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United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching
on
the Nature, Mission and Faithfulness of the Church:

A Resource Paper
from
The UMC Committee on Faith and Order

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See "Abbreviations" on p. 54 below for short titles of the above and of other items cited.

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A Prefatory Word

Aspirants for deacon's and elder's orders sometimes muff the required question on the nature and mission of the church. That reality the drafter sadly learned while serving two terms on Boards of Ordained Ministry in two different annual conferences. The sentence outlining United Methodism's mission candidates know by heart. If pressed about the "nature" of the church, some tend to repeat the missional formula louder. They equate the nature of the church with the mission of the church and that with the mission of the UMC. Far too often, they reduce the church even further, to the local church and to its activist, evangelistic ministries.

In consequence, we sometimes get answers that are heretical, sectarian, un-Wesleyan and unfaithful. Accenting the mission of "making disciples," candidates verge on Pelagianism, as though members and clergy create the church. So they present a church out of human effort and self-sufficiency with little sense of prevenient grace, the operation of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, the communion of saints, and the Spirit-enabled pursuit of holiness by individuals in community! Equating the mission of the whole people of God with the UMC, candidates in sectarian fashion lose sight of the oneness of the church. Similarly, a presentistic and localized focus in many such answers neglects the church's catholicity, hardly good Wesleyan theology. And how do candidates speak unfaithfully?—by neglecting creedal affirmations, God's faithfulness to God's people and the rich Biblical images of the church—so forgetting the long witness to God's redemptive activity in Scripture and Tradition and the church's apostolicity. Is the church not holy, one, catholic, apostolic (or in Nicene order—one, holy, catholic and apostolic)? If coached or prompted with hints, candidates sometimes can recall Nicene or Apostles' phrasing but do little with it.

To guide our leadership, the candidates for ministry, United Methodist clergy and our members away from heretical, sectarian, un-Wesleyan and unfaithful notions about the church, the Committee on Faith and Order (**CFO**) has prepared this resource paper. As the **Acknowledgments and Permissions** indicate and as we explain further below, most of the material systematized here into a doctrine of the church comes from official United Methodist sources. This presentation of our UMC understanding of the church we think will serve those well who are preparing to write theology and doctrine papers for the Board of Ordained Ministry (BOM). It is our doctrine. We believe as well that our clergy and members can also make very good use of what we have here brought together, perhaps in Sunday school classes and adult study settings. For what follows shows that United Methodism possesses a rich and remarkably full store of doctrinal affirmations concerning the nature and mission of the church.

That fact would come as news to many. To Albert Outler's query, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church," both Methodists and non-Methodists have replied sometimes with less caution and ambiguity than he.¹ "No!!!!." Such an ecclesiological indictment or self-indictment undermines effective United Methodist dialogue with other Christians who take such theological self-understanding to be doctrinally foundational and prerequisite for effective conversations. More devastating, a lack of ecclesial self-awareness could mean that United Methodism makes its decisions on policy, organization, polity, order, mission and discipline without appropriate theological grounding for such work. Lacking the guidance that a comprehensive, faithful, systematic doctrine of the church would provide, general conferences, agencies, local churches and conferences may be tempted to legislate or act on impulse or to appropriate the latest organizational nostrum uncritically or to adopt faddish practices from time to time.

In its preliminary work on United Methodist understanding(s) of the church, the Committee on Faith and Order (**CFO**) has found that the common dismissive indictment may be unwarranted. United Methodism possesses affirmations and self-understandings that in aggregate make for quite a credible ecclesiology. However, these are scattered over a broad terrain, and appear in a great variety of forms, often in a piecemeal, disjointed, and incomplete fashion. Little effort has been made towards formulation of a comprehensive, integral vision of the reality of the church in United Methodist perspective.

It is toward that more systematic doctrine of the church this resource paper gestures.² It does so by culling ecclesiological statements from various places where United Methodism or its predecessor churches have spoken. The CFO offers this resource for use in the contexts in which United Methodism works and thinks theologically—especially for the Council of Bishops, boards of ordained ministry, seminaries, lay and clergy delegates to General Conference, the Connectional Table, and discerning laity and clergy across the connection. Who the CFO is, what it has been charged to do and be, and how it came to produce such a paper is detailed below, in the section entitled "The Committee on Faith and Order and its Work: Why a theological exploration now and why one specifically, ecclesiology?" There we also explain the question-answer format, use of authoritative doctrinal and theological statements, the structure of the exposition, and like matters.

¹ Outler began his essay, "In the way it is posed here this question is a trap for the unwary. The answer "yes" says too much; "no" says too little. "In a manner of speaking," which is more nearly accurate than the other two, seems, nevertheless, equivocal." Albert C. Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church," *The Doctrine of the Church*, Dow Kirkpatrick, ed. (New York and Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1964), 11-28.

² The CFO makes available a short and long version of this paper. The latter produces excerpts from United Methodist documents on which the former draws in its efforts at systematic exposition. These reproductions may be especially useful beyond the U.S. in contexts sometimes lacking a library of United Methodist materials.

The exercise of culling and ordering these ecclesiological affirmations has led the CFO to the provisional conclusion that United Methodists do indeed have a surprisingly full-orbed ecclesiology. But having to patch it together in this fashion has also served to alert us (the CFO) that we as a committee and United Methodism as a denomination have much work to do to bring our various affirmations about the church into a coherent, comprehensive and accessible form. This paper then functions diagnostically as well as constructively. In that regard, we seemed to find some surprising weakness in what ought to be a United Methodist “signature” emphasis, namely on the holiness of the church, and a similar slight of the church’s apostolicity. The schema then invites further reflection about United Methodist understanding(s) of the church:

- where do there seem to be gaps, overlaps, or missing connections?
- where might additions or more systematic expression be in order?
- to what concerns ought more formal status to be accorded?
- to what areas or dimensions of ecclesiology should United Methodism pay more attention?
- how might the church best order its doctrine on the church, provide a comprehensive and systematic account, and locate or place such a statement?

On such matters and on this resource paper as a whole, the CFO would be pleased to receive comment, suggestion, correction, and question. Such counsel will be helpful to the committee as it works on a more constructive draft statement on ecclesiology, conceived as a possible parallel to *By Water and the Spirit* and *This Holy Mystery* and on a catechism designed for general use within the church. Communications, including suggestions and criticisms, should be directed to Assistant General Secretary Rena Yocum at GBHEM.

The Nature, Mission and Faithfulness of the Church: A United Methodist Formulation

Colossians 1:15-20 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

John 15: 1-11 I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

1 Corinthians 12: 4-13 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Where do we as United Methodist look for ecclesiology, where do we begin?

Of course, Scripture is our first and last resort but the *Discipline* and other of our United Methodist formal statements provide us lenses with which to read the Bible. For instance,

“Article V—The Church” in United Methodism’s “Confession of Faith” affirms:

“We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.” (THE CONFESSION OF FAITH OF THE EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH, *Discipline*, 71).

Similarly, in the “Preamble” to “The Constitution” we declare,

“The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.

“The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.” (*Discipline*, 23).

How might the affirmations in these statements guide reflection about the church, a grasp of what membership entails, and an orientation to the church’s vocation in the world?

Our reflection about the church, the part of theology termed ecclesiology, appropriately attends to at least three overlapping major themes:

the *mission* of the church—the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in the Spirit which exists in and for the world, participates in the mission of God, the *missio Dei*, and lives the commission from Christ;

the *nature* of the church— the people of God, the body of Christ, and a fellowship in the Spirit made visible as the gathering of believers in which the Word is preached, sacraments administered, discipline exercised and the faithful taught (edified);

the *faithfulness* of the church—the communion of saints, Spirit-birther and Spirit-defined, confessing one faith, baptized in the Triune name, and so oriented to be one, holy, apostolic and catholic.

These three—the church’s nature, its mission, and its faithfulness—are inseparable but may be distinguished for purposes of teaching and learning.

Does the *Discipline* point to the inseparability of the church’s nature, mission and faithfulness?

It does. In many places, including in the final paragraphs of the delineation of our commitment to “Basic Christian Affirmations” (*Discipline*, 48):

“With other Christians, we declare the essential oneness of the church in Christ Jesus. This rich heritage of shared Christian belief finds expression in our hymnody and liturgies. Our unity is affirmed in the historic creeds as we confess one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. It is also experienced in joint ventures of ministry and in various forms of ecumenical cooperation.

Nourished by common roots of this shared Christian heritage, the branches of Christ's church have developed diverse traditions that enlarge our store of shared understandings. Our avowed ecumenical commitment as United Methodists is to gather our own doctrinal emphases into the larger Christian unity, there to be made more meaningful in a richer whole.

If we are to offer our best gifts to the common Christian treasury, we must make a deliberate effort as a church to strive for critical self-understanding. It is as Christians involved in ecumenical partnership that we embrace and examine our distinctive heritage.”

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

How do we recognize a church when we see one? And how do we know that what claims to be “church” is truly a church?

Our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith address just those concerns. “Article XIII—Of the Church” affirms:

“The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” (The Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church, *Discipline*, 66).

We make essentially the same declarations in the “Preamble” to “The Constitution,” as we have noted:

“The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.” (*Discipline*, 23).

To define the church in Trinitarian terms—in relation to the Lordship of Christ, the Word of God and the discipline of the Holy Spirit—points to its eternity, universality and invisibility as well as to its visibility?

Yes. By the Confession of Faith, “Article V—The Church,” we follow declarations about the church invisible or universal, with affirmations about the church visible:

“We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.” (The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, *Discipline*, 71).

So, we hold together our affirmations about the church as divinely instituted and as an earthly vessel, as one of the “means” of the saving grace that effects our salvation?

Yes, and so we sing these refrains of Charles Wesley:

Christ, from whom all blessings flow, perfecting the saints below, hear us, who thy nature share, who thy mystic body are.

Join us, in one spirit join, let us still receive of thine; still for more on thee we call, thou who fillest all in all.

Move and actuate and guide, diverse gifts to each divide; placed according to thy will, let us all our work fulfill;

Never from thy service move, needful to each other prove; use the grace on each bestowed, tempered by the art of God.

Many are we now, and one, we who Jesus have put on; there is neither bond nor free, male nor female, Lord, in thee.

Love, like death, hath all destroyed, rendered all distinctions void; names and sects and parties fall; thou, O Christ, art all in all! Charles Wesley, *Hymnal*, 550.³

Do we pray that the church as divinely established may be a redemptive factor in today’s world every time we commune?

Yes, we pray:

“Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine.

Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,

that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,

until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son Jesus Christ, with your Holy Spirit in your Holy Church,

all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever.⁴

³ *The United Methodist Hymnal* © 1992

⁴ A Service of Word and Table I (c) 1972, 1980, 1985, 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

What affirmations about the church might we draw from the General Conference approved document “By Water and the Spirit: a United Methodist Understanding of Baptism” (*Resolutions # 8031*)?

The Baptismal Covenant. In both the Old and New Testaments, God enters into covenant relationship with God's people. A covenant involves promises and responsibilities of both parties; it is instituted through a special ceremony and expressed by a distinguishing sign. By covenant God constituted a servant community of the people of Israel, promising to be their God and giving them the Law to make clear how they were to live. The circumcision of male infants is the sign of this covenant (Genesis 17:1-14; Exodus 24:1-12). In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God fulfilled the prophecy of a new covenant and called forth the church as a servant community (Jeremiah 31:31-34; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The baptism of infants and adults, both male and female, is the sign of this covenant.

....

Baptism brings us into union with Christ, with each other, and with the church in every time and place. Through this sign and seal of our common discipleship, our equality in Christ is made manifest (Galatians 3:27-28). We affirm that there is one baptism into Christ, celebrated as our basic bond of unity in the many communions that make up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6).

What affirmations about the church might we draw from the General Conference approved document “This Holy Mystery” and the guidance given congregations about communing and discipleship (in *Resolutions 8032*)?

Principle:

The sacraments are God’s gifts to the gathered body of believers to form the church into Christ’s body in ministry to the world. Through Holy Communion, the Holy Spirit works to shape our moral and ethical lives. In the ongoing process of conversion, we grow in personal and social holiness and are empowered to work for healing, compassion, reconciliation, justice, and peace.

....

Practice:

Holy Communion is to be conducted in ways that make apparent the inherent link between the Table and holy living, both individual and corporate. Participation in the Eucharist bears fruit in the world in attitudes and actions of personal and social holiness.

Communing with others in our congregations is a sign of community and mutual love between Christians throughout the church universal. The church must offer to the world a model of genuine community grounded in God’s deep love for every person. As we eat and drink, we

are motivated to act compassionately for those whose physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are unmet.

Receiving the bread and wine as products of divine creation reminds us of our duties of stewardship of the natural environment in a time when destruction and pollution imperil the earth, and unjust distribution of the planet's resources destroys the hopes and lives of millions.

As we gratefully receive God's abundant grace, we are challenged to accept fully our responsibility and accountability for renewal of the social order, liberation for the oppressed, and the coming of the realm of God.

How might such 'catholic' affirmations be particularized for today's communities of faith?

In ¶ 102 (*Discipline*, 47-48), we include the following statements about the church among the "Basic Christian Affirmations" to which we as United Methodists adhere:

"We understand ourselves to be part of Christ's universal church when by adoration, proclamation, and service we become conformed to Christ. We are initiated and incorporated into this community of faith by Baptism, receiving the promise of the Spirit that re-creates and transforms us. Through the regular celebration of Holy Communion, we participate in the risen presence of Jesus Christ and are thereby nourished for faithful discipleship.

We pray and work for the coming of God's realm and reign to the world and rejoice in the promise of everlasting life that overcomes death and the forces of evil.

With other Christians we recognize that the reign of God is both a present and future reality.

The church is called to be that place where the first signs of the reign of God are identified and acknowledged in the world. Wherever persons are being made new creatures in Christ, wherever the insights and resources of the gospel are brought to bear on the life of the world, God's reign is already effective in its healing and renewing power.

We also look to the end time in which God's work will be fulfilled. This prospect gives us hope in our present actions as individuals and as the Church. This expectation saves us from resignation and motivates our continuing witness and service.

We share with many Christian communions a recognition of the authority of Scripture in matters of faith, the confession that our justification as sinners is by grace through faith, and the sober realization that the church is in need of continual reformation and renewal.

We affirm the general ministry of all baptized Christians who share responsibility for building up the church and reaching out in mission and service to the world.

With other Christians, we declare the essential oneness of the church in Christ Jesus. This rich heritage of shared Christian belief finds expression in our hymnody and liturgies. Our unity is affirmed in the historic creeds as we confess one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. It is also experienced in joint ventures of ministry and in various forms of ecumenical cooperation. Nourished by common roots of this shared Christian heritage, the branches of Christ's church have developed diverse traditions that enlarge our store of shared understandings. Our avowed ecumenical commitment as United Methodists is to gather our own doctrinal emphases into the larger Christian unity, there to be made more meaningful in a richer whole. If we are to offer our best gifts to the common Christian treasury, we must make a deliberate effort as a church to strive for critical self-understanding. It is as Christians involved in ecumenical partnership that we embrace and examine our distinctive heritage.”

Does the church that is God’s creation and gift, initiated by His covenanting and redemptive acts, preeminently in Jesus Christ and sustained by the Spirit also necessarily take human, concrete and particular form?

Yes, hence the importance of speaking institutionally, concretely, descriptively—of a congregation of the faithful, of local churches and other on-the-ground communities of faithfulness, of the annual conference as the basic body of the church (*Discipline ¶ 33. Article II*), of United Methodism as a connection (world-wide), and of our specific ecumenical partnerships. Class meetings no longer constitute the local membership and local disciple-making unit, but the small group as Sunday school or Disciple Bible class, men’s or women’s gathering, prayer meeting remains vital. The term “denomination” is not our preferred self-description but clearly at least in the North American context, United Methodism is a denomination. So we participate in bi-lateral and multi-lateral conversations and dialogues as a Methodist and Wesleyan denominational body—defined by and oriented around our core Arminian doctrinal teachings—prevenient grace, universal atonement, free will, justification and assurance, sanctification and perfection, mission and service, law and gospel, faith and works. And we are in on-going exploration of what it might mean to be more self-consciously a world-wide church.

If organization graphs the church in the world, does ministry as well?

Yes, and here, too as United Methodists we show both our Wesleyan and ecumenical colors. Like our Catholic and Anglican forebears, we share the threefold ministry of bishops, elders and deacons towards which ecumenical conversations bid all churches to come (BEM). But

following Wesley, we also consecrate, commission, certify, license, appoint, bless or otherwise empower a great variety of other ministries. American Methodism began without ordained leaders; later licensed class leaders, stewards, exhorters, and local preachers; extended itself over the continent largely by lay initiative (by both women and men); and now recognizes and provides training for such an array of non-ordained offices that we apparently avoid listing them so as to avoid embarrassing omissions. And, of course, with the church universal we understand all Christians to be called by their baptism into the one ministry in Christ of and from which derive diverse gifts (*Discipline ¶¶ 126-131, 301-03*).

Do we recognize the church as well by what it does, how it presents itself, what it seeks to be?

Yes, the church exhibits itself in its mission and ministry. United Methodists generally gather the many expectations, responsibilities, and tasks of the church and its ministries under multiple headings—Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order in the 2008 *Discipline* and Service, Word, Sacrament, Order, Compassion and Justice in the 2012 *Discipline* (*Discipline ¶¶ 303.2, 329, 332*; deacons being ordained to Word, Service, Compassion and Justice; elders to Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service).⁵ Living these fully, faithfully, effectively, we participate in the church’s mission, in the *missio Dei*, and witness to our faith. In human communities where the Word is proclaimed, made present, lived and served and where the Word of Scripture shapes and informs life together and life in the world, the church makes manifest THE WORD, Christ the Word. The church bodies forth THE WORD, embodies THE WORD, lives as THE WORD’s body. “The Church is the communion of those who, by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God, who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response; it is the communion of the faithful.” [WCC 198: 4]

Note. Considerably further explication could be entered here on the church’s Nature, as well as under Mission, of church as the people of God, the body of Christ, fellowship in (or temple of) the Spirit, perhaps also on *koinonia* (communion, participation, fellowship, sharing, as per WCC 198, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*).

⁵. See the concerns raised in the section on “The Committee on Faith and Order” on the elaboration of ministerial categories.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

How does United Methodism now define its mission?

¶ 120. The Mission—The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.

How should we as United Methodists undertake our mission cognizant of God’s mission for the world (the *missio Dei*) and of the various ways in which persons and communities understand their relation to God.

¶ 121. Rationale for Our Mission—The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God’s grace and by exemplifying Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world. The fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world is the vision Scripture holds before us. The United Methodist Church affirms that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the Lord of all. As we make disciples, we respect persons of all religious faiths and we defend religious freedom for all persons. Jesus’ words in Matthew provide the Church with our mission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (28:19-20), and “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (22:37, 39). (*Discipline*, 91).

Are we fed for our mission and recommissioned when we commune?

Indeed, giving thanks to God, asking strength from the Spirit and invoking Christ’s name, we pray:

“Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Has Methodism historically understood its mission evangelistically, providentially and pneumatologically and as oriented towards raising a holy people?

Yes. John Wesley's missiological formulation (*Large Minutes*, Wesley, *Works* (Jackson) 8, 299, was:

Q.3. What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?

A. Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.

American Methodists reformulated that answer to fit a new church in a new nation:

Quest. 3. What may we reasonably believe to be God's Design, in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?

Answ. To reform the Continent, and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands. As a Proof hereof, we have seen in the Course of fifteen Years a great a glorious Work of God, from New-York through the Jersies, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, even to Georgia.

The framing of our mission as “disciple-making” may lead some to view our task as focused entirely on evangelism and church-growth. Is that all that we mean by disciple-making?

No! It certainly includes evangelism and members in joining a local church now pledge “To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service, and their witness;...” (*Discipline* ¶ 217). However, the *Discipline* proceeds to show that making disciples entails becoming and being disciples of Jesus Christ, with all the promises, provisions, expectations and hopes that discipleship entails:

¶ 122. The Process for Carrying Out Our Mission—We make disciples as we:

Proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;

Lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;

Nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley's Christian conferencing;

Send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and

Continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ. (*Discipline*, 92)

Disciple-making then includes concerns for discipline as well as discipling, for communities as well as individuals, for justice as well as for the new birth, for the care of the creation as well as the cure of souls?

Yes, the “General Rules” (*Discipline* ¶ 104)—one version of John Wesley’s mission statement for the people called Methodist—flesh out responsibilities for the individual. The *Discipline* then follows Part IV which treats the “Mission and Ministry of the Church” immediately with the “Social Principles” (Part V). The latter concludes with “Our Social Creed” and “A Companion Litany,” ¶ 166. Parts IV and V might well be understood as closely linked, “Social Principles” as detailing our Mission and Ministry for individuals, communities, conferences, United Methodism as a whole. And *The Book of Resolutions* might be seen as a set of position papers further elaborating and extending the tasks and values entailed in corporate disciple-making. So also might the pastoral letters issued by the Council of Bishops.

Our mission then is inherently corporate, connectional, ecumenical, and global as well as local?

Yes, *Discipline* ¶ 120 is explicated and amplified by the paragraphs that follow, ¶ 123 - ¶ 139. Note, for instance , ¶ 123 and ¶ 124.

¶ 123. The Global Nature of Our Mission—The Church seeks to fulfill its global mission through the Spirit-given servant ministries of all Christians, both lay and clergy. Faithfulness and effectiveness demand that all ministries in the Church be shaped by the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

¶ 124. Our Mission in the World—God’s self-revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ summons the church to ministry in the world through witness by word and deed in light of the church’s mission. The visible church of Christ as a faithful community of persons affirms the worth of all humanity and the value of interrelationship in all of God’s creation. In the midst of a sinful world, through the grace of God, we are brought to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. We become aware of the presence and life-giving power of God’s Holy Spirit. We live in confident expectation of the ultimate fulfillment of God’s purpose. We are called together for worship and fellowship and for the upbuilding of the Christian community. We advocate and work for the unity of the Christian church. We call all persons into discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

As servants of Christ we are sent into the world to engage in the struggle for justice and reconciliation. We seek to reveal the love of God for men, women, and children of all ethnic,

racial, cultural, and national backgrounds and to demonstrate the healing power of the gospel with those who suffer.

Do our ecumenical commitments, therefore, typically call us into mission together?

Yes. Under “The Mission and Ministry of the Church,” the *Discipline* devotes a major section to “The Ministry of All Christians.” Several paragraphs elaborate the ecumenical understanding of ministry and mission:

¶ **126.** *The Heart of Christian Ministry*—The heart of Christian ministry is Christ’s ministry of outreaching love. Christian ministry is the expression of the mind and mission of Christ by a community of Christians that demonstrates a common life of gratitude and devotion, witness and service, celebration and discipleship. All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment. The forms of this ministry are diverse in locale, in interest, and in denominational accent, yet always catholic in spirit and outreach.

And the UMC puts this commitment into action in several ways. For instance, the UMC with the other nine members of CUIC (Churches Uniting in Christ) has committed itself to various ways of working towards unity. Two of those commitments are

Engagement together in Christ's mission on a regular and intentional basis, especially a shared mission to combat racism. The church engages in Christ's mission through worship, proclamation of the gospel, evangelism, education and action that embodies God's justice, peace and love. The commitment made by the members of Churches Uniting in Christ includes all of these, so that hearts and minds may be changed. The participating churches will also recognize, however, a particular and emphatic call to "erase racism" by challenging the system of white privilege that has so distorted life in this society and in the churches themselves. Indeed, this call is a hallmark of the new relationship.

and

Intentional commitment to promote unity with wholeness and to oppose all marginalization and exclusion in church and society based on such things as race, age, gender, forms of disability, sexual orientation and class.⁶

⁶ <http://www.cuicinfo.org/whatiscuic/cuic.html>

Do the complex relations between ecumenism and mission pertain beyond Christianity to how United Methodists interact with other religious communities as General Conference affirmed by lodging guidelines in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012*?

The vision of a “worldwide community of communities” commends itself to many Christians as a way of being together with persons of different religious convictions in a pluralistic world.

Ultimately, this is to shift the question from, “To which church do we belong?” to “Have we participated in promoting the work of the Holy Spirit?” That suggests that we United Methodist Christians, not just individually, but corporately, are called to be neighbors with other faith communities (such as Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Native American), and to work with them to create a human community, a set of relationships between people at once interdependent and free, in which there is love, mutual respect, and justice.

“Dialogue” is the word that has come to signify an approach to persons of other faith communities that takes seriously both the call to witness and the command to love and be neighbors. To be engaged in dialogue is to see witnessing and neighborliness as interrelated activities. Rather than a one-sided address, dialogue combines witnessing with listening. It is the intentional engagement with persons who hold other faith perspectives for purposes of mutual understanding, cooperation, and transformation.

Through dialogue with persons of other faith communities, new insights are received regarding God’s activity in the world today, the divine purpose for humankind as a whole, and the place of the Christian community within these purposes. It is also a common experience for Christians to feel the need to express their own faith with greater clarity. We trust in the Holy Spirit to make known new and different insights through such encounters.

The intent in developing interreligious relationships is not to amalgamate all faiths into one religion. We Christians have not interest in such syncretism. To engage in interreligious dialogue is neither to endorse nor to deny the faith of other people. In dialogue we mutually seek insight into the wisdom of other traditions and we hope to overcome our fears and misapprehensions. Far from requiring a lessening of commitment to Christ, effective dialogue is only possible when one’s own faith is strong, and may ultimately serve to deepen or extend it.

This interreligious engagement challenges United Methodist Christians to think in new ways about our lives in the broader human community, about our mission, evangelism, service, and

our life together within the Christian church. We seek to promote peace and harmony with persons of other religious traditions in our various towns, cities, and neighborhoods. Yet we do not hide our differences, nor avoid conflicts, but seek to make them constructive. In each place, we share our lives with each other, we witness and are witnessed to, we invite others into the Christian community and we are invited into theirs. Our prayer is that the lives of all in each place will be enriched by the differences of others, that a new sense of community may emerge, and that others may receive the gift of God in Christ, while we receive the gifts which have been given them.⁷

We gather the responsibilities and duties of ministry with six rubrics and so ordain elders to word, sacrament, order and service and deacons to word, service, compassion and justice.⁸ How do these areas of ministry— which belong to the whole people of God, to the laity as well as the clergy—prescribe our mission?

Word (preaching, teaching) sacrament (worship, praise), order (discipline, fellowship) and service (mission, evangelism) do define the church's mission. By preaching we mean all the ways in which the Good News of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, taught, communicated, instilled and published. By worship we point to the many aspects of our praise, formal and informal, corporate and personal, by which we glorify God. Methodists employ the word "discipline" to refer to the various regimens for faithful living by which we order and govern our lives and support one another in our Christian walk, as individuals, as congregations, as a church. The word has meant so much to us that we name the book by which we live as a church, *The Discipline*. John Wesley's "General Rules," made constitutional for us by the "Restrictive Rules" represent the heart of Methodist discipline. They provide guidelines, explicitly focused on both justice and compassion and, when interpreted for today (as in the Social Principles), for living fully in the Spirit personally and as communities. Mission stands for the church's witness to and in the world. In various ways throughout the *Discipline* United Methodism affirms mission to be its primary task. The Preamble affirms that the "church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world . . ." And United Methodism's official mission statement is indeed a statement about mission (*Discipline* ¶ 120 above).

⁷ "Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships," *Resolutions*, 269-79.

⁸ See the concerns raised in the section on "The Committee on Faith and Order" on the elaboration of ministerial categories.

How does Scripture image the several dimensions of the mission of the church?

The witness to Christ's Reconciliation as *kerygma*, with a key biblical image for the church as the Body of Christ. The edification of believers as *oikodomia*, with key biblical ecclesial images of Creation of the Spirit and Gifted by the Spirit.

The worship of God as *latouria*, with key biblical images for the church as the People of God and the (living) Temple of God.

The fellowship of Believers as *koinonia*, with various biblical images for the church, including the Communion of the Saints/Spirit-filled community, the household of God, God's holy people, the bride of the Lamb, and the new Jerusalem.

Service to the World as *diakonia*, with key biblical images for the church as the New Creation Body of Christ, the disciples, and servants/proclaimers of the kingdom.

[WCC 198 employs four master "Biblical Insights": The Church as People of God, The Church as the Body of Christ, The Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit and The Church as Koinonia/Communion. In *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) Paul Minear gathered the images under the fourfold major rubrics of People of God, New Creation, Fellowship in Faith, and Body of Christ.]

What other images of the church does Scripture offer?

Elsewhere Paul Minear again gathered various Biblical images but under ten groupings: Saints and sanctified, Believers and faithful, Slaves and servants, People of God, Kingdom and temple, Household and family, New Exodus, Vineyard and flock, One body in Christ, and New Humanity. See Paul Minear, "Church, Idea of," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1: 607-17.

The United Methodist Church now highlights (and The Methodist Church earlier highlighted) particular missional challenges for quadrennial emphasis. Do we now?

Yes, the church now terms them "The Four Areas of Focus." It affirms, that they "express the vision and yearnings of the people of The United Methodist Church" and "focus the work of making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world":

- Combating the diseases of poverty by improving health globally.
- Engaging in ministry with the poor.
- Creating new places for new people and revitalizing existing congregations.
- Developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world.

Has mission to and ministry with the poor been a signature Christian and Wesleyan commitment?

Yes, and we recall it every time we take Communion and hear these words in the Great Thanksgiving:

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ.
 Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor,
 to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovering of sight to the blind,
 to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
 and to announce that the time had come
 when you would save your people.
 He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners.
 By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection
 you gave birth to your Church,
 delivered us from slavery to sin and death,
 and made with us a new covenant by water and the spirit.⁹

Does the church more generally share our commitment to mission to and ministry with the poor?

Yes. The WCC statement on *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, to which all member churches are asked to respond, includes these affirmations with respect to mission:

As Christ's mission encompassed the preaching of the Word of God and the commitment to care for those suffering and in need, so the apostolic Church in its mission from the beginning combined preaching of the Word, the call to repentance, faith, baptism and diakonia. This the Church understands as an essential dimension of its identity. The Church in this way signifies, participates in, and anticipates the new humanity God wants, and also serves to proclaim God's grace in human situations and needs until Christ comes in glory (cf. Mt 25:31).

⁹ A Service of Word and Table I (c) 1972, 1980, 1985, 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

Because the servanthood of Christ entails suffering it is evident (as expressed in the New Testament writings) that the witness (martyria) of the Church will entail - for both individuals and for the community - the way of the cross, even to the point of martyrdom (cf. Mt 10:16-33; 16:24-28).

The Church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalised. This entails critically analysing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation. The Church is called to proclaim the words of hope and comfort of the Gospel, by its works of compassion and mercy (cf. Lk.4:18-19). This faithful witness may involve Christians themselves in suffering for the sake of the Gospel. The Church is called to heal and reconcile broken human relationships and to be God's instrument in the reconciliation of human division and hatred (cf. 2Cor. 5:18-21). It is also called, together with all people of goodwill, to care for the integrity of creation in addressing the abuse and destruction of God's creation, and to participate in God's healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity. [¶¶ 38-40]

THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE CHURCH

What do we confess with Christians throughout the ages and across the world concerning the church?

“We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church.” (The Nicene Creed).

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints” (The Apostles’ Creed, *Hymnal*, 880, 881).

John Wesley, *A Letter to a Roman Catholic* (1749), §9:

I believe that Christ by his apostles gathered unto himself a Church, to which he has continually added such as shall be saved;¹⁰ that this Catholic, that is, universal Church, extending to all nations and all ages, is holy in all its members, who have fellowship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that they have fellowship with the holy angels, who constantly minister to these heirs of salvation;¹¹ and with all the living members of Christ on earth, as well as all who are departed in his faith and fear.¹²

Do United Methodist doctrinal statements echo John Wesley and the formulations of the ancient creeds?

Yes, as noted “Article V—The Church” in our “Confession of Faith” affirms:

“We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. (*Discipline*, 71).

¹⁰ See Acts 2:47.

¹¹ Heb. 1:14.

¹² BCP, Communion, Prayer after offering. Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 10, 82.

One

What further do we as United Methodists affirm about one, holy, catholic and apostolic, these “marks” or “notes” of the church? What do we say about the church’s oneness, for instance?

In the “Preamble” to “The Constitution” we declare as we have noted, “The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.” (*Discipline*, 23).

By this statement, we recognize the inseparability of the church’s nature as the body of Christ and its world redemptive mission. By its nature, the church participates in God’s mission in the world, the *missio Dei*. By its mission, it labors for the unity for which Christ prayed (John 17) so that the world might believe. In various places in the *Discipline*, in our *Book of Resolutions* and other official documents, we speak of living out this vocation of unity. For instance, again in “The Constitution,” we assert:

“¶ 6. **Article VI.** Ecumenical Relations—As part of the church universal, The United Methodist Church believes that the Lord of the church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward unity; and therefore it will seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life: through world relationships with other Methodist churches and united churches related to The Methodist Church or The Evangelical United Brethren Church, through councils of churches, and through plans of union and covenantal relationships with churches of Methodist or other denominational traditions.” (*Discipline*, 25).

How do we unpack these affirmations of the church’s unity?

In Part III of the *Discipline*, the section entitled “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” we claim among our “Basic Christian Affirmations”:

“We affirm the general ministry of all baptized Christians who share responsibility for building up the church and reaching out in mission and service to the world.

“With other Christians, we declare the essential oneness of the church in Christ Jesus. This rich heritage of shared Christian belief finds expression in our hymnody and liturgies. Our unity is affirmed in the historic creeds as we confess one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. It is also experienced in joint ventures of ministry and in various forms of ecumenical cooperation.

“Nourished by common roots of this shared Christian heritage, the branches of Christ’s church have developed diverse traditions that enlarge our store of shared understandings. Our

avowed ecumenical commitment as United Methodists is to gather our own doctrinal emphases into the larger Christian unity, there to be made more meaningful in a richer whole. "If we are to offer our best gifts to the common Christian treasury, we must make a deliberate effort as a church to strive for critical self-understanding. It is as Christians involved in ecumenical partnership that we embrace and examine our distinctive heritage." (*Discipline*, 48).

How do we put a premium on the church's unity as United Methodists?

In "Our Theological Task" section of the *Discipline*, we make "Ecumenical Commitment" a separate and major emphasis, the first paragraphs of which affirm:

"Christian unity is founded on the theological understanding that through faith in Jesus Christ we are made members-in-common of the one body of Christ. Christian unity is not an option; it is a gift to be received and expressed.

"United Methodists respond to the theological, biblical, and practical mandates for Christian unity by firmly committing ourselves to the cause of Christian unity at local, national, and world levels. We invest ourselves in many ways by which mutual recognition of churches, of members, and of ministries may lead us to sharing in Holy Communion with all of God's people.

"Knowing that denominational loyalty is always subsumed in our life in the church of Jesus Christ, we welcome and celebrate the rich experience of United Methodist leadership in church councils and consultations, in multilateral and bilateral dialogues, as well as in other forms of ecumenical convergence that have led to the healing of churches and nations.

"We see the Holy Spirit at work in making the unity among us more visible." (*Discipline*, 88).

To which sections of the Bible might we point to help us understand the oneness of the church?

The unity of the church is grounded in the One God (Deuteronomy 6), affirmed by Jesus (Mark 12), and in the teachings of the apostles in Ephesians 4 (one Lord, one faith, one baptism).¹³

¹³ John Wesley comments as follows on Ephesians 4:4-6:

1. I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord - Imprisoned for his sake and for your sakes; for the sake of the gospel which he had preached amongst them. This was therefore a powerful motive to them to comfort him under it by their obedience.
3. endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit - That mutual union and harmony, which is a fruit of the Spirit. The bond of peace is love.
4. There is one body - The universal church, all believers throughout the world. One Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father - The ever-blessed Trinity. One hope - Of heaven.

The unity of the church echoes the unity of the One God; at the same time, the divisions within the church betray our confession of belief in One God (theologically) and have subsequent sociological implications, usually having to do with the abuse of human power. This unity is a gift of God (I Corinthians 12), and is never a human achievement, right or claim. Its doctrinal function---related to the nature of God---has a corresponding practical function (and here I do not privilege the doctrinal over the practical); namely, our unity is displayed in our connection with each other. This has profound roots in the history of Methodism. For United Methodists, unity lives in tension with a democratic process (in our governing bodies, for example, at every level); the challenge is to preserve a unity amidst diversity that differs from uniformity. The practical expression of unity is the love of God and neighbor. Our complacency with division indicates a lack of love, and is finally a barrier to the mission of the gospel in the midst of unbelief (John 17). (Kenneth Carter).

5. One outward baptism.

6. One God and Father of all - That believe. Who is above all - Presiding over all his children, operating through them all by Christ, and dwelling in all by his Spirit. *Explanatory notes upon the New Testament. By John Wesley, M. A. Late Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford.* (London: printed by William Bowyer, MDCCLV. [1755]), 515.

Catholic

‘Catholic,’ is that an affirmation that we as Protestants and as Methodists readily make?

Well, if we follow John Wesley we do. In his sermon “Of the Church” he affirmed:

“What is the church? The catholic or universal church is all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be ‘one body’, united by ‘one spirit’; having ‘one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.’

“That part of this great body, of the universal church, which inhabits any one kingdom or nation, we may properly term a ‘national’ church, as the Church of France, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland. A smaller part of the universal church are the Christians that inhabit one city or town, as the church of Ephesus, and the rest of the seven churches mentioned in the Revelation. Two or three Christian believers united together are a church in the narrowest sense of the word. Such was the church in the house of Philemon, and that in the house of Nymphas, mentioned Col. 4:15. A particular church may therefore consist of any number of members, whether two or three, or two or three millions. But still, whether it be larger or smaller, the same idea is to be preserved. They are one body, and have one Spirit, one Lord, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”¹⁴

Why is there an asterisk after the word “catholic” in the creeds (Communion and Baptismal services and section on Affirmations of Faith, *Hymnal*, pp. 7, 35, 41, 46, 880, 881, 882)?¹⁵

United Methodism footnotes “catholic” with the explanatory term “universal” to avoid confusing members, some of whom might presume that they are being invited to confess belief in the Roman Catholic Church. The church is catholic, or universal, in that its core identity is found in the whole and not merely in the fragments of its local expression (as essential as local or indigenous expression is). John Wesley summoned Methodists to a “Catholic Spirit” founded on the common witness of the orthodox heritage, unity in essentials, an orientation toward common mission, a disciplined life, and bonds of love. The catholic

¹⁴ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, “The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 3, *Sermons*, 3, 50-51. Hereinafter this edition is abbreviated Wesley, *Works*.

¹⁵ A Service of Word and Table I (c) 1972, 1980, 1985, 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

spirit finds expression as we participate together, in Wesley's words, "in the work of God." A catholic spirit is in contrast to congregationalism or sectarianism (even as these realities are correctives, at times, to historical aberrations). At its best, Methodist is a global church or movement, holding in tension a set of core beliefs and practices with a freedom to share and live the gospel in ways that are appropriate in particular missional contexts (one thinks of the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15 or Paul's meditation on Christian liberty in Galatians 5). (Kenneth Carter).

How do we formalize such understandings of "catholic"?

In Part III of the *Discipline*, the section entitled "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task," we claim among our "Basic Christian Affirmations":

"We understand ourselves to be part of Christ's universal church when by adoration, proclamation, and service we become conformed to Christ. We are initiated and incorporated into this community of faith by Baptism, receiving the promise of the Spirit that re-creates and transforms us. Through the regular celebration of Holy Communion, we participate in the risen presence of Jesus Christ and are thereby nourished for faithful discipleship." (*Discipline*, 47-48).

Do we baptize on behalf of the church "catholic" and does the Baptismal Covenant give expression to the catholicity of the church?

Yes. The Baptismal Covenant begins with the affirmation that by the Sacrament "we are initiated into Christ's holy church." The candidates, parents or other sponsors are then addressed "On behalf of the whole church" in a confession of sin and profession of faith. After the baptisms, the pastor invites the congregation to welcome the new sisters and brothers into the church catholic and to affirm:

"Through baptism you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new creation and made to share in Christ's royal priesthood. We are all one in Christ Jesus. With joy and thanksgiving we welcome you as *members* of the family of Christ." (*Hymnal*, 39, 40, 43).¹⁶

"By Water and the Spirit" explains, "Baptism brings us into union with Christ, with each other, and with the church in every time and place. Through this sign and seal of our common

¹⁶ Baptismal Covenants I, II © 1976, 1090, 1985, 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House Used by permission.

discipleship, our equality in Christ is made manifest (Galatians 3:27-28). We affirm that there is one baptism into Christ, celebrated as our basic bond of unity in the many communions that make up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6).” (*Resolutions*, 931).

If individual members are part of the church catholic are United Methodist congregations as well?

Indeed. In describing “The Local Church” the *Discipline* speaks of its catholic nature:

¶ 203. *Relation to the Wider Church*—The local church is a connectional society of persons who have been baptized, have professed their faith in Christ, and have assumed the vows of membership in The United Methodist Church. They gather in fellowship to hear the Word of God, receive the sacraments, praise and worship the triune God, and carry forward the work that Christ has committed to his church. Such a society of believers, being within The United Methodist Church and subject to its Discipline, is also an inherent part of the church universal, which is composed of all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and which in the Apostles’ Creed we declare to be the holy catholic church. (*Discipline*, 144).

In confessing the church as “catholic” do we commit ourselves as United Methodists to policies of inclusion?

Yes. Two of the seven articles of The Constitution explicitly so commit us:

¶ 4. **Article IV.** Inclusion of the Church—The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking the vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection. In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition.¹⁷

¶ 5. **Article V.** Racial Justice—The United Methodist Church proclaims the value of each person as a unique child of God and commits itself to the healing and wholeness of all

¹⁷ Footnotes identifying texts that have been amended and/or on which the Judicial Council has rendered a ruling are typically omitted.

persons. The United Methodist Church recognizes that the sin of racism has been destructive to its unity throughout its history. Racism continues to cause painful division and marginalization. The United Methodist Church shall confront and seek to eliminate racism, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large. The United Methodist Church shall work collaboratively with others to address concerns that threaten the cause of racial justice at all times and in all places. (*Discipline*, 24).

Does the catholicity of United Methodism also find expression in its self-understanding as by nature both connectional and global?

Yes. In elaborating the “Nurture and Mission of the Church” among our “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases” (Part III “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task” ¶ 102, p. 52) specifies that

“The outreach of the church springs from the working of the Spirit. As United Methodists, we respond to that working through a connectional polity based upon mutual responsiveness and accountability. Connectional ties bind us together in faith and service in our global witness, enabling faith to become active in love and intensifying our desire for peace and justice in the world. “

A similar formulation is to be found in ¶ 123. “The Global Nature of Our Mission” and in paragraphs added in 2012 (¶¶ 101,125) which speak of “a connectional covenant” binding United Methodists throughout the world “in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission” and provides “A Companion Litany to our Covenant for the Worldwide United Methodist Church.” ¶ 125 gestures towards a wider catholicity—affirming and celebrating “our relationships, covenants, and partnership with autonomous, affiliated autonomous, affiliated united covenanting, and concordat churches” and “other partners in the Wesleyan and ecumenical Christian families.” However, the overall tone of ¶ 125 and the phrasing of the new Litany tend towards an intra-denominational understanding of the “connectional covenant.”¹⁸

Note the amplification in ¶132 The Journey of a Connectional People – which has a somewhat different tone:

“Connectionalism in the United Methodist tradition is multi-leveled, global in scope, and local in thrust. Our connectionalism is not merely a linking of one charge conference to another. It is rather a vital web of interactive relationships.”

¹⁸. See concerns raised in the section on “The Committee on Faith and Order” on the tension between the covenantal and ecumenical formulations of catholicity.

“We are connected by sharing a common tradition of faith, including our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules (104); by sharing together a constitutional polity, including a leadership of general superintendency; by sharing a common mission, which we seek to carry out by working together in and through conferences that reflect the inclusive and missional character of our fellowship; by sharing a common ethos that characterizes our distinctive way of doing things.”

An even more detailed and richer formulation of United Methodism’s connective nature, with the same title as the current ¶132 appeared in the 1988 *Discipline*, is displayed in the Appendix (below) and might fruitfully be reclaimed.

Does our understanding of the church’s catholicity and of God’s redemptive love for God’s creation have implications for how United Methodism interacts with other religious communities?

So General Conference affirmed in adopting and readopting “Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses”:

As United Methodist Christians reflect anew on our faith and seek guidance in our witness to and encounter with our new neighbors, we rediscover that God who has acted in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the whole world, is also Creator of all humankind, the “one God and Father of all, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all” (Eph. 4:6 GNT). Here Christians confront a profound mystery—the awareness of God who is related to all creation and at work in the whole of it, and the experience of God who has acted redemptively for the whole creation in Jesus Christ. Christians witness to God in Jesus Christ in the confidence that here all people can find salvation and in the trust that because of what we know of God in Jesus, God deals graciously and lovingly with all people everywhere.¹⁹

¹⁹ “Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships,” *Resolutions*, 273.

Apostolic

Does the “Constitution” speak as explicitly about United Methodism being apostolic?

No. However, ¶ 3. Article III, ¶ 17. Article I, and ¶ 18. Article II in referencing the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith and extending the protection of the “Restrictive Rules” to these standards do commit United Methodism to the maintenance of an orthodox doctrinal witness.

So also ¶ 19. Article III extends the same protection to our “itinerant general superintendency,” the bishops, an office charged from “apostolic times” (¶ 401) with various responsibilities, including that of transmitting the apostolic faith (¶ 403). The bishops are “set apart for a ministry of servant leadership, general oversight and supervision (¶ 401). As followers of Jesus Christ, bishops are authorized to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church.” (¶ 403.1) The six paragraphs that explicate this charge dwell on the missional responsibilities of transmitting the faith, on the office’s role in leading the church into discipleship, and on the personal gifts and grace requisite for such apostolic faithfulness.

When we affirm the church to be apostolic are we saying something about apostolic succession?

No! The church is apostolic as its life is traced to the ministry and teachings of the apostles and carries on their missionary work and faithfully transmits their Gospel message. This is not a reality that can be reduced to a historic apostolic succession---the spirit blows where it will (John 3)—and yet the tradition of the apostles certainly has, as its core, the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican expressions of life, doctrine and work, and each stream has shaped the Wesleyan movement. This is what we would call the great tradition or the living tradition, and it contains many of the resources that sustain our faith; at the same time, there is always a need for reformation, prophetic witness and “traditioned innovation”. The apostolic mission of the church finds its expression in the Methodist practice of itinerancy, which is rooted in the sending of the apostles by Jesus and in Wesley’s actions, but is at the same time always in need of evaluation and revision. (Kenneth Carter).

Is it presumptuous or novel to speak of our itinerancy as apostolic?

Indeed not. Not long before his death, Bishop Asbury spoke to the Genesee [New York] Annual Conference “on the subject of apostolical, missionary Methodist Episcopal Church

government.” He asserted, “I am bold to say that the apostolic order of things was lost in the first century, when Church governments were adulterated and had much corruption attached to them. . . . In 1784 an apostolical form of Church government was formed in the United States of America at the first General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland.” He continued in that vein, remarking on “the traveling apostolic order and ministry that is found in our very constitution.”

Asbury made it to the 1816 General Conference in a casket but anticipating his death wrote earlier that year to those who would be assembled:

Most dearly beloved in the Lord:

My loving confidential Sons in the Gospel in of the grace of God, in Christ Jesus; Grace rest upon you! The God of glory cover your assembly and direct all your acts and deliberations for the Apostolic order and establishment of the Church of God in holy succession to the end of time. Only recollect as far as your observation or information will go, what God hath done by us ... in about 70 years in Europe and less than 50 years in America, and what wonderful things he may do for us and our successors in future years if we stand fast in the Gospel doctrine and pure Apostolic ordination, discipline and government into which we have been called and now stand. (JLFA 3, 475-92; 532).

Then apostolic faithfulness for Wesleyans and Methodists involves, at least in part, the faithful practice of ministry as itinerant, sent, missional?

Yes, and Methodists can look to various commissioning acts by Jesus, in the sending narratives of the Synoptics, but also in like passages in John 15: 1-11²⁰ already cited but also

²⁰ John Wesley comments as follows on John 15-1-11:

1. I am the true vine – So ‘the true bread’ (John vi. 32): that is most excellent.
2. Every one that beareth fruit, he purifieth - by obeying the truth, 1 Pet. i, 22; and by inward or outward sufferings, Heb. xii, 10, 11. So purity and fruitfulness help each other. That it may bear more fruit - For this is one of the noblest rewards God can bestow on former acts of obedience, to make us yet more holy, and fit for farther and more eminent service.
3. Ye are clean - All of you, to whom I now speak, are purged from the guilt and power of sin; by the word - Which, applied by the Spirit, is the grand instrument of purifying the soul.
4. Abide in me - Ye who are now pure by living faith, producing all holiness; by which alone ye can be in me.
5. I am the vine, ye are the branches - Our Lord in this whole passage speaks of no branches but such as are, or at least were once, united to him by living faith.
6. If any one abide not in me - By living faith; not by Church communion only. He may thus abide in Christ, and be withered all the time, and cast into the fire at last. He is cast out - Of the vineyard, the invisible Church. Therefore he was in it once.
7. If ye abide in me, ye shall ask - Prayers themselves are a fruit of faith, and they produce more fruit.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' John 20: 19-23

Do United Methodism's "Theological Guidelines" and understanding of "Our Theological Task" bear on our apostolicity?

Indeed, the entirety of ¶ 105 might be considered a Wesleyan statement of the doctrinal or teaching dimension of the apostolic task, which is, living faithfully, courageously, and energetically out of Biblical witness. The section "Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria" summarizes how we understand the doctrinal or theological force of apostolic:

"As United Methodists, we have an obligation to bear a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the Church's life and witness. To fulfill this obligation, we reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance, striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time.

"Two considerations are central to this endeavor: the sources from which we derive our theological affirmations and the criteria by which we assess the adequacy of our understanding and witness.

"Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.

8. So shall ye be my disciples - Worthy of the name. To be a disciple of Christ is both the foundation and height of Christianity.

9. Abide ye in my love - Keep your place in my affection. See that ye do not forfeit that invaluable blessing. How needless a caution, if it were impossible for them not to abide therein?

10. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love - On these terms, and no other, ye shall remain the objects of my special affection.

11. That my joy might remain in you - The same joy which I feel in loving the Father, and keeping his commandments. *Explanatory notes upon the New Testament. By John Wesley, M. A. Late Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford.* (London: printed by William Bowyer, MDCCLV. [1755]), 270-71.

So is the quadrilateral about apostolicity?

Yes! The explication of the quadrilateral in the *Discipline* describes a way of living faithfully out of the Biblical witness, in a continuous process, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and of finding language, image, metaphor, practice, commitment and program by which the Word of God is made word for today:

“Scripture is primary, revealing the Word of God ‘so far as it is necessary for our salvation.’ Therefore, our theological task, in both its critical and constructive aspects, focuses on disciplined study of the Bible.

“To aid his study of the Bible and deepen his understanding of faith, Wesley drew on Christian tradition, in particular the Patristic writings, the ecumenical creeds, the teachings of the Reformers, and the literature of contemporary spirituality.

“Thus, tradition provides both a source and a measure of authentic Christian witness, though its authority derives from its faithfulness to the biblical message.

“The Christian witness, even when grounded in Scripture and mediated by tradition, is ineffectual unless understood and appropriated by the individual. To become our witness, it must make sense in terms of our own reason and experience.

“For Wesley, a cogent account of the Christian faith required the use of reason, both to understand Scripture and to relate the biblical message to wider fields of knowledge. He looked for confirmations of the biblical witness in human experience, especially the experiences of regeneration and sanctification, but also in the "common sense" knowledge of everyday experience.

“The interaction of these sources and criteria in Wesley’s own theology furnishes a guide for our continuing theological task as United Methodists. In that task Scripture, as the constitutive witness to the wellsprings of our faith, occupies a place of primary authority among these theological sources.

“In practice, theological reflection may also find its point of departure in tradition, experience, or rational analysis. What matters most is that all four guidelines be brought to bear in faithful, serious, theological consideration. Insights arising from serious study of the Scriptures and tradition enrich contemporary experience. Imaginative and critical thought enables us to understand better the Bible and our common Christian history.” *Discipline*, 80-81.

Holy

Holiness has been a hallmark Methodist doctrine. What did Mr. Wesley say about the holiness of the church?

“How many wonderful reasons have been found out for giving it this appellation! One learned man informs us, ‘The church is called holy because Christ the head of it is holy.’ Another eminent author affirms, ‘It is so called because all its ordinances are designed to promote holiness’; and yet another, ‘Because our Lord intended that all the members of the church should be holy.’ Nay, the shortest and the plainest reason that can be given, and the only true one, is: the church is called ‘holy’ because it is holy; because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as he that called them is holy. How clear is this! If the church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If this whole body be animated by one spirit, and endued with one faith and one hope of their calling; then he who has not that spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of this body. It follows that not only no common swearer, no sabbath-breaker, no drunkard, no whoremonger, no thief, no liar, none that lives in any outward sin; but none that is under the power of anger or pride, no lover of the world—in a word, none that is dead to God—can be a member of his church.”²¹

Where and in what ways does United Methodism move beyond the formulae of the Confession to specify the holiness of the church?

The Preamble of “The Constitution” speaks of the church as “the redeemed and redeeming fellowship” seeking under the “discipline of the Holy Spirit” “to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world” (23) And ¶ 21. **Article V**, one of the “Restrictive Rules” references and protects the received Wesleyan guidelines for being a holy church, namely the “General Rules of Our United Societies.” So Part III “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task” affirms “For Wesley there is no religion but social religion, holiness but social holiness. The communal forms of faith in the Wesleyan tradition not only promote personal growth; they also equip and mobilize us for mission and service to the world.” Then follows a section devoted to “Doctrine and Discipline in the Christian Life” which treats the “General Rules,” insists on the constant linkable in the Wesleyan tradition of “Christian doctrine and Christian living,” (p. 52) and then connects “General Rules and Social Principles.” (p. 53)

²¹ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, A The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 3, *Sermons*, 3, 55-56.

Hymnal

In the "Great Thanksgiving, "we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us." The prayer concludes, in eschatological, missional bidding asking the Holy Trinity to make recipients into a holy church:

"By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ come in final victory and we feast at this heavenly banquet, Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and for ever."

Recurrent throughout the Baptismal Covenant are Pentecostal themes, images invocations, declarations and thanksgivings for and about "Christ's holy church," the giving of the Holy Spirit individually and collectively, washing by water and the Spirit, the holiness then made possible by adoption and incorporation, and growing into that holiness.

So for Wesleyans, then, does confessing or professing the church to be holy means our committing ourselves to holy living, individually and collectively and seeking both personal and social holiness?

Yes, indeed, as the following excerpts from the constitutionally protected "General Rules" so indicate (**¶ 104, 76-78**):

Such a society is no other than "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."

...

There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies: "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits.

It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, . . .

...

Secondly: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men:

To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison.

To their souls, by instructing, reproofing, or exhorting all we have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine that "we are not to do good unless *our hearts be free to it.*"

By doing good, especially to them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying one of another, helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only.

By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed.

By running with patience the race which is set before them, denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should say all manner of evil of them *falsely*, for the Lord's sake.

It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are:

The public worship of God.

The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.

The Supper of the Lord.

Family and private prayer.

Searching the Scriptures.

Fasting or abstinence.

Do we explicate or translate these disciplines for holy living—for personal and social holiness—for a digital age and an interdependent world?

In many, many ways United Methodist laity and clergy give weekly and daily expression to holy living for today's society. Within the *Discipline* ¶¶ 122-36 delineate the many dimensions of being holy communities, as does ¶ 216, "The Meaning of Membership." ¶ 127. *The Ministry of the Laity*, for instance, affirms: "The ministry of the laity flows from a commitment to Christ's outreaching love. . . . The witness of the laity, their Christ-like examples of everyday living as well as the sharing of their own faith experiences of the Gospel, is the primary evangelistic ministry through which all people will come to know Christ and The United Methodist Church will fulfill its mission."

What other translations of the “General Rules” provide guidance for holy living today?

Part V of the *Discipline*, “Social Principles” provides such counsel, for individuals, for congregations, and for the denomination. It does so helpfully concluding with the succinct “Our Social Creed” and “A Companion Litany to our Social Creed.” So also the church provides guidance, in a massive way, in *The Book of Resolutions*.

Might the Bishops’ 2009 Pastoral Letter then be seen as providing guidance for and elaboration of the meaning of social holiness?

Yes. They urge United Methodists and all people of goodwill (in the second of three exhortations) to “*practice social and environmental holiness.*” They continue, “We believe personal holiness and social holiness must never be separated. John Wesley preached: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social. No holiness but social holiness.” Through social holiness we make ourselves channels of God’s blessing in the world. Because God’s blessing, care, and promise of renewal extend to all of creation, we can speak today of “environmental holiness” as well. We practice social and environmental holiness by caring for God’s people and God’s planet and by challenging those whose policies and practices neglect the poor, exploit the weak, hasten global warming, and produce more weapons.”²²

To which Biblical passages might we turn to understand the holiness of the church?

Leviticus 11.44-45 For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and **be holy**, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth. . . . For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall **be holy**, for I am holy.

Numbers 15.40 So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall **be holy** to your God.

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

²² *The Pastoral Letter: God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action*, 1, <http://hopeandaction.org/main/>

2 Cor. 5: 17-20. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Philippians 2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

1 Peter 1:13-16 Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'

What implications about the faithful holiness of the church might one draw from Trinitarian formulations of its nature?

When we identify the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and fellowship in the Spirit or invoke other Biblical images, metaphors or symbols of the church we affirm that the church is of God. A holy God demands, expects and creates a holy people. Our holiness,

individually and collectively, rests on God's grace--prevenient, convicting, converting, justifying, regenerating, sanctifying. Founded in the saving experiences of the new birth and baptism, the church lives into the perfect love, care for the poor, and championing of justice that require lives of faithful discipleship and the communal support of small discipling groups.

Holiness or perfection was certainly a central Wesleyan doctrine. Were American Methodists similarly committed?

Bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury in commenting on the *Discipline* and explaining the expectations and regimens of the Christian life for Methodists noted that "Our original design in forming our religious Societies" was "*To raise a holy people.*" They went on to affirm, "*We will have a holy people, or none.* In every part of our economy, as well as doctrine, we aim at crucifixion to the world and love to God." Coke/Asbury, 167.

So then, Methodism understands the church to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic?

So John Wesley proclaimed in the *London Chronicle*, responding to the impugning of Methodist teaching by Richard Challoner (Wesley, *Works* 21: 304-05)

"[S]uch is the Catholic Church, that is the *whole body* of men endued with faith, working by love, dispersed over the whole earth, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. And this Church is 'ever one', in all ages and nations it is the one body of Christ; it is 'ever holy', for no unholy man can possibly be a member of it. It is 'ever orthodox', so is every holy man, in all things necessary to salvation; 'secured against error', in things essential, 'by the perpetual presence of Christ'; and 'ever directed by the spirit of truth', in the truth that is after godliness. This Church has 'a perpetual succession of pastors and teachers, divinely appointed and divinely assisted'. And there has never been wanting, in the Reformed churches, such a succession of pastors and teachers; men both divinely appointed and divinely assisted, for they convert sinners to God—a work none can do unless God himself doth appoint them thereto and assist them therein; therefore *every part* of this character is 'applicable' to them. Their teachers are the proper successors of those who have delivered down, through all generations, the faith once delivered to the saints; and their members have true, spiritual communion with the *one, holy* society of true believers. Consequently, although they are not the *whole* 'people of God', yet are they an undeniable *part* of his people."

And does United Methodism then affirm as well the mandate that ministry, both the general ministry and that set apart, must today transmit “the faith once delivered to the saints”?

Indeed! The *Discipline* charges bishops “To guard, transmit, teach, and proclaim, corporately and individually, the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and tradition, and, as they are led and endowed by the Spirit, to interpret that faith evangelically and prophetically” (§ 414). In their consecration service, the bishops respond to a multi-point question that includes the charge “to guard the faith, to seek the unity, and to exercise the discipline of the whole Church” but then secondly to the query “Will you guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine of the Church against all that is contrary to God’s Word?” Elders, deacons, and diaconal ministers respond to similar questions as indeed do all United Methodists when they take membership vows. Indeed, “Article XIII—Of the Church” makes faithfulness a common charge. “The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” Article V of the Confession of Faith speaks in similar terms. The faithfulness of the church, then, is an all-hands responsibility.

THE NATURE, MISSION AND FAITHFULNESS OF THE CHURCH

Does the church's holiness, catholicity, apostolicity and unity orient it, as do its nature and mission, to God's redemptive and creative activity, to the kingdom of earth for which we daily pray, to our task as stewards?

So the Bishops instruct us. – "This beautiful natural world is a loving gift from God, the Creator of all things seen and unseen. God has entrusted its care to all of us, but we have turned our backs on God and on our responsibilities. Our neglect, selfishness, and pride have fostered:

- pandemic poverty and disease,
- environmental degradation, and
- the proliferation of weapons and violence.

Despite these interconnected threats to life and hope, God's creative work continues. Despite the ways we all contribute to these problems, God still invites each one of us to participate in the work of renewal. We must begin the work of renewing creation by being renewed in our own hearts and minds. *We cannot help the world until we change our way of being in it.*"²³

To grasp the holiness (unity, catholicity and apostolicity) of the church, must we also attend to its mission and its nature?

The church as an ideal is holy, and yet even scripture confesses that "we have the treasure [of the gospel] in earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4). One dimension of this holiness is that the church is set apart for a particular purpose; this is variously defined as word and sacrament, the body of Christ, and as a sign and foretaste of the reign of God. This holiness is both personal and social, evidenced by piety and service, action and contemplation. The fullness of holiness in this way is distinct from some Christian traditions that would give priority to holiness in the interior sphere, and to secular movements that advocate a "works righteousness". The life of holiness is one that is set apart from the culture; Methodists have at times been conformed to the culture, while at other times standing against it. The practice of slavery illustrates both our faithfulness to the gospel in contrast to the culture and our complicity with the culture. A means towards holiness, for Methodists, is discipline. Theologically, this is grounded in the means of grace as the ordinary channels through which

²³ *God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action The Pastoral Letter*, 1, <http://hopeandaction.org/main/>.

growth toward sanctification is possible. Institutionally, this is present in the discipline that governs our personal , congregational and institutional lives. (Kenneth Carter)

Do we understand the church's faithfulness, mission and nature to be inseparable?

Yes. Among the "Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases" identified in the *Discipline* is that on "Mission and Service" —We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining heart and hand, we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world (51).

The Committee on Faith and Order And Its Work

Why, among the very first of its projects, does United Methodism’s Committee on Faith and Order undertake a theological exploration on ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) and why such a limited doctrinal focus?

The Committee on Faith and Order (CFO) began its work guided by the Council of Bishops, the Connectional Table, its mandate from General Conference, and its own convictions about theologizing needed by the church. Counsel from these several directions pointed to the most urgent task to be ecclesiology (the doctrine of ‘the church’) and specifically the drafting of a treatise parallel to *By Water and the Spirit* and *This Holy Mystery*. The CFO began its work mindful of several other explorations underway which also explore the nature and/or mission of the church and with whose work the CFO might profitably be in interaction. Among them are the Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of The UMC, the Ministry Study, Call to Action, Church Systems Task Force and the church’s several bi-lateral dialogues. One of the responsibilities of the CFO, as delineated in the 2008 *Discipline* is "to coordinate and provide for effective interaction and communication among various study committees, commissions and teams when multiple studies have been mandated" (*Discipline* ¶ 1909.4). Further, the disciplinary mandate of the CFO (¶ 1908) is "to give leadership to The United Methodist Church in reflecting upon, discerning and living out matters of faith, doctrinal teaching, order, and discipline in the midst of mission and ministry in the church and the world."²⁴

²⁴ As per the intention of this exercise to display authoritative United Methodist statements on ecclesiology, this paper (both above and below) cites, excerpts from and reproduces extensively and repeatedly from various United Methodist titles. The Committee on Faith and Order expresses appreciation to The United Methodist Publishing House for granting its permission for its use, its expeditious action in doing so, and the waiver of the 1,000 word limitation on such citations. So permitted are our reproductions from the 2008 and 2012 *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2008, 2012* Neil M. Alexander, Judith E. Smith and Marvin W. Cropley, eds. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008, 2012). Used by permission. *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008, 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008, 2012) Used by permission. Similar extensive reproduction comes *The Works of John Wesley*; begun as *The Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975-1983); continued as *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984 -); *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989). *Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts and Jacob S. Payton, 3 vols. (London: Epworth Press; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958).

See “Abbreviations” on p. 41 below for short titles of the above and of other items cited.

Citations from the Nicene and Apostles’ Creed come from *The United Methodist Hymnal* © 1989, 880-82.

Is this charge particularized?

Yes, the 2008 *Discipline* continues (§ 1908):

“The committee shall be a visible expression of the commitment of The United Methodist Church to carry on informed theological reflection for the current time in dynamic continuity with the historic Christian faith, our common heritage as Christians grounded in the apostolic witness, and our distinctive Wesleyan heritage. The committee shall be charged with three broad responsibilities:

“To lead and coordinate studies commissioned by the General Conference in matters related to the faith, doctrine, order and discipline of the church.

“To support and provide resources upon request to the Council of Bishops in their responsibility to “guard, transmit, teach and proclaim, corporately and individually the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and tradition, and as they are led and endowed by the Spirit, to interpret that faith evangelically and prophetically.

“To prepare and provide resources and study materials to the General Church upon request from the General Conference, Council of Bishops, or Connectional Table.”

Why an exploration in this question-and-answer fashion?

John Wesley chose a question-and-answer format as a way of ordering business in his conferences and of minuting the conclusions or findings from those conversations. Although conferences may not structure their sessions around questions today, their reporting and the aggregation of their reports in the annual *General Minutes of the Annual Conferences of The United Methodist Church* retain that question-and-answer structure. Further, over its many centuries, the Christian church has employed a similar format in the catechism and found it to be an effective instrument for teaching and learning. Structured to begin with what the hearer or reader needs to understand first, it serves as a convenient way to order and treat in a straightforward fashion the church’s foundational commitments.

What features of Wesley’s or a catechetical procedure lend themselves to elaboration of current affirmations about the nature and mission of the church?

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The traditional format of questions and answers serves well to identify doctrinal statements to which the church has assented, to draw on traditional or ecumenical formulations to suggest in the query something of the status or authority which any statement enjoys or ought to enjoy, to array such authoritative commitments alongside of one another, to include other statements that would seem to augment or complete formal commitments and to order and provide needed transitions on multiple topics or multi-topical matters.

Does the approach have discovery or diagnostic values?

Indeed. Through the years non-Methodists often and Methodists occasionally have alleged that we lack an adequate doctrine of the church? In an important essay, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church,” Albert Outler addressed himself to that concern (see Bibliography). By proceeding as we have in this working paper, the CFO finds that United Methodists do indeed have a surprisingly full-orbed ecclesiology. At the same time, the exercise implicitly discovers that doctrine to be addressed in a piecemeal, scattered, disjointed fashion in the church’s formal statements.

Further, we find some surprising weakness in what ought to be a United Methodist signature, namely on the holiness of the church, and a similar slight of the church’s apostolicity. It strikes the CFO as strange that in “The Constitution: Division One” the *Discipline* can be eloquent on the unity and catholicity of the church and ignore or slight its holiness and apostolicity.

Similarly, the CFO wonders about the seeming tension, indeed conflict, between the strongly denominational, even triumphalistic, tone of the new ¶¶s 101,125 which speak of “a connectional covenant” binding United Methodists throughout the world and provide “A Companion Litany to our Covenant for the Worldwide United Methodist Church” on the one hand and on the other, the remainder of that Section, “The Ministry of All Christians” which has an implicitly ecumenical-catholic feel.

The schema then invites further queries about

- how the church orders its doctrine and places it?
- where there seem to be overlap, gaps, tensions or needed connection?
- where additions or more systematic expression might be required?
- to what concerns more formal status ought to be accorded? and
- in what areas or dimensions of ecclesiology United Methodism ought to pay more attention?

A further diagnostic finding relates to Christology and its bearing on understandings of ministry. Classically, the church has related three of the tasks

of ministry—word, sacrament and order—to the three offices of Christ—prophet, priest and king. What does it mean to add service, compassion and justice to the work of ministry? Are these comprehended under the classic threefold offices of Christ? Are the offices of Christ expanded? How might service, compassion and justice be understood Christologically?

The CFO has yet to take up the two offices added in the 2012 *Discipline*. It did take note of one option under the 2008 and earlier *Disciplines* which added “service” to word, sacrament and order. That would be for United Methodism to offer the church ecumenical a new Christology that gathers the work of Christ and of ministry in His name in fourfold (not threefold) fashion and under four of Christ’s many offices—prophet, priest, king and shepherd OR prophet, priest, king and servant. This might entail the reworking of the several sections of the *Discipline* devoted to servant ministry and servant leadership (§§ 133-39), bringing Christ’s service/shepherd role theologically into relation to the other three offices, conceiving of servant and service Christologically as well as spiritually and missionally, and rethinking of how the deacon’s responsibilities are defined (see below). Certainly, Good Shepherd and Suffering Servant motifs point to incredibly important aspects of Christ’s redemptive work. One concern about this direction is that to add a fourth office might further the tendency of the royal, kingly and ordering leadership role to drift in an authoritarian direction. When the threefold offices are properly exegeted, the royal office is imaged in servant terms—as a washing of the disciples’ feet, with a crown of thorns, through an enthronement procession on the back of a donkey, in an elevation to the cross, and for a kingdom not of this world. The royal office, then, has shepherd and servant dimensions and those dimensions correct against authoritarian, hierarchical, dictatorial tendencies. To go fourfold, to make the shepherding/servant role a separate office, might take away the important servant/service qualification of the ordering leadership role. Feminist concerns about the male and authoritarian aspects of the royal or kingly office ought, then, in my judgment not to lead to jettisoning it (it is after all Biblical) but to reinforce the insistence that it be understood in suffering servant terms.

An alternative way of dealing with service, then, would be to understand it as in constant and necessary correlation with and dimension of the other three understandings of office, work and mission (prophet, priest, king). The organizational and theological payoff to this direction would be that it would make clearer how without the transitional ordination to deacon, the elder and bishop should own or claim their service responsibilities. Word, sacrament and order have service dimensions and responsibilities that bishops and elders must honor. Additionally and perhaps more importantly, going this direction would permit us to understand that how the deacon—whose office is preeminently about service and leading

the church in its worldly mission— relates to the other three tasks of ministry. The deacon is servant of the Word (especially in teaching), serves at the Table (in preparation and distribution), and serves the church re-ordering of the world (in ministries of justice and compassion). Such an understanding might then entail ordaining the deacon only to service but to a service in world, in Word, at the Table, and in leading the church “to reform the Continent and to spreading scriptural Holiness over these Lands” (the Wesleyan mission statement as recast in the first *Discipline*).

The CFO has yet to think through how the additional two tasks of ministry— compassion and justice—might be given Christological treatment and/or brought into tighter relation to the classic three—word, sacrament and order.

Why does the catechism (and this apparatus) draw so heavily as it does on the *Discipline* and proceed to items lodged in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012*?

Our presumption is that doctrinal statements, theological exposition and teaching about the church ought to rely as much as possible on formulations to which United Methodism has given formal assent. In general, we privilege those statements which have the highest authority but perhaps less consistently so that some might wish. In *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, 43-56, Scott Jones distinguishes ten texts that he distinguishes in three levels. First are the constitutional standards, which include items embraced in the *Discipline* (Constitution, Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church, Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and General Rules of The Methodist Church) plus official standards, Wesley's “Standard Sermons” and (the infrequently used) *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. At a second level Jones places contemporary statements, namely other parts of the *Discipline* and the wonderful but rarely used *Book of Resolutions*. At the third level he locates *Hymnal* and *Book of Worship* which he terms liturgy. In his formulations, he recognizes the degrees of authority represented but draws on all three levels. For a simpler schema, compare Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*, “Appendix 2,” 116-22. See also Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*. While we have not followed Jones, Campbell or Oden but have ranged among various authorities and formulations, we realize that some readers may wish to follow one of these counsels.

Why begin with the most formal and official statements instead of those framed in more current and digestible language?

The value of this exercise, to reiterate a point already made, is its display, as fully as possible, of United Methodism's endeavors to commit itself to and to state what it and the tradition have believed and taught concerning the church. Hence our privileging the language of the *Discipline*. Further, if United Methodism is a confessional church as is sometimes claimed, it is a strange one. Its best, freshest, most contemporary formulations on matters theological occur in the *Resolutions* or in portions of the *Discipline* not constitutionally protected. It is in the section of the latter entitled, "Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists" rather than in the "Articles" or "Confession" where we find the best current expression of Wesleyan theology. And it is in Part V Social Principles rather than in "The General Rules" that we find guidance in today's language for living out the Wesleyan mission. Our standards, like Scripture to which they point, require quadrilateral exegesis. We need to begin by noting what the Standards—the Constitution, Articles, Confession, and other formalizations—actually say. But then text needs contextualizing and translation drawing on experience, tradition and reason. Our *Discipline* has spoken most eloquently when it has contained its own exegesis, explanation or translation, namely in its 1798 Coke/Asbury annotated version and with the 1972 and 1988 commentaries on our doctrinal standards.

The Roman Catholic Church issued a catechism with considerable drama and to widespread acclaim, is there precedence in the Wesleyan tradition for the issuing of catechisms?

Yes. John Wesley's *Instructions for Children*, published in 1745 enjoyed a long life on both sides of the Atlantic. Reprinted by order of the short-lived Council (Bishop Francis Asbury and presiding elders) in 1791, it was followed two years later, also under the Council's insistence, by John Dickins's *A Short Scriptural Catechism Intended for the Use of the Methodist Societies*. The latter went through fifteen printings by 1816, 10,000 copies being issued in 1802 alone. Among twentieth century Methodist catechisms is *The Standard Catechism* published by the Abingdon-Cokesbury Press in 1929.

Is there a readily accessible treatment of catechisms in the Wesleyan and Methodist heritage to which attention should be called?

Yes. See Kenneth E. Rowe's discussion in James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey and Kenneth E. Rowe, *The Methodists* (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 1996; Praeger, 1998), 165-200.

Abbreviations

- BEM *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, the “Lima Test”, 1982), online at <http://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/>
- Coke/Asbury Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in America* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798).
- Discipline* *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012).
- Hymnal* *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).
- JLFA *Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts and Jacob S. Payton, 3 vols. (London: Epworth Press; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958).
- Resolutions* *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008). Copyright © 2012, The United Methodist Publishing House, used by permission.
- WCC 198 *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Paper 198, 2005) online at <http://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/>
- Wesley, *Works* *The Works of John Wesley*; begun as “The Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975-1983); continued as “The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984 -); 16 of 35 vols. published to date.
- Wesley, *Works* (Jackson) John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London, 1872).
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Appendix

The Journey of a Connectional People, 1988

112. 1. Introduction.--Ever since John Wesley began to refer to the scattered Methodist classes, bands, and societies throughout eighteenth-century England as "the connexion," Methodists everywhere have embraced the idea that as a people of faith we journey together in connection and in covenant with one another. Expressing the high degree of cohesiveness and centralized organization among Methodists, the connectional principle became the distinguishing mark which set them apart from the normal patterns of Anglican ecclesiastical organization as well as the more loosely organized Protestant bodies of the day.

2. Roots--This acceptance of strong covenantal bonds among the Methodists was no accident. There were deep theological roots, including the concept and experience of covenant and the resulting emphasis on faith journeying in covenant with God and one another. The connectional idea is a style of relationship rather than simply an organizational or structural framework. As Bishop Paul Washburn once said, it is made up of "living, interdependent and interacting relationships . . . born in covenant-making events."

There were deep biblical roots as well. Images of the church, especially in the New Testament--the vine and the branches, the wedding feast, the household or commonwealth of God, the new humanity with cosmic and kingdom dimensions, the fellowship of the saints, the Body of Christ, and a host of others--supplemented the covenant concept. The very structure of the Apostolic church was connectional and covenantal. Paul realized very early the importance of superintending scattered congregations.

It is important to note that we are not a connectional people because of biblical or theological or even historical mandates. The evolution of our polity has, however, been a natural response to these elements in our background and they continue to inform and direct our efforts.

3. The Principle Itself--Let us simply state the **connectional principle** and its essential ingredients:

The United Methodist connectional principle, born out of our historical tradition, many biblical roots, and accepted theological ideas, is the basic form of our polity, the way in which we carry out God's mission as a people.

It is in essence a network of interdependent relationships among persons and groups throughout the life of the whole denomination.

It declares that our identity is in our wholeness together in Christ that each part is vital to the whole, that our mission is more effectively carried out by a connectional life which incorporates Wesleyan zeal into the life of the people.

Shared Vision--The principle provides a way to identify the gospel alive in today's world as a shared vision that inspires our actions on behalf of Christ. The lonely witness for salvation in Christ has its place but only when sustained and inspired by others sharing that vision.

Memory--The principle provides continued remembrance of the story of our heritage as United Methodist Christians in order that we might share more meaningfully in the experience and the mission of the universal church. As we know and share the common story of our faith journey, our witness to the world is strengthened.

Community--The principle provides for relationships of Holy Spirit-empowered community wherein support, supervision, healing, accountability, and growth can take place for persons and groups across the denomination. Our life together, with its mutual accountability and relationships, keeps us ever alert to being faithful to the gospel in all our efforts. Through it the whole system may be fueled with life-giving Spirit energy.

Discipline--The principle provides a life of voluntary compliance to a discipline which includes rights and privileges as well as responsibilities and obligations. Our mutual acceptance of a disciplined life together enables more effective ministry to the world.

Leadership--The principle provides a sharing of resources and resource persons for mission and ministry--for pastors and laypeople in local settings or beyond local settings. This is done through superintending pastors, boards, and agencies that serve the denomination in ways it may determine.

Mobilization--The principle provides coordinated missional mobilization and deployment in response to the gospel call. The intentional work of the entire body has the potential of greater influence on human life--in response to great social issues, in extending the gospel to new fields, in deploying the ordained in the most effective way. All parts of the Church are vessels of mission, bound together by a form, so an effective whole is developed.

Linkage--The principle provides an interdependent network of gathering points which brings us together in various ways to carry out our shared mission. In these "conferring" experiences we all celebrate together and together lay out our strategy for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. In this way corporate, compassionate power is released.

4. *Affirmation and Stress*--As United Methodist people we celebrate the fact that connectionalism has served us well in our mission and ministry, and we affirm Christ's central role in our lives and through Christ, the enabling of our connection and our life together. At the same time we recognize there are stresses that must be addressed if the connectional

principle is to continue to serve us well in the future. The stresses include issues surrounding clergy itineracy and the appointment process, decision-making, apportionments and designated giving, episcopal leadership, and mutual accountability. It is important for connectionalism to bend, to have tolerance in a changing world, to be able to live in the new days ahead of us with freshness and new commitment.

5. *The Challenge*--Now we have the special opportunity to take this way of doing mission and ministry and to use it effectively in accomplishing our goals as a church. We have a unique avenue for witnessing and reaching out with the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to the end that the world will indeed be reformed. The connectional principle should be interpreted to all our people in new and fresh ways and lifted up with enthusiasm as an effective instrument in our efforts to bring the world closer in harmony with the will and purpose of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.²⁵

²⁵. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1992* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 111-14; *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1988* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1988), 116-18.

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