

Holy Conferencing
A Presentation to the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church
Kevin M. Watson
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If there were one thing that United Methodism could do today that would be most likely to bring deep renewal and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to our church, what would it be?

I believe that reclaiming an accurate understanding of holy conferencing in contemporary United Methodism is the most important thing that we could do as a church. And I believe that if we were to reclaim this practice, that God would bless our efforts and we would see profound renewal in communities where this took place. I really believe that. But everything hinges on getting right what holy conferencing is.

This morning I'm going to sketch what holy conferencing is, make a few brief comments about what it isn't, and then offer some suggestions for reclaiming this practice in contemporary United Methodism.

What Holy Conferencing Is

First, a bit of bad news: This phrase is almost always associated with John Wesley, but he didn't actually say it. Holy conferencing most likely comes from Wesley's use of Christian conference, a phrase he used once in the 1763 doctrinal minutes typically referred to as the "Large Minutes."

The reference occurs in a passage where attention is being given to whether leaders in Methodism are consistent in their own use of the means of grace and in encouraging others to use them as well. For Wesley, means of grace are practices that God has chosen as ways in which God reliably and consistently makes God's self available to us.

In the "Large Minutes," Wesley lists Christian conference as one of only five instituted means of grace. Instituted means of grace are the special category for the outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God for all times and places by which God conveys grace to people created in the image of God. They are grounded in commandments from Jesus in Scripture. In other words,

these are practices that are not limited by the particularities of cultural context, historical era, etc. Placing Christian conference in this category is significant, then, because it is putting the practice in the same category as prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, and fasting – the other instituted means of grace. And it is claiming that Christ has instructed us in Scripture to seek him in this way.

So, here's what is said in the one reference to Christian conference:

Are we convinced how important and how difficult it is to order our conversation right?
Is it always *in grace*? Seasoned with salt? Meet to minister grace to the hearers?
Do we not converse too long at a time? Is not an hour at a time commonly enough?
Would it not be well to plan our conversation beforehand? To pray before and after it?¹

That's it. Wesley didn't provide a more thorough explanation or description of Christian conference because he would have assumed Methodists knew what he meant by the phrase. There is broad agreement among Wesleyan scholars who have studied Wesley's own use of the phrase that by "Christian conference" Wesley was referring to the practice of cultivating growth in holiness in community through conversation about our experience of God. The primary places where early Methodists practiced "holy conferencing," then, was in the class meeting and the band meeting.

The class meeting was a group of 7-12 people, the groups were co-ed, and they were divided based on geographic location. The basic question of the class meeting was "How is it with your soul?" Or, "How does your soul prosper?"

Now, the language of prosperity has a lot of baggage in our current day. However, it is worth noting the positive assumption that is underneath the original phrasing of the question. The assumption of early Methodists was that by gathering together to talk about one's present experience of God that people's lives with God would prosper, or thrive. And this was the case.

¹ John Wesley, "The Large Minutes"; in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10 *The Methodist Societies The Minutes of Conference*, edited by Henry D. Rack (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011), 855-857.

It is also important to note that class meetings were small groups focused on transformation, and not information. It was not a group study of a book, or even the Bible. The content was the participants' lives with God. And in early Methodism, when people gathered together weekly to discuss their experience of God, they became more sensitive to God's presence and work in their lives, and developed a vocabulary for talking about this experience.

In "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," Wesley described the impact of the class meeting on Methodists:

It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to 'bear one another's burdens,' and 'naturally' to 'care for each other.' As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for each other. And 'speaking the truth in love, they grew up into him in all things which is the head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love."²

Wesley found that bearing one another's burdens and caring for each other came through intimate knowledge of what was going on in each other's lives. And, by the grace of God, such knowledge led to "a more endeared affection for each other." As Methodists came to know each other, really know each other more, they loved one another more – not less! They also were able to speak more effectively into each other's lives in ways that led to growth in holiness.

This practice is at the heart of our current mission: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We have room to grow in helping the average Methodist learn how to speak to a lived experience of God. Too often, in interactions with lay Methodists, it seems that they simply do not have a vocabulary with which to speak to God's presence and activity in their lives. Addressing this deficit should be of fundamental concern to leaders in the church.

² Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists"; in *The Works of John Wesley* vol. 9 *The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 262.

In early Methodism, class meetings were also the basic mark of membership. A Methodist was someone who attended a weekly class meeting. And when the Methodist Episcopal Church was formally constituted as a denomination in the United States, the class meeting continued to be the primary location for membership. Weekly attendance was required to maintain membership in the church.

In the version of the *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* annotated by Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke in 1798, they wrote the following about the importance of the class meeting:

It is *the thing itself, christian fellowship* and not the name, which we contend for.... for about twenty or thirty years we have rarely met with one who has been much devoted to God, and at the same time not united in close christian fellowship to some religious society or other [meaning a small group like the class meeting] . . .

We have no doubt, but meetings of christian brethren for the exposition of scripture-texts, may be attended with their advantages. But the most profitable exercise of any is a free inquiry into the state of the heart. We therefore confine these meetings to *christian experience*. . . In short, we can truly say, that through the grace of God our classes form the pillars of our work, and, as we have before observed, are in a considerable degree our universities for the ministry.³

During the period of time that the class meeting was the “sinews of Methodism,” American Methodism grew from one of the smallest Christian groups in American in 1776 at 2.5 % to the largest, by far, in 1850 at over 30%.⁴ This growth is one of the most explosive and spectacular growths of Christianity in the history of Christianity. The class meeting was the heartbeat of the vitality of early Methodism.

³ 1798 *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 147-148.

⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 56.

The next level of small group formation in early Methodism was the band meeting, which was a group of 5-7 people. The groups were divided by gender and marital status. They were voluntary, though highly encouraged for people who had experienced justification by faith and were earnest in their desire for ongoing growth in holiness. To be in band, you had to be open to honest, searching, and piercing conversation.

Once you were admitted, the basic activity of the bands was confession of any sins committed since the previous meeting. It is crucial to note that confession of sin was for the sake of growth in holiness, not to increase guilt or shame. The beginning of the “Rules of the Band Societies,” for example, started this way: “The design of our meeting is to obey that command of God [citing James 5:16], ‘Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed.’”⁵ So, Methodists confessed sin in hopes of experiencing healing and transformation.

The band meeting was rooted in Methodists audacious optimism that God’s grace could free them to the uttermost from sin’s grip on our lives. This is a practice you would not find in many United Methodist churches today, but there are women and men in every community where there is a United Methodist presence who are oppressed by the burden of secret sins, even things that are deep in their past, and the haunting question, or fear, whispered in their ear by the accuser: “Could anyone really love you, if they really knew you?”

Methodists took this accusation head on and through this practice brought people again and again back to God’s unconditional and healing love. Similar to Wesley’s account of the class meeting, in bands Methodists tended to grow in love for each other the more deeply they entered into each other’s lives.

When Wesley referred to Christian conferencing, what we now call holy conferencing, as an instituted means of grace, he was referring to the kind of intimate and focused conversation about one’s lived experience of God and pursuit of a saving and healing relationship with Jesus Christ that were found in the class meeting and the band meeting.

⁵ John Wesley, “Rules of the Band Societies”; in *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:77.

What Holy Conferencing Is Not

Before I move to application, let me pause to note that holy conferencing is more than it has sometimes been seen to be.

When holy conferencing started receiving more attention in The UMC a few years ago, the term was mostly misused. The most common misuse of the phrase has been one that sees holy conferencing as polite disagreement. At times, holy conferencing has been deployed as a way of urging civility in the midst of controversy.

At its best, viewing holy conferencing as a polite conversation, or being nice when we disagree, provides an often-needed reminder to treat one another with respect in the midst of deep disagreement. This is important, very important. But it is not enough.

At its worst, holy conferencing as being polite or nice can be a way of filibustering or procrastinating coming to difficult conclusions. Or, it can be a way of passively aggressively trying to force people to hold deeply held convictions loosely.

Finally, discussions of holy conferencing have at times seemed to value the way in which conversation happens more than the content of the conversation. When we make the way we converse more important than what we converse about and the conclusions we come to, we either deemphasize the importance of beliefs or convictions, or worse, insist that there are no right answers.

Remember that Wesley believed that holy conferencing was an instituted means of grace. This means that Wesley believed that this practice was one of five practices that God instituted as a way that God's grace would be made available to us.

Going forward, we need to reject thin accounts of holy conferencing as polite conversation or being nice when we disagree. We need a clear articulation of what holy conferencing is: It is the distinctive way that Methodists gather together to talk about their relationship with God in order to grow in love for God and neighbor.

Some Suggestions for Reclaiming Christian Conferencing Today

So what does all of this mean for us today? What does it mean for you as the bishops of The UMC?

Holy conferencing, or better yet, Christian conferencing is a part of our heritage. It is a practice we should celebrate and promote, because God has used this practice to make a difference in the lives of countless people in our past. And it is a practice we are privileged to steward today. If Wesley was right, if holy conferencing is an instituted means of grace, then it is one of the few ways that we can say with confidence – God is always present in this practice – always! So, if we believe that holy conferencing is an instituted means of grace, it really makes sense to bet the house on it – though, of course, we wouldn't really do that because we all know United Methodists don't gamble!

I was thrilled in preparing to speak to you today to see the way that Faith and Order sees holy conferencing as one of the distinctive gifts that Methodism has to offer to the broader church. They explicitly point to the class and band meeting as the key way this concept was expressed in early Methodism. This is the best example of what seems to me to be a very positive turn towards a desire to reclaim a more robust version of holy conferencing throughout the denomination.

And I could not agree more with Faith and Order's description of holy conferencing as an essential gift the Spirit has given to The UMC understanding of what it means to be the church. Holy conferencing, rightly understood, is at the core of who we are as Wesleyan Christians!

In difficult times for The UMC, the momentum building for a denomination wide return to the practice of holy conferencing is exciting and reason for optimism. There is much that threatens to divide United Methodism, but this is a practice that has been unifying in a number of contexts.

Contemporary examples of this practice in UM contexts:

Kitchen Groups at Munger Place UMC in Dallas, TX

Kitchen Tables at The Table UMC in Sacramento, CA

Contemporary examples of this practice in non-UM contexts:

Life Groups at Life Church.tv

12 Step Groups (analogous to band meetings)

Momentum has been building to return to this practice, I think in part because others have been stealing, or borrowing, this part of our heritage and thriving. The Holy Spirit seems to be at work in pockets of Wesleyan/Methodist communities, leading a return to this practice. I am wondering if this momentum could become an avalanche of grace?

Here are a few ways that we could work with what God seems to be doing in our midst:

First, we could make holy conferencing a theme of the next General Conference. By this I mean offering preaching and teaching on the role that this has played in our tradition, lifting up the churches that are already returning to this practice – and there are other examples beyond the ones I've already mentioned – and casting a vision for a return to a transformation driven approach to Christian discipleship. I think this should be grounded in our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And it should be explicitly global in scope, indeed, many parts of global Methodism are leading the return to Wesleyan small group formation. A particularly good example is *Longing to Meet You*, which is a guide to starting Wesleyan small groups that are intentionally from a Wesleyan perspective written by Korean Methodists.

The basic practice of holy conferencing is ideally suited to a denomination that is seeking to become a truly global church, because it is simple and it isn't over defined. There is ample room for adaptation and change for churches in a variety of contexts. It has the virtue of being stubbornly focused on what is essential: women and men seeking to grow in holiness together as

a community of faith by the grace of God. And it keeps our lives in God at the center, no hiding. But this basic practice can be inhabited in a variety of ways.

From the General Conference level, you could also emphasize this in the same way at Annual Conferences.

Another advantage of teaching and preaching on this practice at both the General Conference and Annual Conference level is that it would provide the opportunity to cast a common vision of what holy conferencing is, and gently correct some of the misuses of the practice in our recent history.

Then, at the district level, workshops on holy conferencing could be offered where pastors and lay leaders could receive training on how to lead small groups in learning once again to be attentive to God's work in their lives and give voice to their experience of God. This, in my view, would be the layer at which to focus on equipping people to actually start these kinds of groups.

One way that I've tried to contribute to this work is my own life as an academic. I believe that scholars should be committed to writing scholarship that advances the guild in which they are affiliated. But I also think that scholars, especially those teaching in theological seminaries, must be committed to scholarship that is in service to the church and to making their scholarship accessible to the church. I have studied the history of early Methodist small group formation, particularly the band meeting, publishing a book with Oxford University Press (*Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice*). I have tried to translate that work for the church with my recent publication, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*. My publisher, Seedbed, has kindly provided a complimentary copy of this book for each of you, which you should have already received.

The goal of this book is to provide both a basic introduction to Wesleyan small group formation and a guide to starting Wesleyan small groups. In other words, it could be seen as a guide to reclaiming holy conferencing. I wrote the book because I believe that God wants The UMC to return to a form of this essential means of grace. I hope it is a resource that you will find helpful in your leadership of our church. If I can help you in other ways, please let me know.

When Methodists have used this practice, when they have “watched over one another in love,” God has consistently blessed the people called Methodists. The strategic significance of the class meeting as the fuel of Methodism as a missional movement has been widely recognized by historians. There is no reason we cannot retrieve a version of this practice in our own day. I am certain that if we do, God will not fail to bless the undertaking and pour out the Spirit in renewing and recreating ways. May it be so! Amen.