticizing these Jesuit gatherings. More than likely, these professors saw these meetings as a natural part of their daily routine. The point is, though, United Methodist elders do not have this daily opportunity, as a regular part—indeed, an expectation—of their ongoing ministry.

I expect the Order of Elders to enable us to truly be an order. Its work is to pave the way for an ontological awakening of sorts. When the bishop
lays hands on the candidate in the service of ordination as elder in full connection, the candidate enters into a fundamental commitment to "live with all other ordained ministers in mutual trust and concern and seek with them the sanctification of the fellowship." We often forget these lines. In the midst of our busy pastorates, as so often we work in isolation from our colleagues, we long for this bond—this connection—with one another. Yet, because the ethos of being an order is not systematically operative in our lives, we are denied this benefit. This is not to say that elders do not understand the meaning of such an ethos. After all, the Book of Discipline states pretty clearly the purpose of an order, namely, to

1. provide for regular gatherings of ordained deacons and ordained elders for continuing formation in relationship to Jesus Christ through such experiences as Bible study, study of issues facing the church and society, and theological exploration in vocational identity and leadership;
2. assist in plans for individual study and retreat experiences;
3. develop a bond of unity and common commitment to the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church and the annual conference;
4. enable the creation of relationships that allow mutual support and trust; and
5. hold accountable all members of the Order in the fulfilling of these purposes.

This paragraph describes exactly my own yearnings as I observed the daily gatherings of my Jesuit colleagues. If only we could live out these purposes on a weekly, even a daily, basis! So questions like these continue to torment me: why don't we elders practice "these purposes" in our daily lives? Would not much of our cynicism, negative morale, burnout, and depression be mitigated by regular doses of support and accountability? It is my hope that all elders would ponder these important questions.

No one would disagree that these are lofty and prized purposes. Not many of us could make the case that we do not need these elements regularly in our lives. The dilemma lies in the execution of these purposes. As mentioned earlier, in some instances, legislating even a good idea proves to be the kiss of death. How can we make this Disciplinary requirement a cultural necessity in our lives as elders?

Nationally, annual conferences in which bishops, cabinets, and chairs of the orders are providing strong leadership in nurturing the orders, there are strong and creative programs for elders and deacons. Leadership seems
to be one of the keys to success. However, there is yet to be a national model whose success is so marked that others would want to emulate it. However, if, as I have argued, the Order of Elders is crucial to the spiritual and professional well-being of elders, why wait for bishops or chairs of the Order to take the lead? Promoting the ethos of the Order rests with all of us. We should not wait to be led by others but realize it is truly up to each elder to make the commitment to the purposes of the Order, as outlined in the *Book of Discipline*. Thus, each elder must take the responsibility to be in a covenant group with other elders. Each must develop the bonds of unity that will enable him or her to carry out the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church. Each must cultivate relationships of trust and commitment with peers on a regular basis.

We stand at the crossroads in regard to the Order of Elders, as expressed in the title of this article. It is up to us to decide whether the Order of Elders is "doomed to failure from the start" or whether it can become the "true hope for the future." What is important to realize is that we elders will ultimately determine the destiny of the Order and so determine our destiny as elders. What shall we choose: cynicism or hope?

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**Endnotes**

3. Ibid., ¶312.1.
The Oral Roberts Option: The Case for Ordained Local Elders (and Local Deacons?) in The United Methodist Church

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Oral Roberts and the Ministry of Local Elders

I was surprised at a set of entries in the journals of the Oklahoma Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. The journals (from 1968 through 1987) carry the name of "Granville Oral Roberts." This is indeed the Dr. Oral Roberts whose appointment was listed as "President, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa." It did not surprise me that Dr. Roberts's name appeared in the journal; what surprised me was that as far back as 1987 he was listed in the category of a "local elder."

This was surprising, because the terminology of "local elders" and "local deacons," part of the historic framework of polity in American Methodist churches, had not been used in The United Methodist Church for some time. (The term local elder had been in use in both The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church up to 1968.) The conference had not created a fictitious category, for Dr. Roberts was listed in a special category of "Local Elders (before 1968)"; that is, those who had been ordained as local elders before 1968 and whose status was continued even after the term fell into disuse. It was perhaps an awkward situation; but it was not made up for Dr. Roberts. There were other "Local Elders (before 1968)," and the list in the Oklahoma Annual Conference journal continued even after Dr. Roberts's name disappeared from the journal after 1987.

I propose that we take Dr. Roberts and his ministry of local elder as a paradigm of the true United Methodist tradition and a pattern for resolving some of the thorny problems into which The United Methodist Church seems to have become entangled in our attempts to renew the orders of deacon and elder and to honor the longstanding and valiant work of our lay or local... pastors(?). Well, identifying the term that follows "lay" or "local" is part of the problem we have here.
The Heritage of Local Elders and Local Deacons

Who were “local deacons” and “local elders”? The key to understanding this is one of the most critical distinctions in early American Methodist polity, namely, the distinction between “traveling” (or “itinerant”) and “local” clergy. The traveling clergy (elders and deacons) were those who fully participated in the itinerant system by which clergy moved from place to place every week (and sometimes several places within the span of a week). The traveling clergy were devoted to full-time Christian service. They formed a kind of distinctive Methodist order; and traveling elders alone voted in annual conference sessions (until 1830, when the Methodist Protestant Church introduced lay delegates to annual conferences). By contrast, the local clergy were restricted to their local areas, and did not have voice or vote in annual conferences. Most local clergy held secular occupations. A traveling elder who ceased to itinerate was “located,” took the status of a local elder, and surrendered his rights to voice and vote in the conference. Local deacons and traveling deacons, in this early configuration, were transitional offices leading to the offices of local elder and traveling elder, respectively. I want to highlight two critical matters: (1) Only those who were ordained as elders (local or traveling) were authorized to preside at the sacrament of Holy Communion. (2) Local elders were able to provide the sacrament to hundreds of congregations where traveling elders could not be present on a regular basis.

It is important to note that the office of local elder—an ordained minister authorized to preside at the sacrament of Holy Communion—appears in Methodist Disciplines through the 1950s; and although the term was discontinued at a certain point, the provision for local preachers (also a distinct office) to be ordained and thus effectively to become “local elders” remained in the Discipline of the Methodist Church through the final edition in 1964. The same office (and title, “local elder”) appears in the last Discipline (1967) of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. It remains in effect in all of our partner churches in the Commission on Pan-Methodist Union and Cooperation: the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The office of local elder remains in effect in many of our international affiliated autonomous churches, such as the Iglesia Metodista de Mexico (where local elders are presbíteros locales). I believe I am correct in stating that...
of all these partner churches in the Methodist and Wesleyan traditions, only The United Methodist Church has taken the unprecedented step of discontinuing the office of local elder and then proceeding to authorize nonordained persons to preside at the sacrament of Holy Communion. In doing so, we are clearly at odds with our own long tradition.

**Ecumenical Considerations**

The current situation finds us at odds with our longstanding ecumenical commitments as well. John Wesley was forced to deal with the issue of sacramental authorization in response to the crisis that was provoked in American Methodist societies at the time of the American Revolution. Wesley was undoubtedly aware of the fact that the ordinations and consecration that he performed in September 1784 violated the canons of the Church of England. However, in justifying these actions in the letter that accompanied Superintendent Coke, Wesley appealed to his knowledge of Christian polity in the ancient church, and through this to his sense of “the whole church in the purest ages.”

The ordinal that Wesley prepared and sent with his consecrated superintendent honored the historic orders of the diaconate (this was of course the transitional diaconate as Wesley knew it) and the presbyterate and shows what he considered to be a polity that should characterize the universal church. In this polity, only ordained elders were authorized to preside at the sacrament of Holy Communion. True, John Wesley substituted the term elder for the term priest; but elder is a literal translation of presbyteros, the root word for priest. True, Wesley referred to Coke as a “superintendent” and expressed horror when Coke took the title of bishop. But I suspect Wesley’s horror was feigned at this point. As former Greek Moderator of Lincoln College, he knew very well that superintendent, in Latin, is an exact rendering of the Greek term for bishop, episkopos. Both mean “overseer.” His argument that “bishops” had legal status in England is very weak. His “superintendents” were not to be ordained but “consecrated” (as bishops were according to late medieval Catholic precedent and according to the Book of Common Prayer); and they had the same authorization to ordain deacons and elders (priests) as bishops had. Thus, in designing the polity that was to characterize early American Methodism, John Wesley bequeathed to our church a form of polity that he believed to be consistent with historic Christian practice, with what we might call...
“ecumenical precedent.” As Coke and Asbury explained the Methodist polity in their published notes accompanying the earliest Disciplines, they too appealed to the precedents of the ancient church. As we have seen above, even in developing the distinction between “local” and “traveling” elders, historic Methodist polity continued to honor the diaconate and the presbyterate and honored the sense that only ordained elders should be authorized to preside at Holy Communion.

Contemporary ecumenical consensus documents also make problematic the current practice of The United Methodist Church. The Faith and Order study Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, which was “received” formally by The United Methodist Church, upholds the historic threefold orders of deacons, “presbyters,” and bishops, and makes it clear that bishops and presbyters should hold the distinctive function of presiding at the Eucharist. Similarly, the declaration of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), “The COCU Consensus,” based in part on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and formally approved by The United Methodist Church and all of its pan-Methodist partner churches, recognizes the threefold ordering of deacons, presbyters, and bishops, as well as the role of bishops and presbyters in presiding at the Eucharist. The status of the COCU Consensus is questionable now, since it was not approved by the Presbyterian Church in the USA. However, it has remained in effect as The United Methodist Church has become part of the Churches Uniting In Christ (the successor organization to COCU). In both the reception of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and the approval of “The COCU Consensus,” The United Methodist Church has signaled its formal consent to an understanding of ordained ministry that is consistent with our historic polity and practice but is inconsistent with our current practice of authorizing nonordained persons to preside at Holy Communion. Oral Roberts is looking better and better to me.

A Renewed Office of Local Elder

What to do? Here is the point at which a theologian is much better at general principles than at specific proposals for altering the United Methodist Discipline. We are at a fortunate moment, however, for the 2004 General Conference authorized a thorough study of ordained ministry in the next quadrennium, and I hope that the study process will be able to develop more specific proposals. I trust the general principle is clear: however we decide to alter the Discipline, we must return to the fold of our
own history, our partner churches, and our ecumenical commitments by authorizing only elders (and bishops) to preside at Holy Communion. The reinstitution of the category of local elder might be an appropriate way to proceed. Here are some specific suggestions about the renewal of the office of local elder. (Some thoughts on a renewed office of local deacon follow later in the article.)

- **Create or reinstitute an office of "local elder" for persons who are ordained and authorized to preside at the sacrament of Holy Communion.** The older provision for a local pastor to become an elder remains in our Discipline; but it leads to ordination as an elder in full connection. Even if this provision is retained, I suggest that we utilize the category of local elder to ordain many of those who are currently serving as "licensed local pastors." Their authorization to administer Holy Communion would then be linked to their ordination as elders. Further, keep a category of nonordained local pastors (historically, "local preachers") and develop specific requirements for the status of ordination as a local elder; for example, completion of the first three years of the Course of Study and demonstration of gifts and graces in the work of a lay preacher.

- **Separate ordination as an elder from membership in the annual conference.** This would be necessary if we retain our current standards for full clergy membership in the annual conference; and I believe we should retain those standards for elders and deacons "in full connection," or even set the bar higher. In this respect, I agree with Robert Neville's suggestion to this effect. I am aware that local pastors have argued for voting rights in annual conferences in recent years, and this proposal will contradict those aspirations. I would argue, however, that presiding at Holy Communion as an ordained elder is far more important than voting in an annual conference. Moreover, I would be willing to suggest that, if something like this proposal is accepted, persons like me, who serve in "appointments beyond the local church," should be accorded the status of local elders and surrender their right to vote at annual conference. That is, local elders should have voice but no vote at annual conference.

- **Limit sacramental authorization (and possibly authorization to perform weddings and funerals) to the local congregation to which a local elder is appointed.** When I served as a "student lay pastor," I
was not authorized to preside at the sacraments but was authorized to perform weddings and funerals within the scope of my congregations. I appreciated the limitation, because it gave me an easy answer to folks who came to the parsonage to ask if I wanted to make a little money performing a wedding. In any case, it seems to me that this is the essence of what it would mean to serve as a "local" elder.

- Be sure that any polity developed in this respect is consistent with our ecumenical commitments and the polity of our partner churches. This should actually be the first point here, and it ought to be taken for granted; but United Methodists have a certain tendency to get behind the walls of a convention center and invent strange United Methodist stuff with little relevance to our partners or our ecumenical commitments.

The Possibility of a Renewed Office of Local Deacon or Local Diaconal Minister

One of the good things we United Methodists have done was to renew the office of the permanent deacon. Some objected that to lose the transitional diaconate altogether was an unecumenical move, but I don't believe so. Ask any elderly Catholic priest what the transitional diaconate meant prior to Vatican II and he will tell you, probably with a laugh, that he was ordained as subdeacon on a Friday, ordained as deacon on Saturday, and then ordained as priest on Sunday. The laugh is appropriate. Perhaps Superintendent Asbury's rapid progress through the diaconate and the presbyterate were not so unusual after all! Since Vatican II, Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, and others have worked to renew the integrity of the order of deacon in the church. I believe our efforts in this regard, including the discontinuation of the transitional diaconate, are ahead of the ecumenical curve. It is clear from my comments above that I am less than enthusiastic about extending sacramental authority to the Order of Deacons. My primary reason is that this would weaken the integrity and distinct ministry of deacons in the church.

When I began thinking about these issues, I was prepared to say that it would not be relevant to consider a renewed office of local deacon, since local deacons were historically simply a transitional order in preparation for the office of local elder. But I had a conversion about this at Disneyland. Actually, I was at the biennial meeting of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), which met at a hotel in Garden Grove,
California, within sight of Disneyland. The ATS is not a likely locus for inspiration, but the talk given by the association’s president on new challenges in theological education stimulated my thinking. He pointed to the huge number of persons who are currently serving in full-time or part-time ministries in local churches—many of them drawn from the ranks of their own congregations—as youth leaders, business managers, program directors, and in a variety of other positions. Very few of these locally cultivated leaders, Dr. Aylishire pointed out, have any theological education whatsoever. I felt my heart strangely warmed. These folks, I realized, are serving (diakonein) in their local congregations as “local deacons,” even though currently we have only the category of “certification” for such leaders.

The problem is that United Methodist deacons do not itinerate (not even in the very limited sense in which elders itinerate now). So it might not make sense to have a distinction between “local deacons” and “deacons in full connection.” Nevertheless, I think that we do have a very significant group of men and women serving in local churches who need theological formation and whose ministries need better recognition than the notion of “certification” can afford. I would be happy with a newly revised version of “local diaconal ministers” (nonordained) in place of what I am calling “local deacons” here. For me, the main concern is not the particular title we choose or even the issue of ordination. (Ironically, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America began using the term diaconal ministers at about the time The United Methodist Church dropped the term in favor of ordained deacons.) Here are some thoughts on a renewed office of “local deacon” or “local diaconal minister.”

• Develop a new office of local deacon or local diaconal minister (this would not be a renewed office, as in the case of the local elder) that embraces all the categories currently served by our “certification” processes and that allows for some other local ministries not presently covered in the various certification areas.

• Ask the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the United Methodist theological seminaries to collaborate in setting criteria for and developing a curriculum for local deacons or local diaconal ministers, based on the current certification curricula but also considering the Basic Graduate Theological Studies (BGTS) curriculum and the Course of Study as possible models for formation for local deacons.
Find ways to encourage local Christian leaders to seek training and ordination as local deacons or local diaconal ministers. At present, apart from the certification process, the training of local church leaders is unregulated and generally not encouraged. The development of an office of local deacon or local diaconal minister would give us a way to encourage those who are already serving in many areas to seek more formal training.

Consider giving local deacons or local diaconal ministers voice but not vote at annual conference, to parallel my suggestion for local elders.

Conclusion

Do these proposals mean that I, as president of a theological seminary, am effectively "cutting off the branch on which we stand" in suggesting that we ordain some elders who are not trained in seminaries? The "seminarily correct" position, of course, is that our Lord Jesus Christ intended only those persons who hold a Master of Divinity degree from an ATS-accredited theological school to be ordained in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church! This is, however, somewhat difficult to justify on the grounds of Scripture and tradition. Actually, seminaries are deeply involved in the training of deacons and candidates for certification (as well as in the Course of Study). So, with respect to seminaries, what I have proposed is not so very radical. I am confident that if theological seminaries are doing a good job of preparing persons for Christian leadership, then we will not fail to attract candidates. Moreover, I believe that if we can work with the churches to develop new means of formation, e.g., for persons preparing for what I have called the "local deacon," our theological institutions will prosper.

The proposal I have offered here suggests that we renew the office of local elder and possibly the office of local deacon. The use of the office of "local elder" would resolve the difficulties involved in our current practice of authorizing nonordained persons to preside at Eucharist. Also, it would bring consistency to our definition of the elder as authorized to preside at Holy Communion (in addition to his or her ministries of preaching the Word and ordering the church). The use of an office of "local deacon" might strengthen our sense of the integrity of the Order of Deacons as constituted by forms of service in the church and in society. I would be concerned that a category of nonordained local diaconal ministers could confuse the sense
of the integrity of this order that we have worked to define. Nevertheless, I believe that, in general, these proposals are consistent with our United Methodist heritage, with the practice of our pan-Methodist partner churches, and with our broader ecumenical commitments.

I was delighted to read in the *Discipline* of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church that a local elder is ordained as an elder “in the Church of Christ.” I couldn’t put it better myself. We are Christians first and United Methodists second. Our ecumenical commitments should have precedence over intradenominational issues. This means that a United Methodist deacon is first and foremost a deacon in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. A United Methodist elder, whether “local” or “in full connection,” should be considered first and foremost as a priest in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. I suggest that we honor Dr. Roberts as one of the last United Methodist “local elders” as we search for renewed and clarified understandings of the orders of ministry.

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Endnotes

1. I must note that the Oklahoma Annual Conference seems to have found Dr. Roberts’s name to be an exceedingly great mystery from year to year; some *Journals* list him as “Granville Oral Roberts,” others as “Oral Granville Roberts,” and yet others simply as “Oral Roberts.”
2. I shall use the anachronistic term *clergy* here for fear of using the term actually employed in early American Methodist polity, namely, *ministers*.
Some articles take seven years to write. In the Fall of 1997, my second semester of seminary, I was privileged to participate in a doctoral seminar entitled “Diakonia in Modern Church History” with Professor Carter Lindberg at Boston University School of Theology. I was just beginning to discern a call to the new United Methodist diaconate and was anxious to gain clarity on what appeared to be a potentially creative restoration of deacons’ historic place in the church at the 1996 General Conference. One of the first books we discussed was John N. Collins’s Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources. Collins provided a radical critique of what has been the traditional meaning of diakonia as “loving and caring service.” This critique was simultaneously unsettling and intriguing. Collins’s book stood in odd juxtaposition for me to other scholarship we examined in the remainder of the course.

The class went on to explore the Lutheran deaconess movement of the mid-nineteenth century and subsequent developments in Episcopalian, Methodist, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic circles. The Methodist Episcopal deaconess movement was North America’s largest deaconess community at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. We ended the course with a look at the then recently concluded 1995 gathering of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, held in Hanover, Germany, in which Lindberg had been a Lutheran participant.

The Hanover Report, The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity, praised Collins’s “historical-philological corrective to earlier understandings of the diakon-words” but was cautious in considering the implications of his research. My own thoughts about this new research on the meaning of diakonia remained similarly inconclusive as I waited for biblical scholars to engage Collins’s research and possibly reveal its flaws. Over the past seven years, scholars in Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and
North America have done so; and few have countered his findings. The most
ringing endorsement of his research came in 2000, when a respected Greek-
English lexicon largely adopted Collins's views published earlier in Diakonia.4

In his Serve the Community of the Church, biblical scholar Andrew D.
Clarke has recently provided one of the few criticisms of Collins's work.5
Clarke argues that Paul's use of diakon-terms and of doulos in his metaphor
of slavery (1 Cor. 9:19 and 2 Cor. 4:5) illustrates that Paul had a servile
understanding of his own ministry. Such a reading, however, can be
contested by biblical scholarship done by Dale B. Martin and Murray J.
Harris, who have both maintained that Paul's use of the slavery metaphor
was a way of affirming his "authority derived from status by association"
with Christ.6 Collins's main point of contention with Clarke is Clarke's
portrayal of diakon-terms in Paul as having "slavish connotations." Collins
argues that Clarke inappropriately transfers the meaning of the diakon-
terms in the Gospels to the entirely different context of Pauline literature.7

The purpose of this article is to explore the implications of Collins's
research for the United Methodist Order of Deacons. Before proceeding to
that discussion, however, let me say a few words about its relevance for
United Methodist thinking regarding the broader issue of the nature of
ministry itself. A single biblical passage serves to illustrate the potentially
far-reaching implications of Collins's research for United Methodists'
understanding of ministry. The use of the diakon-terms in Mark 10:45 was
the exegetical problem that initially launched Collins's linguistic research:
"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life
a ransom for many." Based on his research, Collins conveys the underlying
meaning to be closer to the following: "The Son of Man came to carry out
his mission and give his life as a ransom for many." The contrast is clear:
The diakon-term does not denote acts of loving, caring service but rather
points to Jesus' relationship to the Father, in order to stress to his bickering
disciples that they are being called to live under a wholly different set
of values in the kingdom of God. "The service of Jesus consists in giving
his life as a ransom. It is not service of any other kind."8 Our understanding of
the diakon-terms and the biblical passages that contain them must be more
kerygmatic than caritative. Jesus is not calling his disciples to adopt an atti-
tude of lowly service under a worldly paradigm of social relations but is
pointing to a completely different set of Kingdom values that drastically
reconfigure traditional notions of status.
In his 1990 text, Collins exhaustively demonstrates that every instance of the verb form of *diakonia* stresses the *relationship* of the minister to the church community that has given him or her authority and not the particular *nature* of the activity. Although such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article, Collins's research has radical implications for general Protestant assertions about the “ministry of all Christians,” particularly in relation to the nature of the episcopacy and an understanding of ordination.\(^9\)

It should be noted at the outset that, as a linguistic study, Collins's work does not claim that the meaning of the *diakon-words* in the New Testament should exclusively define the meaning of ministry or the diaconate today. The Holy Spirit continues to guide the church in new directions for ministry. Since Scripture is our primary source for theological reflection, however, it is essential that the meaning of the *diakon-words* in Scripture be accurately understood if we are going to be faithful to the biblical meaning of ministry in our contemporary reflections on the nature of ministry.

This article will illustrate the fresh possibilities that Collins's research affords a United Methodist theology of the diaconate. In some respects, the focus upon the diaconate is an act of “putting the cart before the horse,” since a theology of the diaconate should follow from and be incorporated into a reappraisal of United Methodist ecclesiology in light of Collins's research on the *diakon-terms*. Accordingly, I have not illuminated in this paper the various aspects of United Methodist polity that would have to change in order to accommodate these ideas. I do hope, however, that such a discussion will be generated from the thoughts put forward here.

Collins's research into the ancient church's understanding of the *diakon-words* has three principal components that are important for United Methodists to consider in our contemporary reflections on the diaconate.

**Deacons' Work Is Not Identified with Social Welfare Work**

The first important insight with regard to the *diakon-words* is best framed in the negative, as a critique of current belief and practice. It may also be the most disturbing to current United Methodist deacons and, as such, must be addressed in a forthright manner. Collins and a growing consensus of other scholars contend that the *diakon-word* group never conveyed the idea of loving and caring service. This now-accepted meaning of *diakonia* was made popular in the nineteenth-century deaconess move-
ment in Germany and received academic support from German theologian Wilhelm Brandt in the 1930s. The rudiments of Brandt’s understanding of *diakonia* can be traced back easily to the Reformation period.

It is important to stress that Collins’s interpretation of the *diakon-*words by no means suggests an abandoning by anyone—deacons in particular—of ministries for the poor. Jesus’ love for the “least of these” and the work with the poor on the part of deacons, elders, local pastors, and laypersons must continue if the church is to be faithful to the gospel message. Rather, it is the understanding of one-to-one correspondence between a deacon’s identity and social welfare ministries that must change. We must be honest in admitting that work among the poor was not constitutive of diaconal or presbyteral identity in the biblical period, even though it has become a cherished part of contemporary deacons’ heritage.

The implications of this aspect of Collins’s research for United Methodist deacons are significant. The *Book of Discipline* asserts that “[f]rom the earliest days of the church, deacons were called and set apart for the ministry of love, justice, and service; of connecting the church with the most needy, neglected, and marginalized among the children of God.” This assertion of the biblical basis for deacons’ ministry is called into question by Collins’s research. Additionally, critics of deacons’ ministries have noted that, if deacons’ identity is constituted wholly by their work among the poor, then there is nothing unique about their ministry. After all, *all* Christians are called to care for their neighbors, with special attention given to the “least of these.” While contemporary deacons may, in many circumstances, be persons who seek to focus a congregation’s attention on the poor, the foundation for a theology of the diaconate is better constructed on other grounds.

The 2000 *Book of Discipline’s* ubiquitous use of “servant leadership” terminology (¶¶131-136), first employed in 1996, also must be revisited, since the new biblical research calls into question the meaning of *diakonia* as “servant leadership.” In employing this terminology, United Methodists were, in many ways, following the example of the World Council of Churches in its use of the term *diakonia* in a theology of service throughout its publications.

Instead of “servant leader” terminology, our denomination might choose to return to the language of “representative ministry,” utilized in the *Book of Discipline* from 1976 to 1992. This description of ordained ministry has been shown to be useful in ecumenical dialogues where a theology of ordained ministry has been discussed. Such a move would be consistent
with Collins's research on diakonia, which similarly affirms an emissarial, or representative, relationship between the minister (deacon or presbyter) and the community or bishop.

**Deacons Are Given a “Connectional Mandate”**

If the foundation for a theology of the diaconate is best built on something other than the deacon's role in social welfare activities, what then ought this foundation be? Collins's research suggests that in the early church deacons were defined first and foremost by a close relationship with their bishop and, by extension, with the corporate body of believers, rather than by any particular function they may have performed. Such a relationship necessarily flows from the ecclesial nature of ministry itself. Deacons' functions in the early church were wide ranging and included distributing Communion to members not present for the community's corporate worship, care for the poor, financial administration, and preaching the Word. Of these many functions, only the distribution of the Eucharist and preaching constituted the "field of meaning" of the diakon-words in the ancient church. This does not mean that contemporary deacons should have such limited responsibilities but rather that biblical reflection upon the diakon-words must begin with the relationality of the terms. The intense relational and interdependent nature of all the church's ministers (presbyters, bishops, and deacons) recalls the unambiguous sense of Jesus' mandate or mission from the Father in Mark 10:45, discussed above.

*Diakonia, or ministry, by definition, was imposed on a person.*

Thus, Methodist understandings and practice of the itinerancy are faithful responses to a key element of the New Testament conception of ministry. Add to this the "brotherly love" of the clergy connection expressed in Charles Wesley's hymn "And Are We Yet Alive," and the richness of the New Testament models of ministry find faithful expression in Methodism indeed. The challenge for the contemporary United Methodist diaconate in this regard is to embody ways that deacons are also under a kind of "connectional mandate." That is, United Methodist deacons must be connected vitally to the worshipping congregation and also be clear about the bishop's mandate they have been given by virtue of their ordination. There can be no such thing as a "free agent" deacon.

United Methodists ought to consider how deacons might live out their mandate of accountability with the bishop or, more practically, with district
superintendents who have also been given the ministry of episkopé, or “oversight.” This need not necessarily be the same kind of itinerancy as that of elders; but the “spirit of the itinerancy” should find some practical expression in our polity for deacons. Some deacons already embody such a spirit as they have begun new ministries with a mandate from the bishop. Much education needs to take place among bishops and district superintendents—as well as among laity, elders, and even deacons themselves—to explicate the nature of the diaconate, so that deacons can be appointed to places that help define their unique ministry and make their connectional mandate clear. This educational task is made more complex by the simultaneous existence of two different forms of the diaconate in United Methodism, the lay office of deaconess and the ordained office of deacon.

Deacons must also continue to struggle to find a place for themselves in the liturgy. The Discipline’s explanation of deacons’ calling to “interrelate worship and service” is a fruitful line of theological reflection. Much work in this regard has already been done by Daniel Benedict and others. United Methodists might also consider an additional vital use for deacons in the “liturgy” of the local church that occurs outside of Sunday morning worship. The Methodist “class leader” is a church office within our Methodist heritage that could be reclaimed by contemporary deacons. Throughout our history there have been various attempts to use this vital office in ministries that incorporate many of the historic roles taken by deacons. These include visiting the sick, promoting serious discipleship among the faithful, and collecting offerings from class members to be used for the common good. Like class leaders, United Methodist deacons in the future may increasingly serve as non-stipendiary ordained persons in the church, much like their counterparts in other denominations.

Many deacons, no doubt, are already serving as small-group ministry coordinators or Bible study leaders in their churches, given that so many of them have considerable training in Christian education. Deacons as leaders of small-group Bible studies, much like Methodist class leaders of the past, could work in close connection with pastors to assist the congregation in receiving the proclaimed Word of God. Such a role for deacons has also been proposed by Reformed theologian T. F. Torrance and was cited by Collins as a helpful practical response to his research findings. As deacons are ordained to Word and Service, they could play an important part in revitalizing the historic role of class leaders in the contemporary church.
Relating the Methodist office of class leader and the contemporary diaconate has implications for determining the desired number of deacons for The United Methodist Church. In the past, there was typically more than one class leader in a particular Methodist society. One of the first early examples in a church document describing the activities of deacons, the Didascalia Apostolorum, shows that there were at least two deacons working to keep order in a small but crowded worship setting. In The United Methodist Church in the United States, at present there are fewer than 1,200 deacons, compared to approximately 33,000 elders.

There are many reasons for this relatively low number of deacons, but a prime reason is most certainly the rather high requirements for formal, seminary-level education. There seems to be an unfortunate belief in the minds of many United Methodists (also expressed in the Discipline) that to be ordained as a deacon, the candidate must have a level of education virtually equivalent to that of an elder. The mandate for ministry embodied in ordination is given not because of a person’s educational level but rather because the church believes God has given her or him gifts for fruitful ministry. United Methodist deacons have far more formal theological education than deacons in other denominations in North America. It is worth considering whether, in the tradition of many Methodist deaconess training institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, instituting deacons’ training schools at the annual conference level might not be a better way to prepare deacons for ministry. This is the contemporary training model for Episcopalian and Roman Catholic ordained deacons. Competence for ministering the Word of God need not require seminary-level education.

The need for such training schools has been suggested at other times in our church’s history, including in the pages of a predecessor of this very journal in 1886. Holiness theologian and Methodist Episcopal clergyman Daniel Steele argued that our denomination’s seminaries were valuable for the excellent theological education they provided but that there were many people needing to be equipped for ministry for whom seminary-level education was not the right preparation. Many of these people possessed gifts for ministry but were poor, and because they could not afford or did not want a classical theological education, they were not being used effectively by the Methodist Episcopal denomination. Notwithstanding current sources of funding that might partially address the financial barriers to
seminary, additional constraints such as time, location, or academic ability similarly might limit persons today who could otherwise be very gifted members of the United Methodist diaconate.

In carrying out their role in maintaining the cohesiveness of the church community, deacons should be utilized as agents from the local church community in distributing the Lord's Supper to people who, due to illness or other reasons, are unable to be present at the community's weekly worship service. This would be a powerful representation of the extension of the church's ministry, which has deep roots in the tradition of the diaconate. Recent proposals at General Conference to give deacons the ability to preside at the celebration of the Lord's Supper in particular localities would have the effect of severing a relationship between a gathered community and an absent member or members—a relationship the deacon is called to keep vibrant. What better way to address the needs that precipitated these General Conference proposals than to bring the previously consecrated Communion elements from a local church worship service to persons unable to attend as an expression of their inclusion? Such arrangements will take planning and coordination, but the barriers to such action in most circumstances do not seem insurmountable.

At the annual conference level, the fellowship of the Order of Deacons currently in place may serve as a model for a cohesive community that, in turn, can be expressed in local church contexts. The experience of chapters of the Order of Deacons in annual conferences suggests that deacons (in part due to their smaller numbers) have had a much easier time developing a sense of community amongst themselves than have their colleagues in the Order of Elders. The Orders of Deacons can also be the context for strengthening the relationship between deacons and the bishops and district superintendents who serve in the annual conference's ministry of oversight. Annual conference chapters of the Orders of Deacons have helped their members to reflect theologically on the nature of their ministry, which has, in turn, illuminated for other United Methodists the deacon's historic place in the church.

What has been most surprising is that most deacons in The United Methodist Church have not followed their counterparts in the Episcopal or Roman Catholic traditions in adopting the title Deacon, choosing instead the general title for ordained persons, Reverend. This has unfortunately blurred their distinct identity for many persons in local churches. Although
minor in some respects, the choice to name one’s own place in the church should be symbolically very important for deacons and the church at large. Referring to deacons as “Reverend” has served to confuse rather than to clarify the deacon’s role in the church, even though its use has most likely emerged out of a desire rightfully to assert deacons’ important place as ordained leaders in the church.

**Deacons Are “Go-between” Missionaries**

Considered along with the emphasis on the integral importance of the deacon’s “connectional mandate,” understanding the deacon as “go-between” has the most potential to revitalize a vision for the diaconate in The United Methodist Church that is true to the biblical meaning of *diakonia*. Of those scholars and church leaders who have been aware of Collins’s contributions, the image they have most frequently utilized to describe the role of the deacon has been that of a “go-between.” A reinterpretation of Acts 6 best exemplifies this idea.\(^2\)

More than any other passage in Scripture, Acts 6 has long been believed to represent the Christian movement’s selection of its first deacons. While most scholars agree that this was probably not the case—the office of deacon most clearly developed only years later—the passage has been influential from very early times in relation to the diaconate. When one applies the new research on the *diakon-*words to this passage, it greatly alters and expands the older (and erroneous) understanding, in which the “seven” were seen as “table waiters” in charge of providing for the material needs of Greek-speaking widows.

As in earlier chapters, in Acts 6 Luke utilizes the *diakon-*words to describe the sacred mandate given by God to Paul and other ministers, or *diakonoi*, to preach the gospel. The fact that, in the next chapter, Stephen, one of the seven, does precisely this is just one of the many indications that the work the seven were assigned to do was to be ministers of the Word to linguistically different and socially marginalized Greek widows. The other disciples continued to preach in Aramaic in the local temple, where these Greek widows could not enter. In a wonderful example of the early church’s responsiveness to the leading of God’s Spirit, a new cadre of Greek-speaking ministers was formed to meet the spiritual needs of a previously neglected part of the community. The new ministers served as vital go-betweens, or emissaries, for different groups within the church.
Later in Luke's account of the spread of the gospel, the idea of go-between or emissary is even more clearly expressed in the delegation sent from the church in Antioch to the church in Jerusalem to provide assistance needed because of the threatening famine in Jerusalem. The NRSV fails to convey the power of the diakon-word used here by translating it as "relief to the believers." When the diakon-word is used in its full meaning, the passage can be read to say, "Without exception the community of disciples determined to send representatives on a mission to the brothers and sisters living in Judea." Great importance was placed on maintaining the fellowship in the church across geographical distance, and the delegation of "go-betweens" served that role.

Read in light of the new insights on the diakon-words, these passages yield many fresh possibilities for United Methodist deacons. Norwegian theologian Kjell Nordstokke has written most powerfully on the transformative potential that a reinterpretation of these biblical words could have for contemporary deacons. The ministry of deacons, Nordstokke contends, "should not primarily be interpreted as self-humiliation and servility, but as conscious mission with divine authority and with the mandate to be a go-between in contexts of conflict and suffering." Just as Jesus described his own mission in Mark 10:45 not as lowly service but as deriving from a wholly (and holy) other Source, so also are deacons given a mandate from God under the values of God's kingdom. There is no need to appeal to a weaker "theology of service." Love and humility are a part of the deacon's ministry—as they are constitutive of all Christian discipleship shaped by the Cross. However, these traits are not best understood as constitutive of deacon's ministry per se. A corrective to the abuses of ecclesiastical hubris of Christendom is not found in a ministry that follows secular trends where "the world provides the agenda"; rather, as Jesus taught, it is found by operating under a radically different set of values in the Kingdom.

What would happen in United Methodism if even just one hundred deacons in the United States followed the example of the disciples in Acts 6 and worked as go-betweens to build bridges of interpersonal relationships between immigrant and nonimmigrant communities, or Native and Anglo-American communities, for the sake of the gospel? On a more global scale, how can United Methodists better follow the example of Acts 11:29 in sending delegations of missionaries between the global North and global South to better be partners in mission around the world? The changing real-
ities of global Christianity and the demographic changes in North America require a similarly bold stance as that taken by the disciples in Acts 6.25

The closing words from a recent sermon by the Episcopal bishop of Bethlehem on the occasion of a deacon's ordination seem fitting for this challenge to rethink our understanding of deacons in United Methodism. As we too turn our attention to Bethlehem in this season, may we deacons in particular seek to reinterpret our ministry, our diakonia, in a fresh, bold way that is worthy of the connectional mandate we have been given.

Jesus' faithfulness, Jesus' bold compassion, Jesus' plain speaking of the truth, got him killed. It is the faithful, compassionate, truthful one whom God raised from the dead, illuminating forever the question of whether faithfulness, compassion, and truthfulness are worth it. Results we may not see in proportion to our dreams and ambitions, and maybe we will see them, but either way, we are part of something that moves from resurrection to resurrection, part of a process that is infinitely bigger than ourselves. By the grace of God you are what you are, and that grace must not be received in vain. Be bold, be powerful, be confident: dare to be deacons.26

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Endnotes

3. My cautious approach to Collins's work is evident in both the book I co-authored with Paul Van Buren, The Deacon: Ministry through Words of Faith and Acts of Love (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1999) and in my article “Deacons as Emissary-Servants: A Liturgical Theology,” Quarterly Review 19/4 (Winter 1999): 372-86. This article is available on my website (http://www.deaconpages.org), along with other diaconate articles, a bibliography, and ecumenical links to websites on the diaconate.
4. For a review of much of the scholarly and ecclesial reaction to his work, see John Collins's most recent book, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing; Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2002). See also Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000). For a brief, otherwise unpublished, essay by Collins on this lexicon's use of his research, see my website. The first German publication seriously to incorporate Collins's work was Hans-Jürgen Benedict, "Beruht der Anspruch der evangelischen Diakonie auf einer Mißinterpretation der antiken Quellen? John N. Collins Untersuchung 'Diakonia'" *Pastoraltheologie* 89/9 (September 2000): 349-64. The most recent treatment of Collins's work is another German publication: Volker Herrmann, Rainer Merz, Heinz Schmidt, Hrsg., *Diakonische Konturen: Theologie im Kontext sozialer Arbeit*, vol. 18 in a series by the Diakoniewissenschaftlichen Instituts of the University of Heidelberg (Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag, 2003). The president of the Evangelical Church in Germany's diaconal work, Jürgen Gohde, has also delivered an address noting the implications of Collins's research for the traditional German understanding of diaconal work. See his "Die Aufgabe der Diakonie im zukünftigen Europa," found online at http://www.diakonie.de/downloads/Gohde-Promotion2003.pdf. The Church of England's report *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001) utilizes Collins's contributions considerably in its reflections upon the diaconate.


7. John N. Collins, personal correspondence, July 29, 2004. For further detail on the nature of Paul's use of diakon-terms, see Collins's *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*.


16. For an excellent contemporary treatment of class meetings and class leaders and how they fit in Wesley’s connection, see D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, Indiana: Evang, 1997).

17. In 1999-2000, I surveyed 516 deacons in five denominations in the United States. Over 90 percent of United Methodist deacons stated that they were paid for the work they do as a deacon, compared to 35 percent of Roman Catholic deacons and 15 percent of Episcopalian deacons. Approximately 70 percent of Lutheran deaconesses and diaconal ministers were paid for their work. The results are available on my website as well as in a monograph series published by the North American Association for the Diaconate (Episcopal), Benjamin L. Hartley, *An Empirical Look at the Ecumenical Diaconate in the United States*, Monograph Series No. 16 (Providence, Rhode Island: North American
Association for the Diaconate, 2003).
19. United Methodist deacons are twice as likely to have graduate degrees than their counterparts in the Episcopal or Roman Catholic churches and 20 percent more likely than diaconal ministers and deaconesses in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. See Hartley, *An Empirical Look at the Ecumenical Diaconate*, 7.
24. See Department on Studies in Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, *The Church for Others and The Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967), 20. The phrase the world provides the agenda was first used in this publication.
When the Catholic diocese of Memphis began to train permanent deacons in 1976, it was a first venture of moving toward an ordained ministry for married and single persons for centuries in this venerable church. Likewise, it was a beachhead for the ministries in the world called out among the whole people of God since the initiation of the reforms of Vatican II. Other Western churches have a longer history of diaconal reflection, training, and ordination, on whose experience Catholics were able to draw.

An Episcopal priest who had directed a perpetual deacon program and a United Methodist seminary dean whose wife was a diaconal minister were included among the members of our diocesan deacon board. As we began to train ministers of service and worship, it was crucial that (1) our program take account of the faith of the church through the ages on this restored ordained ministry; (2) our program be driven by the justice and service needs of our local community, which this ministry is meant to symbolize (Catholics would say "sacramentalize"); (3) this ministry empower the ministry of all the baptized for the gospel message of justice, compassion, and engagement; and (4) our Catholic community learn from and serve all of the Christian communities in Memphis.

We were very grateful to the United Methodist churches in Memphis, as are Catholics around the globe, as we partner together on the long road to full visible unity and the present possibilities for ministry and mission. We are divided at the Lord's Table because we are not fully in communion in ordained ministry. This does not hinder multiple common mission efforts, especially in the service/diaconal dimension of our churches' calling. However, an ordained ministry that is not reconciled is a scandal in our witness that contradicts the will of Christ in the gospel.

United Methodism emerged from a decision by John Wesley, which, for the sake of mission, divided Methodism from Anglicanism—the latter inheriting the divisions in sixteenth-century Western Christianity and the schism...
between East and West of 1054. For the sake of mission, the church's sacramental integrity, and biblical fidelity, major steps have been taken in the past century toward healing these wounds in Christ's body.

In this essay, I reflect on the renewal of United Methodist ordained ministry in light of this mission to restore Christian unity on behalf of God's mission, through the church in the world. "Ecumenical renewal is indeed a pivotal aspect of comprehensive ecclesial renewal, but there is much more to ecclesial renewal than resolving the problem of disunity."¹

All Christians face the question of reconciling our differences in a penitential spirit before the God who calls us to unity in his Son, as the World Methodist Council–Anglican dialogue admonishes us:

None of our churches, viewed from the human perspective, can claim to have been fully obedient to the call of Christ: no ministry has perfectly pointed the church to the faithfulness of Christ; yet both our churches recognize the presence of the crucified and risen One in our midst, and the guiding and healing hand of the Holy Spirit.²

**Ecumenical Developments**

**Emergence of Methodist Ministry, in Ecumenical Perspective**

John Wesley made the decision to provide superintendents for the colonial churches because of his reading of the New Testament that presbyter and bishop were not clearly distinguishable offices—an interpretation that is ecumenically common today. However, because of that separation, his ministers and their successors today have to be ordained when they become ministers in Orthodox, Anglican, or Roman Catholic churches.

These churches recognize the ministry of the ordained presbyter, bishop, and deacon as symbolizing communion in time and space with the apostles (1) by the sign of laying on of hands and prayers by those authorized by the church to ordain (retained by Methodists); and (2) by bishops who themselves were ordained by bishops recognized by the church as standing in succession to the apostles (not retained in the theology of Methodism).

The theology of the priesthood of the whole people of God—the ministry of all the baptized—does not divide our churches. We hold ourselves accountable to this common faith in different ways in the disciplines of our separate churches.
All of our churches recognize that the ministry is exercised in personal, communal, and collegial ways. Methodists use the language of connection and Catholics the language of hierarchical communion to speak of this collegiality within communion (koinonia). In spite of differences of language and structure, the biblical roots and missional thrust of this ministerial interdependence in Christ can be understood as a common heritage. While Methodists do not speak of ordination or the ordained ministry as a “sacrament,” those churches who do use that language can recognize in United Methodist debates the faith that these designations affirm. Certainly Methodists understand ordination as a “means of grace.”

Within this common understanding of the church and its calling, the differences become important if we are to arrive at that full, visible unity of the church to which Catholics, Methodists, and the member churches of the World Council of Churches are committed. Among many Catholics, and I suspect among Methodists as well, the goal of visible unity is not seen by all as a central call of the gospel; the common faith that we share in ministry is not widely known; and the outstanding problems and the urgency of solving them are not appreciated.

Early Methodist ministry in the colonies and emerging states of the Union was itinerate, evangelistic, and informed by sufficient education to bring an unchurched frontier into what would by the early twentieth century become the largest Protestant church in the nation. Ordinations and succession in ministry were presbyterial rather than episcopal.

On American soil, Wesley's superintendents took on the title of bishop, though with a clear commitment to avoid becoming the residential “lord” bishops of the Church of England or of the Continental Empire. In fact, the Methodist bishops became itinerating general superintendents, empowering the untiring circuit riders who carried the task of spreading biblical holiness across the land.

These bishops resonate with the history of religious communities: monasteries bringing literacy, civilization, and law to barbarian Europe; Celtic monk-bishops bringing the gospel to the Germanic peoples of the Continent; and pioneering foundations in outlying Scandinavia, Scotland, and the Slavic hinterlands. In time, these bishops became settled servants of the great American organization that is The United Methodist Church, sometimes carrying great influence for the church's mission in this new democratic context.
It is no surprise to the church historian to find that the only church to have an office building among the monuments of power in the American capitol belongs to this great denomination. When Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Episcopal leaders gather together to face the members of the Congress and the Senate in common witness for the gospel, it is no surprise that they are guests of The United Methodist Church as they prepare to speak the truth in the halls of power. The Episcopal Cathedral may carry the nickname "national" and host the establishment and ecumenical liturgies of the nation's capitol, but it is still the Methodists who host international and national ministers of social witness.

With a residential, presidential episcopate, a presbyterate with a modest range of itinerancy, and an established mission and ministry, reflection on the nature of the church and its connectional system, the ordering of ministry, and the theology of ordination has become an ever-more urgent priority.

While Methodists do not perceive their church or their ordained ministry to be anything other than the bishops, presbyters, and deacons of the universal church, this is not the evaluation of the majority of Christians in the ecumenical movement. Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches are not likely, with their understanding of the faith of the church through the ages, to adopt the Methodist theology of ordination, any more than Methodists are likely to join any one of these traditions in order to bring healing to Christ's body. If division exists and theologies of unity differ, is it not a common challenge, a problem to be resolved together? Unity in ordained ministry, and consequently at the Lord's Table, will be achieved through ecumenical dialogue, under the impetus of the Holy Spirit, in service to that unity for which Christ prayed.

The study of ordained ministry that the 2004 General Conference referred to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry may prove to be as ecumenically productive and illuminating as the text of This Holy Mystery approved at the same General Conference.

Reformation Perspectives in Ecumenical Conversation
The communion of ordained ministry as necessary for the full communion of the church was presumed at the time of the Reformation, though there was no uniform, focused theology of ministry, episcopacy, and presbyterial order. The diaconate remained a transitional order, much as it was in United Methodism before 1996.
The question of whether the fullness of ordained ministry resided in the presbyter or in the bishops was an open question in the sixteenth century. The Lutheran confessions gave a normative character to the bishops, as long as the political prince-bishop was rejected.\(^\text{10}\) When bishops were not available for ordinations in Germany, on the basis of a theological position rooted in St. Jerome (340–420), Melanchton (1497–1560) recognized the authority of presbyters to ordain in the absence of bishops in the apostolic succession. Continuity with the pre-Reformation episcopate was retained in Sweden.\(^\text{10}\)

Other Continental reformers followed the Lutheran theological option. Some of the radical reformers did away with ordination as a constitutive element in the church and developed a functional view of ministry. This latter view is clearly rejected by United Methodists.\(^\text{11}\)

Theologically, the focus on the bishops' role as bearers of the symbol of continuity in space and time and as those ordaining deacons, elders, and other bishops in apostolic succession was clarified by the Catholic Council of Trent (1545–1563), without formally rejecting the Jerome option. Until the second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the option of a presbyter-centered or bishop-centered doctrine of ministry was an open question among Catholic scholars, though clearly the dominant position was that bishops claiming ordination in succession to the apostles was the faith of the church through the ages. Ministers from Reformation churches were incorporated into the Catholic priesthood through ordination, as they continue to be.

On the other hand, Vatican II affirmed the "fullness of the priesthood" to reside in the bishop, without condemning those theologians who had held a presbyter-centered theology of ministry and without explicating a theology of what this "fullness" consists of.\(^\text{12}\) This formulation makes the ecumenical dialogue more complex and seems to close off some solutions for the recognition and reconciliation of ministries. However, it has opened up new possibilities for Catholics in decentralization, participation, and inculturation.

After the first Vatican Council (1870), there was such a strong need for the Bishop of Rome among the bishops of the church and for papal centralization against the onslaught of the Enlightenment and Nazi and Marxist nationalisms that many thought the roles of the diocesan/local church and the collegial and communal dimensions of leadership were lost. Vatican II restored the theology of local, diocesan, inculturated churches; collegial struc-
tures of governance; and the participation of all the baptized in leadership.

In typical Methodist fashion, Catholic, evangelical, and Reformation heritages provide resources for the mission of its ordained ministries and vitality for renewal, while not always being transparent to a coherent theological vision to its ecumenical partners. United Methodist resources are multivalent, but they have provided some clear theological positions on ministry.13

The Elizabethan settlement of 1559 provided decisions about ordained ministry that bridged the Catholic threefold order and the sense of continuity of the faith of the church through the ages with understandings emerging from the Continental, especially the Genevan, Reformation. Like Vatican II, the Elizabethan divines did not resolve the theology of ministry, which was clarified for the time by the work of Richard Hooker (1554-1600). John Wesley stands in this tradition as it developed through Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699), with an evangelistic sense of liberty that led him to move away from the Anglican establishment.

Is a missionary ecclesiology enough to sustain a Methodist doctrine of ordained ministry? Can the ecumenical community move toward deeper unity without addressing the divisive sacramental issues that are at the heart of the doctrine of ordained ministry, eucharistic sharing, and authority and oversight? I think not.

Indeed, one of the deepest ecumenical problems is the religious illiteracy we experience in all of our churches. Even some of our elders/priests do not understand the terms of these debates, the theological positions of one another's churches, and the theological progress that has been made toward healing them.

From the Catholic point of view, the Anglican–Catholic International Commission has reached the most advanced agreement on ordained ministry with any Reformation church, while not yet being able to resolve the intractable question of the ordination of women.14 World Methodist Council dialogues with Catholics have used this theological agreement as a resource.15

The key theological conclusions of this Anglican–Catholic dialogue include our common faith in ordained ministry; imposition of hands with the invocation of the Holy Spirit by bishops; and recognition that authorized bishops are signs ("sacramental," Catholics would say) of ecclesial continuity and collegiality as a shared tradition. The intention of both churches is to ordain presbyters as ministers of Word and Sacrament, as priests who offer
the Lord's Supper as a commemoration of the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ, not repeated but made present again in the community with all of its graces for us. This common faith does not attempt to establish some sort of scientific, tactile continuity in episcopal ordinations.

Nor does the Anglican–Catholic agreement prejudice dialogues of both of these churches with others whose theology of ministerial continuity develops from different principles. Anglican churches have gone into full communion with Lutheran churches and others (for example, in India) who are willing to share the sign and symbol of episcopal communion but on different theological grounds.

Dialogues with Lutherans and Catholics provide the richest resources for resolving issues between Reformation churches, which do not claim episcopacy in the way Anglicans do but have an ecumenical openness to a reassessment of a common theology of ministry and to taking steps toward mutual recognition and reconciliation. The theological and ritual approaches in this dialogue have already helped Anglicans and Lutherans to move forward toward full communion, including in ordained ministry. These resources may be valuable when United Methodists take up these topics with the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

United Methodist Contributions at Present

In the next section, I will review some of the dialogues in which Methodists have made significant contributions. There I would like to articulate two important ways in which United Methodist ecclesiology, with its catholic, evangelical, social spirituality and Reformation elements, provide an especially important bridge to pan-Methodist unity initiatives and Anglican–Methodist reconciliation.

Since the 1960s, nine Protestant and Anglican churches in the United States have been on a journey of reconciliation through the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which became the Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) in 2002. CUIC does not yet represent the full communion to which its member churches aspire. However, it represents the most ambitious multilateral journey now afoot in the United States. The churches together have articulated nine points that are the basis for their hoped-for unity.

The two issues for common work that are before these nine churches right now are the struggle against racism and the recognition and reconciliation of ministries. I will take up both of these points, illustrating how
United Methodism provides an important bridge, even while being challenged in its own theology of ordained ministry. I will treat only the ministry dimension of the monumental task of overcoming racism.  

Racism and Methodist Ministry

The rich history of Methodist unity was celebrated most recently (in 1968-1970) with the dissolution of the Central Conference for African-American Methodists and union between the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches. It is a source in the Spirit for drawing sustenance in the long journey toward CUIC. The initiative in repentance and reconciliation with the historic African-American Methodist churches—Christian Methodist (CME), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ)—points a way to the contribution of these four churches together among CUIC.

The U.S. churches that are honest about their history have had to come to terms with the racism that is our national legacy and our continuing tragedy. From the very beginning, the African-American churches have been full participants in the Faith and Order movement and in the World Council of Churches and U.S. National Council of Churches. The participation of the three Methodist churches CUIC has been an opportunity to apply the theology of creation and redemption to each element of the theology of the church, including its ordained ministry.

Theology of ordained ministry does not separate the four Methodist churches. There are no sacramental barriers to full communion. However, the history of these four churches creates a challenge in the exercise of ordained ministry now and in a united church. Work on pan-Methodist collaboration has already faced some challenges.

The racial inequalities among the nine COCU member churches was addressed in the unsuccessful proposals of the 1970s by "compensatory treatment"—strategies that insured that these African-American churches and racial minorities within the other (at that time) seven churches would not be excluded from leadership. In a time of fear and anti-institutional attitudes, this and other structural strategies did not lend themselves to reception by the churches. Any proposal that does not call for some sort of deeper conversion in Christ is hardly worthy of the name ecumenical renewal.

The African-American churches, one would suspect, are concerned whether the process of mutual recognition, reconciliation, and interchange-
ability of ministries will perpetuate ecclesiastical apartheid, brain drain, and inequitable resources for professional ministry.

What strategies can Methodists devise and test out and then offer to the other five CUIC churches that will ensure that all candidates for ordination have the experience and are open to the call to serve in any congregation where ministry is needed, regardless of its ethnic make-up, economic status, or regional location?

The appointment/itinerancy system of these four churches is exactly designed to provide for a mission strategy that matches ministers across racial (and gender) lines, and, if worked out collegially, across jurisdictional and denominational lines. There will be no credibility to mutually recognized, reconciled, and interchangeable ministries unless there is a core of elders and bishops, and congregations and conferences that they have served, that have had the experience of this communal and collegial itinerancy.

The Anglicans bring the gift of a sign of apostolic continuity in time and space, the Presbyterians of an ordained order of “lay” oversight (in their ruling elders), and the United Church of Christ and The United Methodist Church of years lived trying to make the Spirit’s gift of unity work. Is it not appropriate for Methodists to reflect on how to pioneer ecumenical interracial ministry, interchangeability, and itinerancy?

The second issue that one might expect African-American Methodists to raise is the prospect of a “brain drain” of the best and brightest of their elders, and possibly even of bishops, to serve in the other churches with which they hope to be reconciled.

During the 1970s, I taught at Memphis Theological Seminary (Cumberland Presbyterian). As one might expect, the majority of students was United Methodist, and the number of African-American students was higher than in any other seminary in the city. It was not uncommon to find my AME or AMEZ students, four or five years after graduation, serving a United Methodist congregation. The “Vaticans” for the CME and Church of God in Christ are in Memphis; so students from these churches tended to “itinerate” better than their counterparts. It was also not uncommon to find Cumberland Presbyterian students ending up in Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations as they “moved up” the ecclesiastical ladder.

How is this issue to be addressed? None of the CUIC leadership, or any of its congregations, intends full communion to mean a diminishment of the three African-American Methodist churches, their leadership pool, and
their ministerial competency. Yet, Methodists also know that conflicts between congregations and ministers and between personalities in leadership, and even a lack of cultural fit, recommend that cabinets and district superintendents make adjustments for the sake of the congregation, the minister, and the collegial well-being of the conferences.

Are there ways in which ministers from other CUIC churches can be made available, both spiritually and in terms of skills, for work in the three Methodist churches? Is there a way that benefits and prospects can be equalized among the nine churches so as to make "migration" to more affluent, more educated, and more participatory churches less of a factor?

This is a very hard question, the stuff of which serious ecumenical renewal is made. The answer can come only through direct, honest dialogue among the leaders of these nine churches. Certainly, the four Methodist churches have a unique contribution to make to this conversation.

The third issue is ministerial formation and the economic and academic support for it. Like the historically Black colleges, there would be a real threat of both a brain drain and a diminution of institutional resources if all of the slots, scholarships, and other institutional supports of the Princetons, the Generals, and the Dukes, as well as denominational resources set aside for ministerial formation, were made equally available to all applicants for ordination from all of the nine member churches. On the other hand, does not full communion in "sacred things" also have implications for the resources that support these ministries?

At some point, if full communion is to have any meaning in the pulpits, congregational lives, and structures of the churches, then all ordinands in the nine churches will need to be accountable to the discipline, worship, and theology of all the partner churches. These elements of renewal call for not only conversion of spirit but also concrete educational and polity changes and policies for formation.

For example, when a member church is discerning how to accredit a seminary of a partner church, what account is being taken of CUIC commitments and of the curriculum that will serve both the identity of the particular heritage and its ecumenical commitments? How will boards, scholarship committees, and conference and denominational boards of ordained ministry be restructured to serve and support the vision of a united church?

In a united church, we dare not lose the gifts we bring to union or the rich heritage with which we have been endowed by the Holy Spirit during
the years of our separation. Therefore, special care will need to be given in
the formation of those serving in the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and
Order. All ministers will need to know the history of the church, the
history of the churches, and strategies for enhancing the identities of all
the partners in the union.

In this particular case, how will Black seminaries be supported and
strengthened and members of the three African-American churches be
encouraged to take advantage of ecumenical placements in ecumenical
partners’ seminaries without losing the gifts they bring or the resources
they need to minister within their own heritage?

We can be grateful that CUIC’s Ministry Task Force scheduled a
meeting specifically with African-American Methodist churches as it
continues to draft a proposal for discussion in 2007 and beyond. We may
not see reconciliation, recognition, and interchangeability of ministries in
our lifetimes; but a deepened understanding of how to heal the wounds of
racism in the ordained ministries of Protestant churches in the United
States can be a gift to all of us following Christ’s call to reconciliation.

There are two further and unspoken issues: the “democratization” of
the church and human sexuality. The Methodist system has checks and
balances that resonate with forms of American secular polity. Nevertheless,
this polity has given the church forms of episcopé that enable more freedom
for mission than even in Episcopal and Catholic churches.

The role of the bishop and the presiding elder in African-American
Methodism has been an instrument of liberation in a racist society. Of
course, there are instances of corruption in these systems, as there are in
the more democratic churches. However, I suspect there would be resis­
tance to any union that would diminish the role of African-American
Methodist bishops in their leadership of the church. Should there be a
special consultation and study of episcopé, with special attention to the
needs and gifts of African-American culture for leadership?

Finally, let me draw attention to the differences about human sexuality
among CUIC member churches. John Thomas, General Minister of the
United Church of Christ, opines that differences on homosexuality are not
classish dividing. The United Church of Christ is the only member church
that ordains homosexual ministers in committed relationships, though a
number of other churches have polities that allow such ordinations by
“local option.” Even though denominational polity prohibits Presbyterians,
United Methodists, and Episcopalians from approving such ordinations, it is clear that they are happening without sanction and that the debate is enjoined. In fact, some in the CUIC leadership are pressing on ecumenical partners positions that contradict the policy of their own churches.

If it is perceived that it will be necessary to change the polity of one's own church on this matter as a price of entry into CUIC, then the African-American churches may be reluctant to do so and equally reluctant to make an issue of it. That is, the issues of stable family and male integration into society are so pressing for the African-American churches that any legitimation of alternatives would be seen as undercutting this urgent ministry.

In my experience in staffing the application of the Universal Fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Churches for membership in the National Council of Churches, it was very difficult to get African-American churches to engage the discussion of homosexuality in the church. One African-American church voted to not allow any of its members even to participate in the dialogue. While, like Catholics and Orthodox, few African-American churches would excommunicate members for something so personal as their sexual behavior, the public affirmation of what is perceived to be an alternate life-style is often difficult to discuss.

Certainly, United Methodist and Anglican experience with their African churches and other international partners should make it clear that we are early on in the discussion of this issue. In my judgment, in discussing today what science has taught us about homosexuality, we are roughly where the churches were in the 1920s in discussing evolution. In the long run, homosexuality may not be a church-dividing issue; but if any of our partners in dialogue perceive it to be so, then it needs to be taken most seriously.

The other bridge that United Methodists offer in this conversation is with its mother church, the Anglican Communion. More will be noted about the results of that dialogue below, as it is a resource in CUIC.

**United Methodist Contributions to the Dialogue**

It is not necessary to document, for any American ecumenist, the gift of The United Methodist Church and its dialogues to the global and U.S. ecumenical movement. However, like Roman Catholics, I occasionally come upon Methodists uninformed by the hundred years of dialogue and the forty years of Methodist–Catholic dialogue. Sometimes this ignorance leads to unfounded judgments being made.
In these dialogues, United Methodism is renewing its faith, polity, and mission to continue the process of mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries and empowering the ministry of the whole people of God for service to the world. I will only briefly document these contributions here.

Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry
The historic 1982 World Council of Churches’ text on the sacraments and ministry and the responses of the churches demonstrate our progress together and our future challenges more than any other ecumenical development of the past century. It is only a convergence text. It does not claim full consensus or resolve differences on ministry among the churches. In fact, the ministry section is the least satisfactory of the three texts, possibly because it is the most ambitious. However, it is an important marker on the long pilgrimage toward reconciliation.

On the whole, the United Methodist response is positive, as is the British Methodist response, showing a wide range of consensus on the biblical doctrine of ministry; the priesthood of the whole people of God; and the communal, collegial, and personal character of episcopé. However, German United Methodism is pessimistic about the document’s conclusions on ministry and its methodology, even about the ecumenical partners. This raises the question whether the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is acceptable among German Methodists. The American United Methodists seem more positive on the prospects for recognition, reconciliation, and a common theology of apostolicity, ordination, the emergence of the threefold ministry, and the urgency of this reconciliation for common mission in the world.

Likewise, all Methodists agree on the importance of the ordination of women as central to their understanding of the hierarchy of truths relative to the church’s ministry. Traditionally, Methodists have not imbued the teaching office with infallibility; but the irreformability of this development within Methodism is clearly affirmed and made a criterion for church union.

Anglican Dialogue
As noted above, as heirs of the Anglican Reformation, United Methodists also bridge between Anglican ecclesiology and that of the other Protestant members of CUIC. The bilateral dialogues between the World Methodist Council and the Anglican Communion provide a platform for United Methodists and Episcopalians in moving toward union.

This dialogue affirms a common faith in the doctrinal heritage of the
church; understandings of apostolicity; the ministry of all the baptized; the communal, collegial, and personal nature of oversight; and the urgency of a common ordained ministry to serve a common mission in the world. Thus, the dialogue is able to propose a theological basis and steps toward recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministries.

This growing convergence means, amongst other things, that old contrasts between episcopal churches, themselves with different understanding of episcopacy, and churches with non-episcopal polities, might be viewed in a broader perspective, namely, the perspective of common loyalty to the apostolic faith, and obedience to and trust in the faithfulness of God who does not leave the world without witnesses. (#63)

We see the historic episcopate as one sign of the continuity, unity and catholicity of the church. We look forward to entering into fuller communion with one another in faith, mission and sacramental life and to the historic episcopate becoming again, for all of us, one element in the way by which the ordained ministry is transmitted with due order... not to call into question the ordination or apostolicity of any of those who have been ordained as Methodists or Anglican ministers according to the due order of their churches. (#70)28

The theological complexity and length of this agreed text make it an unlikely resource for American ecumenical work and those assemblies with responsibility for making these theological decisions on behalf of the churches. However, its reception—or nonreception—will require Anglican and Methodist scholars to provide both analysis and popular interpretations so that the truths of these formulations can be tested against the faith of the whole people of God and the biblical mandate for the unity of the church. Setbacks in some situations (like England) should not be taken as definitive until scholars from around the communions have tested the consensus. If this agreement is not adequate to transcend the sinful divisions among Christians, must it not be demonstrated why this is the case?

Lutheran Dialogue

United Methodists in Europe are in full communion with the Lutheran churches of Germany and Scandinavia. Ordained ministry was not a church-dividing issue. Full communion agreements among Anglicans and Lutherans have been resources for the World Methodist Council dialogue noted above.
in resolving questions of the historic episcopate and apostolicity.  

For the sake of completeness, it is necessary to note that there is a United Methodist–Lutheran agreement in this country on episcopacy and episcopate. With adequate agreement on questions of the Eucharist, a full communion agreement similar to that in Europe may become possible in the United States. The World Methodist Council and the Lutheran World Federation have also produced a common statement.

**Roman Catholic Dialogue**

Unlike Lutheran–Catholic and Anglican–Catholic dialogues, the World Methodist Council dialogue has not proposed to the churches solutions that would reconcile Methodist and Catholic ordained ministries. However, the extensive work on tradition, apostolicity, the church, and authority lays the groundwork that promises to create a basis for such dialogue in the future. United States dialogue agreements on the Eucharist and the present dialogue on the Global/Universal and Local Nature of the Church begin to bring church-dividing issues to the fore. Neither are these dialogues sufficiently known among our people nor are the terms of debate clear to all of our ministers and priests. In spite of our rich agreement in spirituality, mission, and theology, we may have a long road to go.

**Conclusion**

The work of The United Methodist Church on its understanding and practice of ministry is an important foundation for its entry into dialogue with churches from which it is divided. The rich history of ecumenical engagement is an invaluable resource for its own renewal and contribution to the unity, mission, and witness of other churches.

All of our churches are in transition and most experience tension. As we move toward reconciliation, we need one another and our ministry to one another. All Christians can be grateful for the role of Methodists and their theologians in the church and in the ecumenical movement.

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Endnotes


13. Lawrence, "Has Our Theology of Ordained Ministry Changed?" 156ff.


18. Other steps that might be taken by Methodists are suggested by Richey and Frank, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition*, 140.


29. Ibid., 172-73.


The Grace of Letting Go: Theological Reflections on Forgiveness from a Space In-Between

MICHAEL NAUSNER

What I dream of, what I try to think as the “purity” of a forgiveness worthy of its name, would be a forgiveness without power: unconditional but without sovereignty.

Jacques Derrida

Everyday Forgiveness

Forgiveness is like the oxygen we breathe. It literally makes possible communal life in general and communication in particular. To be incapable of forgiveness is to walk slowly toward suffocation. Human beings depend on forgiveness, as individuals and as communities. As a consequence of the commandment of love, it is at the core of our Christian vocation.

To consider the many contexts to which the concept of forgiveness applies is astonishing. Would everyday life with family, friends, and colleagues be possible if forgiveness were not happening again and again, removing obstacles to communal living? Given how many times a day we casually utter phrases like "Excuse me," "I am sorry," and "Please forgive me," the necessity of forgiveness for life within communities seems to be deeply engrained in us. Moreover, over the past several decades, an awareness has been growing that forgiveness might be applicable also to the relation between communities, between nations, and even between cultures. In his book When the Powers Fall, Walter Wink observes that suddenly many people in the public arena seem to be apologizing. While writing this article, the media were reporting in some detail the shocking abuses in Iraqi prisons by American soldiers and the attempts of President Bush and Defense...
Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to apologize for these abuses. Whether or not these apologies had anything to do with asking forgiveness is debatable. These attempts at least appear to point to an awareness at the highest levels of power that human coexistence depends on forgiveness. But as is the case with so many almost omnipresent phrases and concepts, we risk losing sight of the real challenge they hold.

Forgiveness Impossible?

In pondering where I have most recently witnessed an event of forgiveness, I realize that I have to think for a long time. Phrases related to forgiveness are all around me. But when last have I witnessed forgiveness as transformation of communal life? While at the core of Christian vocation, forgiveness often is an insurmountable challenge for everyday living. Maybe this is because, as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida puts it, forgiveness is true forgiveness only if it involves the unforgivable: "Forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself." This rather categorical philosophical statement will resonate with anyone who has tried seriously to apply the issue of forgiveness to situations of unfathomable violence and destruction. Torture, war crimes, and genocide certainly belong to this category. How can such severe assaults on human life ever be forgiven? Who can forgive such brutal tearing apart of communal bonds? It seems to me that recognizing the impossibility of forgiveness in these situations is to take them with utmost seriousness and to protect forgiveness from becoming a cheap way of downplaying injustice and violence.

This seriousness about the impossibility of forgiveness comes to the fore in one of Charles Wesley's hymns, when he writes,

Forgive my foes? It cannot be: My foes with cordial love embrace?  
Fast bound in sin and misery, unsaved, unchanged by hallowing grace,  
Throughout my fallen soul I feel with man this is impossible.

While Wesley's reflections here seem to refer to psychological blockages in the relation between individuals, Derrida's remarks came after a visit to South Africa. Here the "impossibility" seems to refer to the process of communal forgiveness between perpetrators and victims of the apartheid regime. But individual and communal forgiveness are interrelated and cannot be neatly separated. Guilt cannot be confined to the inner life of
the individual, because he or she is always part of a wider community. Whether it is about forgiveness between individuals or between nations, the Christian community has a vocation to help people understand and implement the process of forgiveness in different spheres of life. Christian faith as a fruit of divine forgiveness is well positioned for such a task.

In what follows, I engage seriously the “impossibility” of forgiveness and the difficulties that mar its description, arguing that forgiveness is impossible in the sense that it never can be given according to strict regulations of exchange. Like love, forgiveness is a gracious flow that surprises us, rather than a duty that could be demanded. It becomes possible if all attempts to control it are let go. To put it paradoxically, forgiveness can occur only if we allow ourselves to feel the full weight of its impossibility. Walter Wink puts it this way: “We are enabled to forgive, finally, because we cannot forgive, and throw ourselves on God’s mercy.”

I want to concentrate on three aspects of forgiveness that honor its “impossibility” but also render it paradoxical. The first aspect has to do with the position of the one granting forgiveness, i.e., the where of forgiveness. I argue that the impossibility of forgiveness and its control have to do with each person’s participation in multiple communities and traditions. Those who forgive and those who receive forgiveness are in a sense always caught in-between, since no one ever occupies a stable foundation from which to settle things once and for all. The second aspect is forgiveness as a letting go rather than as a gift, i.e., the how of forgiveness. Given our multilayered participation in different communities and traditions, we can never define the precise character of the forgiveness needed. The one who forgives is not really giving something she or he subsequently does not own anymore. An understanding of forgiveness as letting go is therefore more adequate. Finally, I highlight the grace character of forgiveness, i.e., the what of forgiveness. Whenever forgiveness becomes a reality, it is not the production of the one who forgives but ultimately an occurrence of divine grace. Forgiveness happens both to the one who forgives and to the one who receives forgiveness. From a human perspective, the grace of forgiveness is “impossible.”

The Where of Forgiveness: Forgiveness from In-between

Influenced by liberation theologians, feminists, and most recently by postcolonial theorists, I have become acutely aware of the fact that the position from which we think and act and project our lives is an important aspect of
our theological analysis. It inevitably colors our theology, whether we are pastors, scholars, or live out our Christian vocation in other ways. An awareness of our place is essential for any viable theologizing. From “where” are we developing our theology? Where are we as we grant or receive forgiveness? Postcolonial theory has brought to our attention with new urgency and sharpness of analysis that in our multicultural and globalized world our positions are multilayered and ambiguous. I borrow the notion of interstitial subjectivity from postcolonial theorists to make the point that there never can be a solid and unambiguous foundation from which to grant forgiveness. Our identities emerge continuously “in between” different influences—in the “in-sterrstices,” so to speak. We are caught in between and therefore we necessarily have to forgive from a place in-between, not owning a solid position.

At no point in time do we possess a comprehensive and exact understanding of either the make-up of our identities or the multitude of events and activities in which we participate. We continuously are shaped “in-between” different social, cultural, and religious force-fields, particularly in our increasingly multicultural world. Therefore, postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha rightly criticizes theories of selfhood that are construed too narrowly. He sees it as “politically crucial . . . to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities.” It is the “in-between’ spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood.” Human beings, thus, need to be understood as “interstitial subjectivities.” This means that we as subjects-in-between have no sharp boundaries from within which we could launch our activities or determine the foundation for forgiveness.

One of the theological consequences of this theory of the interstitial subject is that the question of guilt exceeds the problem of individual culpability. I share the conviction of those scholars who do not believe in the possibility of a clear-cut determination of guilt once-and-for-all. Miroslav Volf is aware of this complication when he writes that “the closer we get . . . the more the line between the guilty and the innocent blurs.” Marjorie Suchocki puts it in more theological language: “To break the world cleanly into victims and violators ignores the depths of each person’s participation in cultural sin. . . . Forgiveness does not divide the world into the guilty and the innocent.”

Suchocki’s rendering of original sin as “participation in cultural sin” resonates with a postcolonial reading of subjectivity, according to which subjects are neither squarely situated within only one cultural group nor
isolated individuals with clear boundaries. To morally assess a subject, therefore, one needs to take into account that it is multiply situated, i.e., participating in different cultural groups simultaneously. We participate in a complex matrix of contemporary and historical relations. As Derrida puts it, "We are all heir, at least, to persons or events marked, in an essential, interior, ineffaceable fashion, by crimes against humanity."11 Thus, the cultural space in which forgiveness is to take place is not structured in a binary manner, where insiders and outsiders or offenders and victims are easily identified. Since human selves are multiply situated, forgiveness is better understood as a continuous openness to communicative flow than as a clearly definable gift we are able to grant.

The How of Forgiveness: Forgiveness as Letting Go

Strictly speaking, then, forgiveness is not a matter of giving. Thus, I suggest a reimagining of the character of forgiveness, so that it is understood less as a gift giving and more as a letting go of the stifling effects of experienced injustice and resentment. The metaphorical emphasis here is not on the closing down of an account but on the reopening of a communicative flow.12 Clogs in the communicative channels are "let go" and constructive relations to the opponent become possible again.

John Milbank points out that the Greek (and Latin) notion of forgiveness did not view it as gift. "Only in a later era at once Christian and feudal do the vernacular tongues suggest that forgiveness is a positive offering."13 While some European languages, such as German, English, French, Spanish, and Italian, etymologically relate forgiveness to a gift giving, others, such as the Scandinavian languages, retain the Greek character of forgiveness as letting-go (aphiemi); for example, Swedish: förlåtelse. In addition, forgiveness as letting go resonates with the general use of the term aphiemi in the Gospels. In most cases (e.g., Matt. 3:15, 5:24, 5:40, 8:22; Mark 10:28; Luke 13:8; John 12:7), it has to do with a very practical letting-go, a letting-be or leaving of material things or circumstances. Only once does Jesus directly relate aphiemi to the term gift (doron): "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave (aphiemi) your gift (doron) there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24). Here, being reconciled starts with asking forgiveness. Gift giving (sacrifice) is separated from the act of forgiveness.
This passage is significant, since it highlights the connection between human and divine forgiveness, on the one hand (forgiveness is always divine grace), and the important role of human initiative, on the other. In order to be able to "take in" divine forgiveness (symbolized here by the act of sacrifice), we need to give our neighbors the chance to let go of their grudges against us. The request for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer follows the same logic. "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). Again, human forgiveness is a precondition for the ability to take in divine forgiveness. This instance differs from the previous passage in that here it is about our letting go of grudges against our neighbors, which opens the way toward acceptance of divine forgiveness.

These two passages are an important corrective to the customary logic that Christians forgive because God has forgiven them. These passages suggest that there is nothing automatic about the logic of forgiveness. Divine forgiveness does not release us from the daily struggle for mutual forgiveness. In a sense, forgiveness is inaccessible to the unforgiving heart. Another way of expressing the paradox that divine forgiveness is both primary and secondary is to say that divine forgiveness expresses itself in human forgiveness, and vice versa. If we let go of the sins that others have committed against us, God confirms this forgiveness and lets go as well (John 20:23). Milbank, inspired by Soren Kierkegaard, describes the paradox in which the human forgiver finds himself: "His forgiving of the other... shows that he is divinely forgiven, or rather his forgiving of the other is the very instance of himself being divinely forgiven."14

**Power and Justice**

Before I proceed to the what of forgiveness, I want briefly to ponder two major complications that belong to any situation in which forgiveness is needed. It sounds so easy to talk about letting go. But once we take a closer look we realize that, as Walter Wink puts it, "forgiveness... is among the most unexpected and impossible acts a human being can perform."15 The two complications I have in mind are the issues of power and justice. Forgiveness is complicated because it does not happen in a power vacuum; i.e., it rarely takes place between individuals or groups that are equal. Moreover, forgiveness is complicated because it always occurs in a certain tension with the question of justice.

The person or party understood to be forgiving is in a position of power
over the person or party who is to receive forgiveness. In other words, the one who forgives assumes the authority/power over the one to be forgiven. For example, in discourse on the global economy, one often hears the call for the forgiveness of debts of nations in the South. Appropriating the term forgiveness in this context is misleading. While the rich nations assume the authority to grant forgiveness to the poor nations, there seems to be at least as much justification for calling on the poor nations to forgive the rich! The mechanisms of global economy and the expansion of multinational corporations are no solid foundation on which to ground unambiguous criteria for forgiveness. When forgiveness is confined to an ethically questionable economic system, its character is distorted, because forgiveness granted from a position of power risks eclipsing issues of justice. Individuals and institutions need to communicate continuously with one another to determine what needs to be forgiven and how justice can be served, in order to assure that forgiveness does not simply become an additional strategy to enforce unjust power systems.

But what if the powerful ask for forgiveness? Something like this seems to have happened when President Bush apologized to the Iraqi victims of the prison abuses. However, far from being a genuine request for forgiveness, Bush's statement was an attempt to justify the actions of the powerful. In a visit to the king of Jordan, the President stated, "I told them I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners and the humiliation suffered by their families. I told them that I was equally sorry... that people that would see those pictures didn't understand the true nature and heart of America." It seems to me that Bush's first "I was sorry" is canceled out by the emphasis on the "true nature of America." The implicit message appears to be this: The abused prisoners ought to forgive, since Americans actually are good. The issue of forgiveness is misused in order not to compromise the rule of power. Asking forgiveness in a genuine way is contingent on recognizing the full scope of the atrocities committed. President Bush failed to do that from his position of power.

Let me mention one more example of the relationship between power and forgiveness. In the same week that President Bush issued his apology to the Iraqi prisoners, Joseph Sebarenzi visited my university. The occasion was the tenth anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Sebarenzi is a Tutsi. He had lost his parents and seven siblings during the genocide. Afterwards, he returned from exile and became spokesman of the
Parliament in 1997, a position of considerable power. In spite of his unfathomable personal losses, he promoted a process of restorative justice instead of retributive justice—a process that, for him, includes “apology, forgiveness, and compensation.” Sebarenzi observes, “I am a victim of genocide, but we cannot judge one million people—no jail is big enough. Retributive justice will just lead to another cycle of killing.” From a position of power Sebarenzi tried to advocate a message of forgiveness. But, after receiving death threats, he had to flee his country again in 2000. Was he doomed to fail because he promoted a message of forgiveness from a position of power? Is the project of collective forgiveness bound to suffer shipwreck because the calls for retributive justice are too powerful?

In searching for a viable understanding of forgiveness, we must keep in mind the issue of power. Attention to imbalances in power evokes attention to the question of justice—which, as the example of Sebarenzi shows, should not be separated from or replaced by forgiveness. Sebarenzi fits Derrida’s description of “a victim of the worst,” who can demand “that justice be done ... and yet in his heart forgives.”

Feminist theologians have contributed extensively to the discussion about forgiveness and justice. Pamela Sue Anderson cautions against the “pernicious notion” of forgiveness according to which “forgiveness of massive wrongdoing” is expected from women and marginalized others. By neglecting the question of justice, such a notion of “forgiveness” reinforces “the lack or loss of self-respect suffered by oppressed persons.” In their autobiographical book Proverbs of Ashes, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker exemplify how destructive it can be to conflate forgiveness with acceptance of violence and injustice. Parker carefully suggests a way forward for violated people: “By letting go we have opened ourselves to something better. Grace comes to us.” But she also warns against a theology of the cross according to which “violence is justified as sacred.”

Forgiveness can never be demanded. But forgiveness of massive wrongdoing—even without the wrongdoer’s agreement—can be an expression of self-respect, since it means letting go of stifling resentment. Such a letting-go without the wrongdoer’s agreement, i.e., without mutuality, is not to be seen as a substitute for justice. Forgiveness that makes justice unnecessary is not forgiveness but submission to unjust conditions.

Rather, forgiveness is a parallel process to justice. At times, by facilitating communication, forgiveness may even be the first step toward
justice. While I agree with Miroslav Volf that "the very idea of forgiveness implies the affirmation of justice," I do not think that the simple formula "no justice, no forgiveness" is helpful. If justice has to be achieved before experiences of injustice can be let go, then we are in a vicious circle.

Elsewhere, Volf recognizes that "strict restorative justice can never be satisfied." The unattainability of perfect justice certainly does not mean that justice should not be sought. Something analogous is valid for forgiveness, which in the human realm is never complete. Forgiveness parallels justice also in the sense that it never is accomplished once-and-for-all. This, I think, is implied in Jesus' answer to Peter's question about how often one should forgive. "Seventy-seven times," the Lord replied (Matt. 18:22). I take seventy-seven (in other translations, seven times seventy) to mean abundantly, continuously. Forgiveness is not settled by measuring and counting or by a balancing out. Being a matter of the heart (Matt. 18:35), forgiveness can be seen as a preparation for restitution, justice, and, finally, for reconciliation.

The What of Forgiveness: Forgiveness as Grace

The term forgivingness captures the character of forgiveness as a preparation for the process of reconciliation. It is a "compassionate readiness to forgive" and acknowledges from the outset the need of open communication channels for relational life to prosper. Forgivingness also indirectly acknowledges one's own complicity in unjust relations. It acknowledges that we share a world that is plagued by violence and injustice. Sandra Olewine seems to mean something very similar to the notion of forgivingness when she advocates for living in a "state of forgiveness," even amidst the violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While forgivingness is at least partly a matter of the will, the reality of forgiveness never is.

Here I return to the issue of the impossibility of forgiveness. The impossibility of forgiveness is intimately connected with its grace character. Jacques Derrida asks this rhetorical question: "Must we not accept that, in heart or in reason, above all when it is a question of 'forgiveness,' something arrives which exceeds all institution, all power, all juridico-political authority?" This "something" I interpret as divine grace, which, lest it be degraded to cheap grace, is never within the reach of human possibilities. When forgiveness occurs, it is a sign of God's graceful presence among human beings. The best we can do is to practice forgivingness, which means allowing forgiveness to occur and letting go of clogs in our commu-
nication channels. Thus, forgiveness is a matter neither of the will nor of reason. It arrives surprisingly and uncontrollably as a movement of the heart. Charles Wesley captures this movement beautifully in verse two of the hymn we quoted earlier. Here, he portrays forgiveness as conditional on the presence of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts:

Great Searcher of the mazy heart, a thought from thee I would not hide,
I cannot draw th’envenomed dart, or quench this hell of wrath and pride,
Jesus, till I thy Spirit receive, Thou know’st, I never can forgive.\(^{31}\)

As a matter of grace, forgiveness cannot be understood as a gift generously bestowed on another, since forgiveness is grace to the one who forgives as well as to the one who receives forgiveness. This is why forgiveness does not occur at the moment when someone grants forgiveness or asks for forgiveness. It becomes real when communication flows again, when the clogged space “in between” the hostile parties opens up again. And this is exactly what cannot be produced.

Forgiveness is about genuine communication and relation. Such communication needs an open space, free of domination. The church is called to provide such a space and to administer it. It is a difficult vocation for both the church as a whole and for individual Christians, because, as we have seen, we continuously find ourselves implicated in relations of domination. We are caught “in between,” which is probably why, as Wink notes, “the churches of the world have never yet decided that domination is wrong.”\(^{32}\) Such a decision, however, is made implicitly whenever the church takes its vocation seriously to become an in-between space where broken-down communication can be taken up again and where forgivingness is practiced as a preparation for the grace of forgiveness to become a reality.

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Endnotes
1. I am grateful for the constructive comments on this article by Harald Bohlin, Olivia Franz-Klauser, Catherine Keller, and Mayra Rivera Rivera.
6. John Milbank has elaborated on this impossibility, listing five aporias: (1) The subject of forgiveness can never be absolutely defined. (2) Time separates the instances of assault and forgiveness. (3) What is forgotten cannot be forgiven. (4) The question of the motive is always unsolved. (5) Human forgiveness is never really final. See John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 50-60.
12. The definition of the International Forgiveness Institute at the University of Wisconsin is helpful in terms of its emphasis on the paradoxical nature of forgiveness and on its “self-healing” aspect. But it still focuses too much on the notion of the gift and on the binary between the one who forgives and the one who receives forgiveness. See the institute’s website: http://www.forgiveness-institute.org/IFI/WhatIs/definition.htm.
14. Ibid., 57.
15. Wink, *When the Powers Fall*, 14.


22. For a discussion of the abuse of power by demanding forgiveness, see Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, *Forgiveness* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 4ff.

23. As Walter Wink points out regarding the issue of mutuality, “Forgiveness can be unilateral; reconciliation is always mutual. . . . Forgiveness is thus a component of reconciliation, but only a first step. We may forgive our enemies in our hearts, but reconciliation requires that we pick up the phone or meet face to face and try to work things out” (*When the Powers Fall*, 14).

24. In his conversation with liberation theology, Daniel M. Bell constructs a polarity between forgiveness and justice that I find problematic. “Forgiveness,” Bell writes, “is a theologically more appropriate characterization of God’s activity to overcome sin in the world than the liberationists’ vision of justice. . . . Forgiveness interrupts the cycle of violence and counter-violence that plagues justice.” See Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 148, 50.


26. Andrew Sung Park has used the term forgivingness from the Korean perspective of han. He juxtaposes the forgiveness of offenders with the forgivingness of victims and claims that the church has given too much attention to the former. Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 90-91.


31. See [http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/hymn/jwg08/jwg0830.html](http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/hymn/jwg08/jwg0830.html).

32. Wink, *When the Powers Fall*, 11.
The question of the utility and future of our general agencies, timely in light of General Conference's elimination of the General Council on Ministries (GCOM), is one over which I continue to mull. My short answer is this:

• Agencies constitute one expression of our connectionalism;
• Connectionalism, one of the defining “marks of Methodism,” must be sustained;
• However, forms of connectionalism have varied and evolved over time, agencies being just one expression thereof;
• A future without agencies or with significantly reconstituted agencies would not necessarily violate our connectional spirit.

We have witnessed, I from afar, the third, strange dalliance of GCOM with General Conference. Commissioned by three previous General Conferences to study itself and our connectionalism, GCOM three times returned after four years of hard work with a new... continued on page 412

The gospel of Jesus Christ is believed or not believed by what happens in the congregations. It is by what the congregation does that the gospel hits the road! In The United Methodist Church, the congregation is the place where individuals hear the Word, are discipled, and from where they live out their witness to Jesus Christ.

In my view, the districts, annual conferences, jurisdictions, and general agencies exist in order to facilitate this proclamation by word and deed in the congregations. This is why the General Conference affirms, time and again, that the accountability of general agencies needs to be measured by their effectiveness in working with congregations. Working with congregations also includes representing congregations in ways that a single congregation cannot do alone. The general agencies have an important place in The United Methodist Church!

The first congregation where I was a member was a community... continued on page 416
connectional vision, a scheme that looked very much like GCOM's structure stretched over the whole church. Three times GCOM presented General Conference with a connectional vision that made over central structures into a giant GCOM and made GCOM the primary expression of United Methodist connectionalism.

I believe that the architects of each of these elegant schemes proceeded with well-intentioned but slightly misguided readings of our connectionalism and the place of the agencies in it. Connectionalism characterizes churches other than Methodist, but the Wesleyan tradition accords connectionalism a distinctive, implicitly theological, purposive, and missional meaning. Reformed (Presbyterian) and Catholic (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican) churches function with polities grounded respectively in Scripture or tradition. Calvin read church order directly out of the Bible. Catholic churches add the further warrant of tradition. Both our Reformed and our Catholic friends value their church order for what it is. Notwithstanding our fixation on our own structures and our Discipline, United Methodists operate with a "doctrine" of connectionalism that belongs to life and work rather than to faith and order. We value our connectionalism for what it does and not so much for what it is. We have built connectional structures, agencies included, to do our common work and to make missional decisions. For us, Scripture and tradition warrant our mission. Our connectionalism serves that mission.

GCOM's several proposals might be seen as connectionalism more in the Reformed or Catholic mode—efforts to reenvision structure so as to express and achieve connectional unity within global United Methodism. The 2004 General Conference acted instead for a connectionalism that could work. It did so by rejecting GCOM's proposal, "Living into the Future," eliminating GCOM itself, and assigning the coordinating task to a downsized "Connectional Table." Connectionalism's work, not its "being" or "nature," won out.

I do not intend to minimize the creativity in the GCOM proposals or to diminish the theological dimensions of connectionalism. Quite the reverse. Elsewhere, I have tried to read connectionalism theologically and tease characteristic Wesleyan emphases out of our practices of connection. In addition, I argue that one can find in connectionalism and in related "marks of Methodism" what the church through the ages has understood.
to be the fundamental characteristics or "notes" of the church—its oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. Our connectionalism expresses the unity and catholicity that GCOM sought—less through its style and form and more through its purposive character. And social and personal holiness, truly apostolic mandates, belong among connectionalism's purposes.

Through the years, Methodists evolved various structures and practices by and through which to achieve corporate purposes and mission. Opportunities and challenges occasioned adaptation, change, and innovation. Looking at structures and practices as they evolved over time, one can discern successive stages or phases of Methodist connectionalism. One of these stages might be termed "corporate." This corporate phase, borrowing from business and governmental patterns elaborated during and after the Civil War, gave us the organizational structure of boards and agencies. Because this structure has been with us for so long (essentially since the 1880s), we have a hard time imagining Methodism—indeed, imagining Western religion—without it. By noting that Methodists created this structure to meet the missional needs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precisely to organize the church more efficiently for foreign and domestic missions, we can appreciate it as an expression of connectionalism but also understand that Methodists undertook connectional endeavor in different fashion earlier and might well do so in different fashion hereafter.

The earliest "communities of speech"—the pattern of itinerant conversionistic preaching under appointment—yielded the basic, quite minimal, annual conference structure. A second such community, "organized revivalism," beginning in the mid-1790s, produced multiday revivalistic, quarterly meetings and annual conferences, invented General Conference, and discovered camp meetings. In a third phase, around 1820, Methodism borrowed the voluntary society structure from other Protestants and created Bible, mission, tract, and Sunday school societies, a from-the-bottom-up, loosely knit set of associations, each governed by its single purpose. Then the church created Christian Advocates and founded colleges, looking to editors and faculties to connect the church through the written word. By the latter part of the century, to bring order to this remarkable array of missional impulses, Methodism (the Methodist Episcopal Church first, other constitutive denominations of The United Methodist Church soon thereafter) gave General Conference authority over connectional enterprises and
literally reincorporated the church. In the twentieth century, three other forms of accountability and purposiveness emerged. (1) Professionalization or professionalism. This form creates like-kind groupings and utilizes annual conference committees to provide practices and structures comparable to professional organizations in other fields. (2) Councils. The councils—Judicial Council, the Council of Bishops, GCOM, General Council of Finance and Administration—function with explicit Disciplinary warrant. (3) Caucuses: Grass roots in origin, caucuses, though often seen as fragmenting, also connect Methodist subsets by purpose, ethnicity, language, conviction, concern, and agenda.

A variety of different forces, including critiques by some of the caucuses, have made the question of this little essay pertinent. Other agency-undercutting factors include the continued erosion of the church's numbers; reduced finances; widespread distrust of centralized power; hermeneutics of suspicion; politics of accountability; pressures for representative, including global, membership; passions for evangelism, especially on a local level; and more congregationally driven programming.

As we wonder about the future of agencies, the possible role of congregations deserves particular note. Some really large churches within United Methodism possess staff, monetary resources, facilities, media capacity, and digital prowess exceeding all but the very largest agencies and probably most annual conferences as well. Have we reached a point where specific congregations with a very connectional spirit might be deputized to orchestrate United Methodism's corporate endeavors? (Some of the work done at a connectional level clearly should be left alone.) At a time when higher education touched only the few, agencies effectively brought together the talent needed for a cause and were given the resources through general church apportionments to do the church's work. Now, individual congregations (at least, in the U.S.) boast extraordinary expertise, energy, resources, and staffing. They undertake global mission. They produce quality media programming. They work with complex educational programs, sometimes using their own or tailored resources. They conduct myriad local outreach efforts. Might such cathedrals work more on connectional behalf? If they are not to supplant our general agencies, at the very least might they collaborate with the agencies?

Yet another very distinct possibility is that the agencies will reinvent themselves in a mold different from that conceived by GCOM and more
service-responsive in the fashion of the General Board of Discipleship.

What is the future of our connectionalism? Its form should, I think, follow function; facilitate our mission; incorporate what works out of present structures; and sustain our common endeavor.

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Endnotes

1. Perspectives in this review derive from previous and forthcoming work on connectionalism, including The Methodist Conference in America (1996); Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity (1997); Questions for the 21st Century Church (1999); and Marks of Methodism (forthcoming), all Abingdon publications.

church, not related to any denomination. It prided itself on being independent. The congregation financially assisted a handful of mission projects, thus linking us to a community a bit wider than our own. As the years passed, the focus was just on the congregation. All connections to larger community ceased. The church tumbled in on itself, seeing nothing more than the boundaries of its own community.

When I became a member of The Methodist Church (before the merger between the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches in 1968), I joined a denominational connection that enriched my experience of the Christian faith through knowing that we were actually connected with global humanity. I could participate, through my time and treasure, in the church in other communities. I could be resourced in my understanding of how the gospel of Jesus Christ relates to human issues.

The congregation is where the gospel makes the difference in lives of people. This is why I always draw the organizational chart of The United Methodist Church with the congregations at the top of the page! Every organizational level beyond the congregation serves to resource the congregation or to represent it in geographic, political, or economic circles beyond the congregation’s neighborhood. General agencies are needed and important to help congregations remember the wider world and to participate in Christ’s mission.

During the merger in 1968, the Structure Study Commission was established to review the work of the general agencies. The Commission spent almost one-half of the 1968–72 quadrennium discussing the principles of organization, concluding that they would adopt the "systems approach" to the organization of The United Methodist Church. The Commission explored five organizational theories: (1) traditional theory; (2) strong-leader theory; (3) human-relations theory; (4) classic-bureaucratic theory; and (5) systems theory. Systems theory holds organizational growth and goal achievement, along with the growth of persons and their achievements, both as being of equal importance and as being based on interrelationship and interdependency of the organization and the people.

The Structure Study Commission described The United Methodist Church as a social system. “It consists of individuals and groups who are engaged in a structured form of relationship and interaction, and who are guided by a particular faith commitment and a given set of values and
norms. The Commission described three subsystems within The United Methodist Church and noted:

Denominational purposes are formulated and adopted by the General Conference. But the General Conference, as a policy body, can only state the purposes of the denomination in broad terms . . . and authorizes (general agencies) and prescribes a pattern by which resources are to be allocated.

The only structural change brought to the 1972 General Conference by the Commission was to establish the General Council on Ministries (GCOM) and a council on ministries at each level of the church's organization.

It is the role of the general agencies, then, to take policies and to design and/or implement programs that fulfill the intent of The United Methodist Church. The general agencies have done well in developing programs over these thirty-six years. General agencies are still needed!

I was General Secretary of GCOM from 1975 to 1986 and realized that the task of coordination could be done only through building relationships of trust and through sustained communication among the general agencies. While our staff team did this well, there was, and still is, a problem, namely, coordination among agencies that were, and still are, not equal. The United Methodist Church has two conglomerate boards that are focused on well-defined portfolios; a series of smaller program/advocacy agencies; and some service agencies. The two conglomerate boards have their own internal coordination to do. It makes almost unmanageable a conversation among general agencies when their scope of work is not equal and so vastly different.

To address this problem, I suggest, in the context of the new Connectional Table structure, the creation of six-to-eight general program boards, each with a focus similar to that of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry or the General Board of Church and Society.

When it created the Connectional Table, the 2004 General Conference carefully preserved an important principle of polity in The United Methodist Church, namely, the principle of checks and balances. In the congregation, as well as in our connectional life, we need to separate planning from deciding and implementing from evaluating and be clear when we are in which mode. There needs to be separation of program and finance, yet it should be done in concert with each other. I was very
opposed to the notion of bringing together GCOM and the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA), as proposed by GCOM in "Living into the Future." One of the large issues for the Structure Study Commission was the awkwardness in the former denominations that the treasurer was deciding issues of program. I salute the wisdom of the 2004 General Conference delegates in creating the new agency structure for keeping the Connectional Table and GCFA separate.

General agencies continue to have an important role to play in the denomination. They provide program materials for the congregation as the gospel is proclaimed in communities. They witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in geographic, economic, and political circles that need connectional power. And they teach the congregations about the relationship between faith and works.

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Endnotes

2. Ibid., 4.
As we prepare to celebrate Lent, we pause to reflect on how weary the road to Calvary was for Jesus. Not only did he have to deal with his own self-doubt, similar to that of many great prophets of the past, like Jeremiah, for example; he also had to come to terms with the fact that people were not ready for the kind of good news he had to offer. From a human point of view, his ministry was marked by failure and defeat. Proof of this is the kind of death he suffered. His name, dear to his closest friends, family, and followers, was despised by and unknown to most people, so much so that there are virtually no records of his life in extrabiblical materials. His was a life spent in the provincialism of an obscure region of Palestine. And yet his followers knew something the rest of the world did not know. They had experienced something that had changed their lives, giving them hope and courage to live. They kept his memory alive, and they remembered his words and his message of liberation. They recorded the conversations he had with so many people, in which he opened to them a new world of meaning and possibilities—a world where God alone was the supreme ruler of people’s lives.

February 13, 2005: First Sunday in Lent
Matt. 4:1-11; Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Ps. 32; Rom. 5:12-19
The temptation account in Matt. 4:1-11 is so similar to the one in Luke 4:1-13 that for a long time now scholars have suggested that the evangelists share a common written source, hypothetically known as "Q" (from the German Quelle, meaning "source"). Matthew’s order of the temptations differs from Luke’s, but it is believed to best reflect the Q document for a couple of reasons. (1) It is more logical, leading to a climactic offer of all the kingdoms of the world. In Luke, this temptation is the second of the three temptations. (2) The first and second temptations are structured in a similar way: "If you are the Son of God . . ."
Matthew follows Mark's narrative order in which Jesus, after his baptism, is led by the Spirit into the desert. Unlike Mark, who does not state that the purpose was to be tempted by Satan, Matthew makes it very clear. Not even Luke, who used the same source, is that specific about the purpose of Jesus going to the wilderness. He says that Jesus "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (4:1-2). The assumption is that while he was there, the devil came to tempt him. But for Matthew it is important to highlight the fact that Jesus is coming to the wilderness with the purpose of challenging the devil on his own ground.¹

The structure of the passage is a dialogue between Jesus and Satan. Jesus' three answers to Satan are direct quotes from the LXX, as used by Q, which obviously made some alterations to the text of the Greek Bible. For example, the quotation from Deut. 6:13 changes from "shall fear" to "will worship," because that is what the context demands (v. 9, "if you will fall down and worship me"). When Jesus speaks, his words carry canonical authority. When the devil speaks, his words are not so authoritative since he is quoting from Psalm 91, part of the Writings, which acquired canonical authority much later than the Torah, perhaps even after Matthew was written.

Two of the temptations deal with the devil questioning Jesus' unique relationship to God: "If you are the Son of God..." The third one does not question this relationship but suggests that even if Jesus is the Son of God, he could certainly change allegiances by worshiping Satan instead. In both Matthew and Luke, the progression starts with the temptation to satisfy physical needs, which, for Jesus, would have meant stopping the spiritual search he had embarked on. The devil is asking him to sacrifice communion with God for a taste of bread (see Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-7); and, what is worse, to use his power in a selfish, self-serving way. But it also recalls the manna incident in Exodus 16. If God fed Israel miraculously, how much more would God feed God's only Son? Further, this temptation questions the voice heard at Jesus' baptism, for it is asking Jesus to seek an external confirmation—a "sign"—of God's affirmation in 3:17 (cf. Matt. 12:38-40; 16:1-4).

The second temptation has to do with putting God to the test to see if God will deliver Jesus from harm and, presumably, vindicate him in front of a gathered multitude (at the Temple). This temptation was also present at Gethsemane, when one of those who were with Jesus drew a sword and tried to defend him. On that occasion Jesus affirmed that even though the
possibility of divine deliverance was real (which made Jesus' arrest an act of true self-giving), he refused to make use of this right (Matt. 26:53). Jesus answers the devil with Deut 6:16, a passage that recalls an instance when the people of Israel, tired and thirsty from the journey, questioned God's caring presence among them (Exod. 17:1-7). The incident brought about the miraculous provision of water from the rock but also made the incident a type of how humans test God when in difficulties. Jesus would not follow the devil's advice and would not test the good will of God by demanding proofs.²

The third temptation has to do with gaining political and economic power in exchange for idolatrous behavior, that is, with denying the true God. Jesus appeals to Deut. 6:13, where Israel is admonished to recognize the uniqueness of their covenant God in the midst of the gods of all the other nations. Unlike Israel, which succumbed to the idolatry of worshiping power, Jesus will not give in to the allure of political and economical power. On a mountain (vv. 8-10), Jesus rejects the devil's offer of world domination. On top of another mountain (Matt. 28:16-20) and because he chose to follow God's way, Jesus is granted all authority in heaven and on earth.³

The similarities between Jesus' and Israel's testing in the wilderness are too many to be disregarded: Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness; Israel is led into the wilderness by God through Moses. Jesus is to be tempted by the devil; Israel is to be tested, tried by God. Jesus fasts during forty days and forty nights; Israel journeys during forty years; Jesus is tempted by hunger; so is Israel.

But there are similarities also between Jesus and Moses. Moses was on top of Mount Sinai during forty days and forty nights, after which he delivered the Law to the people (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:9, 25). Similarly, Jesus stays forty days and forty nights in the wilderness and then delivers the Sermon on the Mount, a kind of new law (see Matt. 5-7). The Matthean community sees the parallels between Israel being tested in the desert and Jesus being tested in the wilderness. For them, Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, is going to be everything Israel was not. Conversely, they feel empowered to obey God as Jesus did and to become the new people of God on earth.

If the Matthean community regarded Jesus as a new Moses, Paul regarded him as a new Adam, whose act of obedience brought about life eternal rather than death (Rom. 5:12-19). Here we have two clear examples of the early church reading the Hebrew Bible through the lenses of the experience of the Risen Christ. Thus, Jesus' ministry was seen by some as
the giving of a new law for the new people of God—and even as a model to be imitated. Others saw in Jesus the agent of a new creation, the archetype of the true human being.

February 20, 2005: Second Sunday in Lent
John 3:1-17; Gen. 12:1-4a; Ps. 121; Rom. 4:1-5, 13-17
The immediate context to our passage is 2:23-25. Nicodemus is one of those who “believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing” (2:23). The Jews (“Judeans” is perhaps a better translation of Ioudaioi) in 2:18, the “many” in 2:23, and Nicodemus in 3:2 assume that miracles can legitimate Jesus’ authority. But Jesus did not entrust himself to them, for he knew their motivations. This is the backdrop against which the following dialogue should be understood.

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The structure of the dialogue is simple: Nicodemus makes an affirmation and asks two questions (vv. 2, 4, 9) and in each case Jesus answers with a categorical, authoritative answer: “Very truly, I tell you” (vv. 3, 5, 11). Later, in v. 13, the dialogue turns into a monologue—probably by the evangelist, who now addresses the theological implications of the dialogue.

Even before Nicodemus makes his first comment, three important statements happen (v. 2)—one by the narrator and two by Nicodemus himself—that need to be considered: the reference to “night,” the title Rabbi, and the personal pronoun “we.” The fact that the passage states that the encounter happened at nighttime has been interpreted in many ways. (1) Like Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus was a secret disciple of Jesus and so came to him at night (cf. 19:38-40). (2) It is a symbolic reference to unbelief or to the wrong kind of belief, embodied here in Nicodemus (see 3:19-21). (3) The night was the time for studying the Torah and for theological dialogue. Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as Rabbi and comes to him at night for a theological discussion. Given the negative connotations of darkness in this Gospel (contemporary interpreters living in racially prejudiced societies should be aware of the dangers of neglecting to unpack this Johannine theme!), it is probable that “night” here refers to unbelief or spiritual misunderstanding.

In John, the title Rabbi appears on the lips of the disciples only (1:38, 49; 4:31; 9:2; 11:8). This could mean two things: either Nicodemus was on the way to becoming a disciple (cf. 19:38-40; 7:50-52, where he timidly tries to make a case for Jesus’ right to a legal hearing) or he is using the title with some irony, since it would be highly improbable that a member of the Jerusalem elite.
would address a Galilean peasant, who, in 7:15, is said to be uneducated, as Rabbi. In favor of the first option, the three times that Nicodemus appears in John (3:1-12; 7:50-52; 19:38-40) seem to point to a progressive coming to terms with discipleship—from believing in Jesus because of the signs (which, as we suggested above, was a misunderstanding) to fully honoring him in death, paying Jesus the tribute a disciple would pay a beloved teacher.

The "we" of v. 2 may refer to those who, in 2:23, believed in Jesus because of the signs or to the Pharisees, whom Nicodemus represents. They are depicted in the Gospel as the archenemies of Jesus; so Nicodemus is probably using a polite exaggeration, since it is very unlikely that the Pharisees would have sent him.

In his first affirmation, Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus has come from God and that God is present in him because of the signs that he does. He thinks that the miraculous is proof of God's presence. But Jesus is not flattered by this. He knows what motivates Nicodemus, even if we as readers still wonder about it. Jesus replies that merely seeing his signs is not enough. The kingdom of God is not something that can be detected with the physical eyes, but, rather, is a reality that can be perceived only through the eyes of the Spirit—after one has been born "anew" or "from above." The Greek word anothen can mean both things, but the pun is possible only in the Greek language, which places the responsibility for this wording entirely on the Evangelist's shoulders. Here it possibly means "from above," i.e., from God (see 1:13), since this idea is taken up again in 3:31, where the Evangelist talks about Jesus as the one who comes from above—a persistent theme throughout the Gospel.

Why did Nicodemus misunderstand Jesus' words? Two principal reasons have been suggested. (1) It is part of the Evangelist's argument. The reply is aimed not only at Nicodemus but also at the community he represents. (2) To be "born again," as Nicodemus understood it, would have meant altering one's ascribed honor status in a very radical way; and Nicodemus was not ready to trade his honorable position in society for an uncertain new status.

Jesus' second answer clarifies the previous one by way of two synonymous parallelisms: "no one can see the kingdom of God"//"no one can enter the kingdom of God"; "without being born from above"//"without being born of water and Spirit" (vv. 3, 5). In the Greek text, the parallelisms are striking. "Seeing" and "entering" the Kingdom refer to the same reality as does being "born from above" and "born of water and Spirit."
Seeing and entering the Kingdom are important ideas. It seems as if, for John, there is no earthly dimension of the kingdom of God in the future, as is the case in the Synoptic Gospels and in traditional apocalyptic literature. Rather, in John, it is the person who is enlightened by an experience with God's only Son, Jesus, the Light of the World and the Bread of Life, and who can then contemplate—"see"—the Kingdom and participate fully in it ("enter" it). Experiencing the Kingdom is a present possibility, but only for those who have been spiritually awakened to it (cf. Rom. 4:13-17).

Being born from water and Spirit can be translated as "water which is Spirit," since "water" and "Spirit" are joined by "and" (καί) and governed by the same preposition "from" (ἐκ); thus, it probably refers to one thing, not two. In the Fourth Gospel, water is used to point to the lower, physical world (1:33; 3:23; 2:6-7; 4:6-7; 5:7) but also to the spiritual world (4:14; 7:37-39). Used in contrast with physical birth, water refers to spiritual birth. It can also refer to baptism and the new life in the Spirit that was linked with this sacrament. At any rate, Jesus is pointing at a spiritual dimension of life that has been completely missed by the learned Pharisee. Those who interpret this Gospel as a coded document for and from a community undergoing harassment from the religious leaders of the people of Judea see in this passage a criticism of the leaders of the synagogue. The apologetic implications are clear: the Johannine community, represented by Jesus, is in the know; the Pharisees, represented by Nicodemus, are not.

Nicodemus's second question reveals that he realizes that Jesus meant "from above" and not "again." Still, he does not know how this is possible, since he asks, "How can these things be?" Jesus' reply shows the irony of the situation: a teacher of Israel does not know what a peasant from Galilee does! Consequently, in v. 11, Jesus delves completely into communal language, using the plural "we" and "you." It sounds very much like 1 John 1:1-4. The community speaks through Jesus. They know, yet Nicodemus does not. The community has given testimony (about Jesus, the Logos of God), but Nicodemus's community has not received this testimony. And then Jesus says something that has been puzzling scholars for a long time. He contrasts "earthly" things with "heavenly" things (v. 12). The problem is that vv. 3-8 can hardly qualify as "earthly." Perhaps it refers to the examples given by Jesus, which are taken from earthly realities (birth, water, wind). Or perhaps it is because these things take place on earth, while Jesus is beginning to anticipate going to heaven and being lifted up.
Jewish and Christian mysticism and apocalypticism shared this idea of an experience of being transported to heaven where the person contemplates either God's glory or the future of history and returns to earth to communicate and reveal this vision to others. Verse 13 seems to be a veiled criticism of such experiences (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1-10). What these people claimed was a direct revelation from the Spirit, independent from an ongoing connection with Jesus. Therefore, the crux of the argument seems to be this: The kingdom of God is a spiritual reality that can be seen only when the person has believed that Jesus is the agent of God's new creation. It cannot be detected by the naked eye or by invoking a special experience of heavenly bliss. None of this qualifies a person for seeing or entering into the Kingdom or having eternal life. Only the encounter in history with the incarnated Logos makes that possible.

February 27, 2005: Third Sunday in Lent
John 4:5-42; Exod. 17:1-7; Ps. 95; Rom. 5:1-11
There are two main characters in this dialogue, Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Each one of them is embedded in two different ethnic and religious groups—the disciples and the Samaritan villagers—which provide the backdrop for their conversation.

Let us start with Jesus. As a Jewish male, he is in a position of advantage over the woman. But, as a thirsty and tired sojourner, he is obviously at a disadvantage: he does not have a bucket to draw water. A thirsty Messiah and a resourceful woman will find out that they need each other—a wonderful metaphor for how God and humanity are intimately interconnected.

This is a story of overcoming exclusiveness and of building community through inclusiveness. One movement is negative, the other positive. First, after the woman's initial surprise, Jesus invites the dialogue by becoming vulnerable ("Give me a drink" [v. 7]) and by allowing the woman to exercise some power over him (she is the one with the bucket!) Some have pointed out the paradox of the scene: Here is the giver of living water, thirsty himself. Second, Jesus overcomes the disciples' initial surprise and prejudice toward the woman and teaches them a lesson in discipleship. Third, Jesus overcomes his own Jewish cultic tradition by affirming that God is best worshiped in "spirit" (v. 23). He does away with the Temple institution both in Israel and in Samaria and points to a different eschatological reality, in which he believes he is now living ("and is now here" [v. 23]).
The second movement is positive and is one of building community. Jesus does this first by crossing gender boundaries and by engaging the woman as a valid conversation partner to whom he makes the first self-revelation of the entire Gospel: “I am he” (v. 26). Thus, Jesus breaks open the boundary between male and female and includes women in the circle of disciples, for this resourceful and clever woman goes back to the village and witnesses to the townspeople concerning Jesus. Consequently, they are able to make a christological confession (v. 42). But Jesus also builds community by crossing racial boundaries and breaking down the distinction between “chosen people” and “rejected people.” Jesus extends the mission of the Jewish Messiah to the Samaritan people, who were hated by the Jews because of the Samaritans’ history of racial mixture and religious syncretism.

Enter the Samaritan woman. She is in clear disadvantage because of gender and race. But she has the advantage of being a local (Samaria is her home, after all) and of having access to the water of the well, which Jesus lacks. Unlike Nicodemus in ch. 3, who seems to run out of questions as the dialogue progresses, this woman engages Jesus in a profound theological conversation. In the text, she is the spokesperson for the Samaritans (notice the use of plural personal pronouns in vv. 12, 20-22). She makes progressive affirmations of faith that prepare the way to her being sent as a disciple. When carefully read, this story provides the warrant for the presence of women among Jesus’ group of disciples. Two clues from the Johannine context will show this. First, in 1:40, Andrew tells his brother Simon that he has found the Messiah and then brings him to Jesus. In 4:39, the woman’s testimony brings about the conversion of the Samaritans. Second, in 1:46-49 Nathanael becomes a disciple after Jesus tells Nathanael his whereabouts under the fig tree. In 4:29, the woman becomes a witness to Jesus because of what Jesus told her. There is no doubt that this woman is a witness to Christ—a disciple—just as much as the male disciples (1:35-51).

A third disadvantage the woman faces (besides those of gender and race) is her private life: she has had five husbands. But this is not necessarily proof of a licentious life. She could have been trapped in the custom of levirate marriage (see Tamar in Genesis 38) and the last male in the family line had refused to marry her.¹³ The text portrays her not as a tramp but as an example of growing faith. The five husbands can also be a reference to people from five foreign nations who were brought as colonists by the Assyrians when they conquered the region in 721 B.C.E. (see 2 Kings 17:24).
This created a situation of intermarriage, aggravated by Herod the Great's decision to continue the pattern of colonization by settling thousands of foreigners in Samaria. If this is the case, then Jesus is commenting not on the Samaritan woman's private life but rather on her mixed race and culture due to imperialism.

The disciples are the group to which Jesus relates ethnically and religiously. They are Jews (v. 9). They appear at the beginning of the narrative (v. 8) and again after Jesus has finished his conversation with the woman (v. 27). They provide a syntactical "bookend" for Jesus' conversation with the woman, for the text lets us know that it is when the disciples are gone that Jesus actually talks to the woman. Verses 7-30 can be structured in the following way:

A. A woman came to draw water (v. 7)
B. The disciples had gone away into the city (v. 8)
C. Dialogue between Jesus and the woman (vv. 9-26)
B'. The disciples came back from the city (v. 27)
A'. The woman left the water jar and went back into the city (v. 28)

John 4 represents the founding narrative for the presence of a considerable number of Samaritans in the Johannine community. Thus, the story promotes diversity among the early Christian communities as well as legitimizes the discipleship of women. Against this backdrop, the disciples in the narrative stand for those people inside the community who were not really enthusiastic about the prospects of including non-Jews as fellow believers. The male disciples are summoned to participate in the mission, but they have to acknowledge that "others" have labored first. This is a veiled reference to the missionary work of the woman.

The Samaritan villagers acknowledge Jesus as the "Savior of the world," not just the Jewish Messiah or the traditional Samaritan Ta'heb ("the one who returns"). This speaks of a new consciousness arising in the Johannine community that struggles to overcome cultural and national differences. Whatever the woman told them, she did it in a way that allowed her conversation with Jesus to filter through her own understanding of who Jesus was. Even if, as Jesus said, salvation is from the Jews, it would not be limited to Israel alone but would spill into the whole world. Initially (unlike the Jewish disciples in 20:18-29), they believe because of the woman's testimony but then are able to ascertain for themselves who Jesus really is. Like the woman's, their faith progresses.
What happened at the well that empowered the woman to become a witness of the gospel? Jesus treated her as a valid conversation partner, engaging her in serious theological conversation. The fact that he disagreed with some of the woman's affirmations is the best proof that he was treating her with respect. In his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Jacob Neusner explains that for a rabbi to argue and dialogue with others was a sign of respect: "It is my form of respect, the only compliment I crave from others, the only serious tribute I pay to the people I take seriously—and therefore I respect and even love."\(^\text{15}\)

The question still remains as to how Jesus was changed by the experience. If we cannot answer the question, then we have to conclude that this dialogue was staged, fabricated. Thus, I think that because of this experience Jesus began to realize the universal scope of his mission. His ministry would not be bound by social, ethnic, or religious conventions. It was an exercise in inclusiveness, something similar to what he experienced with the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30. So, Jesus left us with a crucial lesson: community can be built only when we are not afraid of overcoming old prejudices and are willing to break social conventions that dehumanize us. The living water that Jesus promised the woman, symbolized in the water that Moses caused to come out of the rock (Exodus 17), is God's purifying water, the Holy Spirit (7:37-39), which can purify our hearts of old hatreds and hostilities and form us into a diverse people of God on earth.

**March 6, 2005: Fourth Sunday in Lent**

*John 9:1-41; 1 Sam. 16:1-13; Ps. 23; Eph. 5:8-14*

Chapter 9 functions as a commentary on Jesus' claim in 8:12, "I am the light of the world." Verse 5 ("As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world") ties chapters 8 and 9 together. Chapter 9 can be divided into three sections: introduction to the healing (vv. 1-5), description of the healing (vv. 6-7), and reaction to the healing (vv. 8-41). As in John 4, a number of characters populate the scene: the blind man, Jesus, the disciples, the Pharisees, and the blind man's parents. Religious instruction is again conveyed through dialogue, a literary device present in rabbinic and Hellenistic documents as well as in the Jesus tradition.

How one punctuates v. 3 makes a difference in the way one interprets this incident. The *NRSV*, by adding "he was born blind" (a phrase not in the Greek text), suggests that the man's blindness is an "excuse" for God to
show God's power (see also 11:4). A more accurate translation of v. 3 reads as follows: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But in order that God's works might be revealed in him it is necessary for us to work the works of the one who sent me . . . ." This translation establishes no connection between sickness and sin (but see 5:14). Therefore, Jesus has to do the work of God and heal the man. In either case, Jesus seems to be rejecting some of the Old Testament teaching about sickness as a consequence of inherited sin. In the Jewish tradition, there were two causes for sickness: the sins of the parents, which produced the suffering of the children (Exod. 20:5), and prenatal sin committed by the fetus. The latter was an older tradition, stemming from the rabbinic period. But there were in Israel also differences of opinion on this matter, as suggested by Ezekiel 18 and Jeremiah 31:29-31. In our passage, Jesus seems to side with those prophetic traditions that affirmed that people were individually responsible for their sins.

In reading the Gospel of John, ancient and contemporary readers are used to expect more than the obvious, so when it comes to understanding what the blind man stands for there are a variety of possible interpretations:

1. Since the purpose of signs in John is to teach about Christology, the giving of sight to a blind man teaches people that Jesus is the light of the world, similar to the way the multiplication of loaves in ch. 6 shows that Jesus is the bread of life. The only way people can approach the light of God shown in the person of Jesus is by acknowledging their own blindness. Approaching Jesus pretending to know (Nicodemus) or see (Pharisees) amounts to remaining in spiritual darkness. This chapter in particular and the Gospel in general exemplify the movement from unbelief to belief. With his declaration in v. 38, "Lord, I believe," the man demonstrates the kind of faith that is required for salvation. The same kind of confession is shown by Martha in 11:27.

2. The man is a foil for the blindness of the Pharisees, a poignant example of the irony of the Fourth Gospel and the humor of the region: a blind man who sees what the religious authorities do not (vv. 39-41). The chapter starts with a man born blind and assumed to be a sinner (v. 2) and ends with some of the Pharisees being declared sinners because they pretend to "see," which shows their unbelief (vv. 39-41). In the course of the chapter, "blindness" moves from a physical to a spiritual level. The blind man not only sees in a physical way but also believes and receives spiritual light (see Eph. 5:8-14). Sinfulness is related to physical defect, disobedience
to the Torah, and the inability to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Again, we see
the amazing piling up of symbolisms in John's rhetoric.

3. Sending the man to be washed in the pool of Siloam recalls the inci­
dent in 2 Kings 5:10-14, where Naaman the leper is sent by Elisha to bathe
in the river Jordan. It also emphasizes the healing power of water, since the
man is healed only after he washes himself in the pool—an act of trusting
obedience. That is why in the early church this story was read during the
baptism of new converts. Some scholars even believe that vv. 38-39 were
added later for precisely that purpose. In fact, this story appears in early
catacomb art most frequently as an illustration of Christian baptism. In
the Gospel itself there are proofs that the Evangelist had in mind a
baptismal motif. The name of the pool means "sent"; and in John Jesus is
the one who was sent from God. Also, the water of the pool was the source
of the water used in the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, and the
reader has learned from 7:37-38 that Jesus, during the last day of the
festival, declares himself to be the source of living water, thus symbolically
replacing the water of the festival with his own person.

4. One of the most popular interpretations of this chapter is that the
man reflects the situation of the Johannine community when it was force­
fully separated from the synagogue. This is based on 9:22, 34 but also on
12:42-43 and 16:2. This is probably true, but the separation does not have
to be understood as forceful expulsion but perhaps as voluntary separa­
tion. This takes the responsibility for the rift off the Jewish people and puts
it on the community (also Jewish), which found it impossible to remain in
communion with their brothers and sisters at the synagogue because of
their developing Christology—an example of which can be seen in the
man's progressive understanding of who Jesus was (see 9:11, 17, 33, 38).

Conclusion

As we slowly make our way into Lent, trying to disregard the idolatrous
commercialization of the season in our society, let us remember that Jesus
took time to speak to people about what was really important for them. In
the face of an impending death, he still focused on people's needs. His was
a life selflessly invested in others. In an age of technological advances,
emails and web pages, where the line between what is real and what is not
has been dangerously blurred, let us take time to dialogue with our fellow
human beings just as Jesus did. Let us take a real interest in their lives. Let
us make time to talk—as Jesus did in his long road to Good Friday—about what really matters, computers and PowerPoint presentations notwithstanding.

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Endnotes

2. Ibid., 111.
7. Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary, 82.
8. Talbert, Reading John, 99.
16. Talbert, Reading John, 162.
A recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet Project found that some 25 percent of Internet users (around 28 million people) have looked for religious or spiritual information online. That is more than the number of those who have used online banking, online stock trading, online auctions, online dating services, or online gambling. Religion is among the busiest lanes in the information superhighway. Of course, the image of the World Wide Web as a superhighway can be misleading. In reality, the Web resembles something more like a crowded bazaar in which anyone can set up their own stall, hoping that others will pass by and take notice.

Religious and theological websites are about as diverse as the phenomenon of religion itself. Some offer information about a religious group, ministry, or position in a relatively passive way, while others are aggressive in their defense of positions, attacks on other positions, or efforts to make converts. Some websites offer what is both intended to be and taken as a form of spiritual community. Some are intensely practical—they are places where work gets done, ideas are exchanged, and resources are shared. The sheer quantity of religious websites can, of course, pose problems for pastors, church leaders, laypersons, or theology students, who must make decisions about what is useful and trustworthy from within this virtual chaos. With a little technological know-how, anyone today can put up a website posting—for example, a lengthy treatise on infant baptism—and as a theology professor, I will find it quoted in one of my students' papers, alongside Augustine, Luther, Wesley, or Calvin. This fact raises important questions about identity and authority, because any sect can now present itself on the Web as historic Christianity and any individual can easily present him- or herself as a reliable spokesperson for a group or denomination. While some speak of the Internet revolution as the democratization of information, it may be that our situation is more like information anarchy. Still, while this reality calls for caution and discrimination, the wealth of
resources available on the Internet for religious, liturgical, historical, and theological research is far too valuable and accessible to be treated lightly or dismissed easily.

**Religion Gateways**

One of the best ways to find useful religious and theological material on the Internet is to begin with a reputable guide, index, or gateway. These guides usually have links to a variety of sites, categorized under subheadings such as religious topics; online journals, magazines, and newsletters; texts, archives, and collections; societies, institutions, religious bodies, and traditions; syllabi, bibliographies, and courses; and theologians or great thinkers. Some of the best among these guides make an attempt to be selective rather than comprehensive:

- **The Wabash Center Guide to Internet Resources for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion** ([http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/front.htm](http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/front.htm))
- **Virtual Religion Index** (Rutgers University) ([http://religion.rutgers.edu/vri](http://religion.rutgers.edu/vri))
- **Religion-online.org** ([http://www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org))
- **Computer-Assisted Theology** (Michael Fraser) ([http://users.ox.ac.uk/~ctitext2/theology](http://users.ox.ac.uk/~ctitext2/theology))
- **Theology Links** ([http://www.fambof.nl/links/theology](http://www.fambof.nl/links/theology))
- **Finding God in Cyberspace** ([http://sim74.kenrickparish.com](http://sim74.kenrickparish.com))
- **Fides Quaerens Internetum** ([http://people.bu.edu/bpstone/theology/theology.html](http://people.bu.edu/bpstone/theology/theology.html))

Theological libraries frequently function as some of the best gateways. Over the past two decades, seminary and divinity school libraries have been busy trying to keep pace with the Web developments, and this has meant new strategies around what it means to collect and preserve information (and, indeed, what counts as information); but especially around what it means to provide access to information. The mammoth task of scanning and digitizing important theological and reference works, journals, heavily used materials, and historical collections, so that they can be accessed online is a project only in its infancy. The legal, technical, and economic issues surrounding all of this are enough to drive a librarian batty, but the move toward digitization of important, historical, or frequently used materials is inevitable.
It would be impossible in this short article to list the many resources available to the cyber public from theological school libraries and their websites; but generally one can find invaluable Internet research tools, archives, indexes, manuscripts, special collections, databases, bibliographies, and access to holdings online. The American Theological Library Association (ATLA) produces one of the most comprehensive religion databases in the world, covering antiquities/archaeology, Bible, church history, ecumenism, ethics, missions, pastoral ministry, philosophy, religions/religious studies, and theology. ATLA also maintains an online collection of major religion and theology journals, the ATLA Serials project (ATLAS). The best theological libraries subscribe to these and other searchable databases and offer access to them online. Without any attempt at being exhaustive, a few helpful theological library websites are:

- **Boston University School of Theology Library**  
  [http://www.bu.edu/sth/sthlibrary](http://www.bu.edu/sth/sthlibrary)

- **Drew University Library**  
  [http://www.depts.drew.edu/lib](http://www.depts.drew.edu/lib)

- **Duke Divinity School Library**  
  [http://www.lib.duke.edu/divinity](http://www.lib.duke.edu/divinity)

- **Pitts Theological Library** (Candler School of Theology)  
  [http://www.pitts.emory.edu](http://www.pitts.emory.edu)

- **Vanderbilt University Divinity School Library**  
  [http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lib](http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lib)

- **Yale University Divinity School Library**  
  [http://www.library.yale.edu/div/divhome.htm](http://www.library.yale.edu/div/divhome.htm)

Of course, journals and magazines are tremendous resources for theological study, and a considerable number of religious and theological periodicals have gone to online formats (some exclusively so). Again, while it is impossible to list the many journals here, most of the gateways referenced earlier feature directories of these journals and magazines. The Wabash Center's site ([www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/e-j-idx.htm](http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/e-j-idx.htm)) provides one of the better "directories of directories" for electronic journals.

Among the most unique and powerful of the Internet's properties is its interactivity; and this has changed the face of how much of theology gets done today. A growing number of theological websites host bulletin boards and discussion forums, such as "Open Source Theology" ([www.open-sourcetheology.net](http://www.open-sourcetheology.net)) or "Faith Maps" ([www.faithmaps.org](http://www.faithmaps.org)). But the busiest
such instrument on the Internet for this type of activity is undoubtedly the “list-serv,” which refers both to a mailing list for group discussion and conferencing and to the discussion group itself. One must subscribe to a list-serv in order to post and receive the email exchanges among its members, and usually a moderator attempts to ensure basic courtesies in communication. List-servs have become some of the busiest hives for the exchange of information and ideas, questions, answers, and arguments; and they are available on almost any topic under the sun (see, for example, the lists at discussionlists.com or groups.yahoo.com). As one might guess, one of the disadvantages of list-servs is that, at times, one must wade through volumes of unimportant or even irritating emails to find something worthwhile. Keeping track of the various “threads” in a discussion can also prove bewildering at times.

Because the increasing speed of Internet access allows users to share and access material through a variety of media—text, images, sound, video—theological and religious coursework is gradually becoming more widely available on the Web, complete with “live chats” and streaming video. Even where online courses are not available, however, Internet users scouting for religious resources will find a number of helpful syllabi and bibliographies by conducting simple searches through the standard engines such as www.google.com or www.altavista.com.

Despite the tremendous possibilities for interactive teaching, learning, exchange, and discussion on the Internet, the ability of the Internet simply to serve as a storehouse of knowledge remains one of its most important qualities. Answers to basic theological questions, data on religious groups and their beliefs and practices, and historic religious documents and texts are all easily accessible. Take, for example, the following widely used collections:

- **Christian Classics Ethereal Library** ([http://www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)) Probably one of the most comprehensive online collections of Christian literature, ranging from the early Church Fathers to devotional classics to major Christian theologians and thinkers

- **Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms** ([http://www.gty.org/~phil/creeds.htm](http://www.gty.org/~phil/creeds.htm)) A set of links to a wide range of creedal statements from a variety of Christian traditions

- **Documents of the Protestant Reformation** ([http://www.mun.ca/rels/hrollmann/reform/reform.html](http://www.mun.ca/rels/hrollmann/reform/reform.html)) Hans
Online Resources in Theology and Religion

Rollman's collection of links to the documents of the various re-formations of the sixteenth century

- **New Advent** ([http://www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org)) An extensive theological resource and host to the 1917 Catholic Encyclopedia—an older but easily searchable source of theological terms, historical entries, and answers to theological questions.

  Wesleyan theological resources may also be found on the Web, with the following as a set of useful starting points:

- **John Wesley Resources** (General Board of Global Ministries) ([http://www.gbgm-umc.org/UMW/Wesley](http://www.gbgm-umc.org/UMW/Wesley))

- **Methodist Archives and Research Centre** (John Rylands University Library of Manchester) ([http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/text/method.html](http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/text/method.html))

- **The United Methodist Archives Center** (Drew University Library) ([http://www.depts.drew.edu/lib/uma.html](http://www.depts.drew.edu/lib/uma.html))

- **The Wesley Center Online** ([http://wesley.nnu.edu](http://wesley.nnu.edu)) Provides a number of digitized works of John and Charles Wesley (for example, the 1872 Jackson edition of Wesley's works and his notes on the Bible), John Fletcher, and important works from the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement.


Liturgical Resources

Religious aids to worship abound on the Internet. Some sites offer Web-surfers their own private worship experiences, complete with music, scripture readings, meditations, sermons in streaming audio, discussion boards, prayer requests, and, of course, a chance to give an offering. One site even walks individuals through their own private Communion service (a theological contradiction, of course), including instructions for when to get up and get a glass of grape juice. Thousands of persons have experimented with the "Church of Fools" ([www.shipoffools.com](http://www.shipoffools.com)), sponsored by The Methodist Church of Great Britain. The virtual church brings together individuals from around the world each week into a virtual 3D space, where visitors are allowed to pick their own animated character, who can stroll around the sanctuary, visit the crypt, sit in a pew, kneel, genuflect, talk to other people, and take part in a short service. (The church warden
can "smite" unruly persons who violate church decorum, thereby removing them from virtual existence.)

But beyond the interesting and controversial attempts at providing "Web worship," online resources for worship are plentiful and include scores of sources for religious music (including "midi" samplings and full downloads), prayers, readings, and orders of worship. A number of useful Lectionary resources are available to assist pastors, preachers, and worship leaders. Vanderbilt Divinity School Library provides all three cycles of readings for the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) from the NRSV in an easily accessible format (http://divinity.lib.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary). Other Lectionary resources worth consulting are

- **Comments** (http://montreal.anglican.org/comments) Useful set of commentaries, introductions, and technical information on each of the RCL readings hosted by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal
- **The Text This Week** (http://www.textweek.com) A remarkable set of links and resources for studying and reflecting upon the readings for each week, with links to lectionaries used by a number of major Christian communions. This site is especially helpful in stimulating thought about the various Scripture readings by suggesting themes within them and then providing links to images (frescoes, icons, statues, pictures, and paintings) and movies in which these themes surface.
- **The Lectionary** (http://satucket.com/lectionary)
- **The Lectionary Page** (http://www.io.com/~kellywp)

In addition to Lectionary resources, websites like the Mission of St. Clare provide an online version of the Daily Office (http://www.missionst-clare.com), with prayers, readings, psalms, and music for each day, while a number of websites, such as "James Kiefer's Christian Biographies" (http://elvis.rowan.edu/~kilroy/JEK), provide brief biographies of saints and church leaders linked to the day of the year on which they are remembered. Other worship and liturgical aids can be found through gateways that offer hundreds of invaluable links to libraries and reference material, liturgical centers and organizations, publications, texts, prayers, rites, and music.

- **Liturgy Links** (Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy) (http://www.nd.edu/links)
- **Lift Up Your Hearts** (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada) (http://www.worship.ca)
• Liturgical Studies and Liturgical Music (College of St. Benedict/St. John's University)  
(http://www.csbsju.edu/library/internet/theoltgy.html)

• An Anglican Liturgical Library (http://www.oremus.org/liturgy)  
An extensive collection of prayers and texts used throughout the worldwide Anglican communion, including numerous resources for working with the Book of Common Prayer. See also “Liturgical Resources” at http://www.anglicansonline.org/resources/liturgical.html

• The Catholic Liturgical Library (http://www.catholicliturgy.com)

• Monastic Topics: Liturgy (The Order of St. Benedict)  
(http://www.osb.org/liturgy)

Comprehensive bibliographies for worship and preaching are located on the website of the Vanderbilt Divinity School Library. For the liturgics bibliography, see http://divinity.lib.vanderbilt.edu/bibs/liturgics.htm; for the homiletics bibliography, visit http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/homiletics.htm. While websites devoted to offering contemporary worship resources are far more numerous than traditional liturgical resources, they also tend to be more commercial and so less immediately helpful unless one is looking to buy material. One of the best starting points for contemporary worship resources is “WorshipMusic.com” (http://www.praise.net); and, of course, no one should overlook the various websites hosted by his or her own denomination or tradition.

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Endnotes

The slogans and statistics stand in sharp contradiction. Bumper stickers and glib phrases abound: "Children First"; "No Child Left Behind"; "For the Sake of the Children." Yet, the statistics are sobering. In the opening chapter, Fewell notes that in the past decade armed conflicts have killed two million children, disabled four to five million, and left twelve million homeless. . . . One hundred and fifty million children in developing countries are suffering from malnutrition. . . . In the United States . . . homicide has become the third leading cause of mortality for children between the ages of five and fourteen (19-21).

_The Children of Israel_ challenges us to read "the Bible for the sake of our children." The cover, a chilling Gustave Dore engraving of the Flood, depicts the struggle of parents attempting to protect their children from the rising waters that will inevitably overcome them. In this context, Fewell asks: "In a world where so many children are sick, hungry, dying, abandoned, displaced and violated, in a world where politics take precedence over matters of life and death, what difference does reading the Bible make?" (22)

The book is divided into two parts, with each chapter preceded by a brief dialogue between an adult and a child. Each piece is a gem, snatching my attention, as if I were there when Jesus turned a Samaritan into a hero.

Fewell invites readers to move into the biblical text, challenging them to stand within familiar narratives but using an unfamiliar template. First, she demands that we widen our perspective of the text to include the edges and the shadows, asking, "Where are the children? What is happening to them?" This draws our eyes from the familiar hero to those who, albeit often invisible, yet inhabit the text. In the shadow of Abraham's radical obedience stands the child Isaac, seeing a father ready to burn him alive. Moses, plucked from the Nile, diverts attention from the other babies who drown. Dead first-born sons are on the edges of the Exodus.
Gomorrah, and countless other cities are the silent cost of cleansing and overcoming. Children of "pagan" women become homeless as Israel purified itself from the heathen. A nameless daughter pays the price of a father's bargain with God for victory.

Having equipped us for a fresh, yet passive, perspective, Fewell now calls us to become active by "interrupting the text." She illustrates this with an engaging church nativity play episode, in which a young boy, in the role of the innkeeper, departs from the narrative tradition. Upon hearing Joseph's plea for a place in the inn for the pregnant Mary, the boy blurts out, "You can have my room!" We are invited to imitate him as we shift from observation to engagement. For those of us who seek solace and security in Scripture, this can be disturbing. Yet the rewards are rich, as the smooth surface of conventional interpretation gives way to the complex, textured grittiness of real-life faith journey.

While Part One prepares the reader with a template and tools for engaging Scripture, Part Two prepares us for reading Scripture with children—or, more accurately, to hear Scripture through children. Fewell states, "If the church's habit of reading scripture is to steer clear of texts that present moral and theological difficulty, then its children are left with nothing textual and tangible to help them articulate their experiences, concerns, and fears, or to help them grapple with their own development as moral beings" (107). She reminds us of the few stories in which a child is the main protagonist, noting that orphanhood and violence are recurring themes. As in fairy tales, their lives are interrupted, challenged. They are presented with the opportunity to make something happen in order to make changes not only for themselves but also for the larger community.

Each of the three rich chapters of Part Two focuses on one such story (Daniel, Esther, Hannah). The chapter on Esther is presented as a play within a play—a group of young girls (both Christian and Jewish) preparing a Purim play. Their own experiences are interwoven with their encounter with Esther's life, and the Scripture narrative explodes with implications.

*The Children of Israel* is a good read, accessible and challenging. But be warned: both your seeing and your hearing are subject to change.

Reviewed by Patricia Barrett. Barrett is an Assistant General Secretary in the Division of Ordained Ministry, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.
Index to Volume 24, 2004

Editorial
Rethinking War and Peace, 5-6
Learning for a Change, 115-116
Preaching for a New Time, 225-26
A Call to Order, Once More . . ., 335-36

Issue Theme
The War on Terror and the “Wrongful Use of the Name of the Lord Your God,” Tyron Inbody, 7-20
United Methodist Witness in Times of War: Five Characteristics, Ellen Ott Marshall, 21-34
Reflections from a War Zone: Jesus’ Radical Call to Forgiveness, Sandra K. Olewine, 35-46
The Military Chaplain in Time of War: Contours and Content of Ministry, Robert J. Phillips, 47-58
“I Recognize Religion”: Terrorism and Pastoral Theology, G. Clarke Chapman, Jr., 59-66
How Can Continuing Theological Education Serve the Church?, D. Bruce Roberts, 117-30
Rejoicing in the Truth, Charles M. Wood, 131-41
Nurturing a Learned Clergy: A Survey of the United Methodist Clergy Probationary Process, Lovett H. Weems, Jr., 142-52
For Excellent Purposes: Aspects of Lay Theological Education in The United Methodist Church, Susan Willhauck, 153-67
From the 3Rs to the 3Ws: Continuing Education in a Digital Age, Thomas R. Hawkins, 168-80
Preaching Paul, L. Susan Bond, 236-48
Preaching Theology, John S. McClure, 249-61
Preaching amidst Different Cultures, Aida Irizarry-Fernandez, 262-71
What is an Order?, Reflections on the Vocation of Elders and Deacons, Mark W. Stamm, 337-49
The Order of Elders: Doomed to Failure or Hope for the Future?, Grant Hagiya, 350-57
The Oral Roberts Option: The Case for Ordained Local Elders (and Local Deacons?) in The United Methodist Church, Ted A. Campbell, 358-66
United Methodist Ordained Ministry in Ecumenical Perspective, Jeffrey Gros, 381-98

Outside the Theme
Beyond Burnout: New Creation and the Economics of Grace in Global Capitalism, Joerg Rieger, 67-79
The Global Nature of The United Methodist Church: What Future for the Branch Outside the United States?, Patrick Ph. Streiff, 181-93
“I Permit Not a Woman to Teach”: Women’s Roles as a Test Case for Biblical Authority, Ralph K. Hawkins, 269-99; Response to Ralph K. Hawkins, Tex Sample, 300-2; Rejoinder, Ralph K. Hawkins, 303-05
The Grace of Letting Go: Theological Reflections on Forgiveness from a Space In-Between, Michael Nausner, 399-410

The Church in Review
The Future of Connectionalism, Thomas E. Frank; Mark W. Wethington, 80-86
General Conference, Grant Hagiya, Robert C. Schnase, 194-200
The Meaning of United Methodist Relatedness, William B. Lawrence; Ted Brown, 306-12
General Agencies in The United Methodist Church, Russell E. Richey; Norman E. Dewire, 411-18

A Word on the Word
Lectionary Study: Youtha Hardman-Cromwell (Spring), 87-96, Judith A. Stevens (Summer), 201-10
James W. Moore (Fall), 313-19, Osvaldo D. Vena (Winter), 419-31
Issues In: Congregational Studies, Edwin David Aponte, 97-103; Interreligious Dialogue, M. Thomas Thangarat, 211-18; Continuing Theological Education for Clergywomen, Beth Luton Cook, 320-24; Online Resources in Theology and Religion, Bryan Stone, 432-38

Book Reviews
In This Issue:

Issue Theme:
The Orders of Ministry: Problems and Prospects

What Is an Order? Reflections on the Vocation of Elders and Deacons
Mark W. Stamn

The Order of Elders: Doomed to Failure or Hope for the Future?
Grant Hagiya

The Oral Roberts Option: The Case for Ordained Local Elders (and Local Deacons?) in The United Methodist Church
Ted A. Campbell

Connected and Sent Out: Implications of New Biblical Research for the United Methodist Diaconate
Benjamin L. Hartley

United Methodist Ordained Ministry in Ecumenical Perspective
Jeffrey Gros

Outside the Theme

The Grace of Letting Go: Theological Reflections on Forgiveness from a Space In-Between
Michael Nausner

The Church in Review

The Place of the General Agencies in The United Methodist Church
Russell E. Richey
Norman E. Dewire

A Word on the Word

Lectionary Study
Osvaldo D. Vena

Issues In: Online Resources in Theology and Religion
Bryan Stone

Book Review

The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children, by Danna Nolan Fewell (Abingdon, 2003)
Reviewer: Patricia Barrett

Index to Volume 24

Next Issue:
The Israeli–Palestinian Situation: Theological Interpretations