

The Future of Global Methodist Education*

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Abstract

In his essay, Rev. Dr. Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, president and professor of Hebrew Bible at Claremont School of Theology, helps us think through Methodism's distinctive legacy and commitment to education and what they teach us about the future of global Methodist education.

The essay begins with a grim but increasingly familiar story about the closing of a formerly successful UM-related college. Kuan points to the economic consequences of a declining enrollment and a falling birthrate worldwide, which leave institutions of higher education vulnerable to the challenges of a competitive international market. As if that were not enough, other challenges include concerns over student debt, the price of education and the perceived return on investment. Yet the Wesleyan education project retains its relevance and distinctiveness through: 1) "marrying" vital piety and true learning—character and intellectual formation; 2) instilling a sense of service; and 3) making education available to the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized, thereby making real social transformation possible.

Kuan sums up by saying that these distinctives have propelled the educational ministry of United Methodism to the forefront, beckoning the church to live into its principles. United Methodist institutions of higher education are called to subvert social constructs even when the church is not ready to be so inclusive, especially of LGBTQIA+ people into the total life of the church.

Kuan concludes, "We are the church's constant reminder of the Wesleyan tradition of inclusion and the benefits that inclusivity reaps for all God's people."

The Future of Global Methodist Education

The news was released on January 23, 2019 that Green Mountain College in Vermont was closing at the end of this academic year after being in existence for 185 years.¹ Green Mountain was a niche school, known for its environmental programs and consistently recognized as the "greenest" institution in the United States.

In his announcement of the closure of the college, President Robert Allen said, "The decision to close Green Mountain College comes only after a tireless pursuit of multiple options to remain open, including the rigorous search for new partnerships and reorganization of our finances. Despite our noteworthy accomplishments related to social and environmental sustainability, we have not been able to assure the economic sustainability of the college. Financial challenges are impacting liberal arts colleges throughout the country and Green Mountain College is no exception. These financial challenges, the product of major changes in demographics and costs, are the driving factors behind our decision to close at the end of this academic year."²

The story of Green Mountain College, one of our United Methodist-related colleges, is not unique. In March 2019, another of our Methodist-related colleges, Hiwassee College announced that it would close at the end of the spring semester after 170 years and many struggles to stay open.³

Higher education in the U.S. has been under stress for some time now. Education Dive recently published a list of 84 private and public non-profit colleges that have closed, merged, or been acquired by larger institutions since 2016.⁴ The situation is even more dire if one includes for-profit institutions. A Chronicle of Higher Education analysis of federal data shows that, "in the last five years, about half-a-million students have been displaced by college closures, which together shuttered more than 1,200 campuses."⁵

In her article in U.S. News and World Report, Lauren Camera notes that "Some forecasters, including famed Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen, predict as many as half of all universities will close or go bankrupt in the next decade. The crisis is largely driven by declining enrollment facilitated by the Great Recession, which resulted in a significant drop in the U.S. birthrate. Scholars estimate that nearly 2.3 million fewer babies were born between 2008 and 2013, which, when combined with an expansion of higher education offerings in the decades preceding that, mean too many slots compared to the number of applicants."⁶

¹ <https://www.greenmtn.edu/closure-information/> (accessed June 24, 2019).

² <https://www.greenmtn.edu/message-from-the-president/> (accessed June 17, 2019).

³ Scott Jaschik, "One Small College Will Close; Another Slashes Programs," <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/03/29/hiwassee-college-will-close> (accessed June 17, 2019).

⁴ Education Dive Staff, "How many nonprofit colleges and universities have closed since 2016?," <https://www.educationdive.com/news/tracker-college-and-university-closings-and-consolidation/539961/> (accessed June 17, 2019).

⁵ Michael Vasquez and Dan Bauman, "How America's College-Closure Crisis Leaves Families Devastated," <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190404-ForProfit> (accessed June 17, 2019).

⁶ Lauren Camera, "The Higher Education Apocalypse," <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2019-03-22/college-closings-signal-start-of-a-crisis-in-higher-education> (accessed June 24, 2019).

Marty Meehan, the president of the University of Massachusetts summarizes the problem like this: “Colleges and universities will have too much capacity and not enough demand at a time when the economic model in higher education is already straining under its own weight.”⁷

Of course, we know that declines in the number of traditional college-age students, while perhaps the main driving force, is not the only contributing factor. There are also growing concerns about student debt, the price of higher education and the return on investment. In addition, for-profit institutions have encountered more stringent regulation from the federal government and self-inflicted wounds from misbehavior and poor performance.

The situation is, unfortunately, not unique to the U.S. In the last eight years, I have traveled often to Asia. One conversation I heard over and over again is the decline of college-age students, particularly in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, and how this is impacting colleges. In fact, these countries have been tracking low-birth rates for years.

In an article titled, “Declining populations point to a sombre future for HE,” Yojana Sharma writes, “Many countries in East and Southeast Asia saw two decades of unprecedented expansion in higher education as participation increased, fueled by rising prosperity and aspirations... But dramatically declining birth rates in the past decade leading to a contraction in the university age cohort... will mean tighter constraints on universities and in some cases a restructuring of the sector.”⁸

Japan has seen its population of graduates shrink by almost half from a peak of 2.05 million in 1992 to just under 1.2 million in 2014. The prediction is that it will fall again to roughly 990,000 in 2031. Taiwan will see a decline in its youth population of around 46 percent between 2015 and 2050. In the same period, Thailand will experience a population decline of 38 percent, while South Korea and China will see declines of 31 and 21 percent, respectively. Many universities in Japan are failing to fill their government-allocated quotas. In South Korea, 43 colleges by 2022 and 73 four-year universities by 2024 will no longer be needed. In Taiwan, colleges and universities are cutting programs because of low enrollment. There, the Ministry of Education outlined plans in 2015 to merge or close up to 52 of the country’s public and private universities, representing one-third of its colleges and universities. A tsunami is brewing in China. By 2100, China’s total share of the world’s student-aged population will be cut by half. This will have a seismic impact on global higher education.

The Legacy of the Historic Relationship Between Methodism and Education

John Wesley was an Oxford don and that it is widely acknowledged, “he was learned, scholarly, and erudite.”⁹ His scholarly production, namely, his sermons, notes, journals, and other writings, revealed that he was indeed a major scholar of his time.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yojana Sharma, “Declining populations point to a sombre future for HE,” <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20180406110416788> (accessed June 24, 2019).

⁹ James Laney, “Methodism and Education: From Roots to Fulfillment,” *Quarterly Review: A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry* 18/4 (1998): 323.

Wesley's class meetings were also organized around education. In fact, evangelism for Wesley was rooted in education. To him, the two are inseparable. "Into the class converts came as probationers...The weekly class meetings provided the regular pasturing, discipline, guidance, nurture, instruction, mentoring, and encouragement that the system afforded."¹⁰

Accepting George Whitefield's invitation and encouragement to go to the Bristol area to preach in the open fields, Wesley left the comfort of the academic setting, yet his commitment to and passion for education never left him. Discovering the paucity of educational opportunities for the poor, the children of coal miners he was preaching to, Wesley founded the Kingswood School in 1748. Here, the students were nurtured in true learning and vital piety, where the roots and tradition of a Wesleyan education may be found.

The heirs of Wesley have repeated this heralded tradition of establishing educational institutions wherever the gospel was preached many times over. In 1784, at the Christmas Conference that marked the beginning of Methodism in the United States of America, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury emulated what Wesley had done at Kingswood by founding a college named after themselves, Cokesbury College in Abingdon, Maryland. Unfortunately, American Methodists were not prepared for such a college, leading to the demise of the college in 1796. Important lessons were learned.

Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt note: "Three decades later, Methodism started over. It established academies in 1817 in Newmarket, New Hampshire, and two years later in New York City. The next General Conference took up the matter and did so with a new sense of education's importance to denominational well-being."¹¹

The General Conference of 1820 recommended that all the annual conferences "establish, as soon as practicable, literary institutions under their control."¹² These earliest frontier colleges were started "to give the key of knowledge to your children, and those of the poor. . ."¹³ Literally hundreds of institutions were founded over the decades and centuries that followed and many of them still remain today. Among these are some of the best and most renowned colleges and universities in the world.

It didn't take long for Methodists in the United States to turn their attention to theological education. The New England Methodists started the first theological institution, Newbury Biblical Institute, in 1839 that became what is today Boston University School of Theology. In 1854, a second Methodist seminary, Garrett Biblical Institute, was started in Evanston, Illinois. Neither of these institutes were graduate theological seminaries. While there were conversations and advocacies for a graduate theological seminary dating back to the 1850's, it was not until the centenary year of American Methodism that the aspirations of people like John McClintock, James Strong, and Randolph Sinks Foster came to fruition. At the celebration of the Centenary

¹⁰ Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: Volume I, A History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 23-24.

¹¹ Richey *et al.*, 136.

¹² Quoted in Richey *et al.*, 137.

¹³ <https://www.gbhem.org/article/um-related-education-and-transformation-us-higher-education> (accessed June 24, 2019).

Jubilee of American Methodism at St. Paul's Church in New York City in 1866, John McClintock gave a rousing speech where he began by extolling the successes of Methodism in the first century.

McClintock asked, "Who of us here is willing that Methodism shall die? Who is there of us rather that is not ready, if need be, to devote himself to the cause and say, 'Sooner than it shall die, I will, and I will die in its service'?"¹⁴

This was but the preamble to what he was to announce that day: "I think it right to say that one of your members has set you a noble example. I hope that Daniel Drew's life may be spared to see the erection of a theological seminary to which he has consecrated a quarter of a million dollars and to which he will give as much more before it is finished. It is a grand start."¹⁵

A few months later, the New York State Legislature issued a charter for a theological seminary that would provide for "theological instruction and education therein, in promotion of the doctrine, tenets, and discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, under the direction and supervision of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States."¹⁶ Thus, Drew Theological School was founded in 1867.

Worldwide Expansion of Methodist Education

The tandem of evangelism and education has been carried by Methodists to Africa, Asia and Latin America. Henry Gerhard Appenzeller, who had answered the call for overseas missionary service while still a student at Drew Theological School, arrived in Incheon, Korea on Easter day 1885. Appenzeller spent much of his time preparing a missionary residence as missionary activity was prohibited. When the prohibition was lifted in 1887, he began his missionary work. He founded Paichai Hakdang, a school for boys, in February 1887. He saw this school as a means to reach young Korean men with the Gospel, to introduce beneficial Western knowledge into Korean society, to train Koreans to lead Korean Methodism, and to establish a fully rounded university. Mary F. Scranton, another Methodist pioneer in Korea, also started the first school for girls, Ewha Hakdang, in 1886. Ewha Womans University, one of the most prestigious universities in Korea, grew out of this girls' school in 1946.

This story is repeated in Malaysia and Singapore. Methodism in Singapore and Malaysia started out as a missionary initiative in 1885 by missionaries who were already in India. William Oldham travelled to Singapore to plant the foundation of the mission. Oldham started the church's first English-language boys' school, the Anglo-Chinese School, in 1886. Two girls' schools, namely Methodist Girls' School and Fairfield Methodist Girls' School, were subsequently established in 1887 and 1888, respectively. A decade or so later, the Methodists also started schools for boys and girls in many places in Malaysia. The educational efforts of Methodists in Singapore and Malaysia have been rather remarkable and significant. Today, the Anglo-Chinese Schools in Singapore are regarded as premier schools and the Methodist College

¹⁴ John T. Cunningham, *University in the Forest: The Story of Drew University* (Andover, NJ: Afton Publishing Co., 1990), 36.

¹⁵ Cunningham, 37.

¹⁶ Cunningham, 38-39.

in Kuala Lumpur is a highly regarded and sought-after pre-university institution. These schools have become symbols of educational excellence.

The story of Methodist education continues. In 1992, in response to the critical need of higher education in the continent of Africa, The United Methodist Church founded Africa University in Old Mutare, Zimbabwe. “The mission of Africa University is to provide quality education within a Pan-African context through which persons can acquire general and professional knowledge and skills, grow in spiritual maturity, develop sound moral values, ethics and leadership qualities.”¹⁷ Today, Africa University has more than 1,700 students from 27 countries, and graduates are serving in 38 countries throughout the continent.

The Legacy and Distinctive Qualities of a Wesleyan Education

The decline in higher education has an impact on the future of global Methodist education. In such a challenging sector and shrinking market for students, what role should Methodist education play in global society?

First, Methodist education has never been just about the imparting of intellectual knowledge. It has never been merely about preparing men and women to be successful people in the workforce. It has never been just about training the best pastors, teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, business executives, CEO’s, etc. That, of course, is important for any educational endeavor and cannot be minimized. The Wesleyan tradition of education, however, is about marrying vital piety and true learning. It is as much about character formation as it is about intellectual formation. It is about the formation of the total person. During the opening convocation of the Joint IAMSCU-NASCUMC Meeting at Washington’s National Cathedral in July 2011, James Laney reminded us that church-related colleges “are not just in the educational business.” They are “the ones that are custodians of the soul.”¹⁸

If Methodist education is about the formation of the entire person, it follows that the second distinctive feature of a Methodist education is service. Laney has noted that “John Wesley was a product of the establishment of privilege to privilege; and he could have remained within that system, being very dedicated and pious.”¹⁹

Yet, because Wesley never remained stuck in the establishment of privilege, he was able to forge the tradition of education for service. By bringing in the poor, educating them, empowering them, and then turning them “upon the world so they could become productive citizens, people who had a sense of purpose, a direction, a focus, people who made contributions,”²⁰ Wesley unleashed his students, his heirs, for a life of service. Thus, a Methodist education is about instilling in women and men a sense of service to the world. It is not just about getting a job after college or an appointment or call after seminary. It is about leaving college or seminary with a sense of purpose to create change, to transform the lives of others. Methodist education has

¹⁷ <http://www.africau.edu/mission.html> (accessed June 24, 2019).

¹⁸ James T. Laney, “The Education of the Heart: Distinctive Qualities of Methodist Institutions in the Formation of Leaders.” Keynote address delivered at the Joint IAMSCU-NASCUMC Meeting, Washington, D.C., July 24, 2011.

¹⁹ Laney, 324.

²⁰ Laney, 325.

always been more than providing knowledge. It encourages students to see themselves as stewards of their community who should use their education to give back to the community and the world.

The third distinctive feature of a Methodist education is inclusiveness. Inclusiveness dates back to Wesley's founding of the Kingswood School, when he made education available and accessible to the poor and the disadvantaged. Inclusiveness means "reaching out and providing education to as many as possible."²¹ It is about "the education of those societies so that people who couldn't read were now able to read Scriptures, newspapers, and legal papers and become conversant with the world."²² It is this inclusiveness that led to the founding in 1836 of Wesleyan College to empower women, the first college to grant degrees to women in the U.S. It also led to the founding of the Freedman's Aid Society to address the vocational, educational, and religious needs of newly freed slaves. As Laney further notes, "Wesley's educational vision opened the door to these people; it changed their hearts, gave them a motive for improvement, educated them, and turned them upon the world."²³

It was this same vision of inclusiveness that led Methodists to start schools all over the world, to make education accessible to those for whom such opportunities were once absent. It was this same vision that moved Methodists in the United States to found many of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. It was this same vision that propelled Methodists to establish schools for girls, in Japan, Korea, India, Malaysia and Singapore. Methodist education empowered the poor, the underprivileged, the disadvantaged and women to become agents of transformation.

Inclusiveness is not just about providing opportunities for others, not just about letting others have a seat at the table. It is about change, about transformation. Sharon Hels notes, "When we go out as Wesley did and include others, something changes not only in them but in us. And the empowerment is not only with them but also with us, in the new way that we can live a more open and sympathetic and understanding life."²⁴

The United Methodist Church continues to see this inclusiveness in education as a social justice issue when it articulates its Social Principles: "We believe that every person has the right to education...Persons should not be precluded by financial barriers from access to church-related and other independent institutions of higher learning" (§ 164E).²⁵

For the last 270 years, since the founding of the Kingswood School, the educational arm of the Methodist tradition has been at the forefront of leading the church forward by subverting social constructions. By making education accessible to women, the marginalized and the poor, global Methodist institutions have stood up for them even when the church was not ready to include them in the total life of its ministry.

²¹ Sharon J. Hels, "Introduction: On Learning the Liberal Arts," *Quarterly Review: A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry* 18/4 (1998): 320.

²² Laney, 324.

²³ Laney, 325.

²⁴ Laney, 329.

²⁵ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 139.

Today, The United Methodist Church is embroiled in a debate over the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people. This fight over human sexuality has the potential to split the church and taint the identities of Methodist-related higher education institutions.

The National Association of Schools and Colleges of the United Methodist Church (NASCUMC), issued a statement “On the Called General Conference and the Subject of Human Sexuality” in 2019. In it, the members of NASCUMC took a clear stance on the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people, not only on our campuses but also in the life of the church. This was not the first statement on inclusion that NASCUMC issued. A similar statement was issued a decade ago.

Our colleges and universities must continue to take the lead to foster the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people and to help lead the church in this direction. There is no turning back the clock. We must continue our long-held tradition of ensuring that students of all backgrounds have an equal opportunity to be nurtured in true learning and vital piety.

Forging the Future of Methodist Higher Education

Combining true learning and vital piety with a commitment to service and inclusivity is our core mission as Methodist schools. It's what sets us apart and it is how we will remain relevant in this changing academic climate. We must zero in on the qualities that distinguish our institutions and use them to adapt to the needs of the next generation of students. As we face a shrinking college-age population, we will learn to alter our approach and better meet the needs of this shifting demographic. In a world of rising education costs, we must collaborate to find savings and identify innovative strategies to remain affordable for students of all socioeconomic classes. Finally, as The United Methodist Church remains in contention over human sexuality, its academic institutions must serve as a beacon of inclusion. We are the church's constant reminder of the Wesleyan tradition of inclusion and the benefits that inclusivity reaps for all God's people.

There are many challenges ahead, but we have a strong Methodist tradition to help guide us.

About the Author

I have always been committed to higher education, and in fact, my own sense of calling is to higher education. In addition, I am committed to Methodist-related higher education because I am a beneficiary of such an education, having earned degrees from Trinity Theological College in Singapore – an institution that Methodists had a role in founding – Southern Methodist University and Emory University. Moreover, I have served as dean of the Theological School at Drew University, the first graduate theological school that Methodists started in 1867, and currently as president of a free-standing United Methodist school of theology, Claremont School of Theology. Methodist institutions have played a significant role in my education, my life, my career and my ministry.

* A different and longer version of the address, entitled “My Vision of the Future of United Methodist Higher Education and Theological Education,” was presented as the Willson Lecture at GBHEM on October 12, 2012.