

Session Two: Participant Material

Shaped by Our Wesleyan Heritage

As United Methodists, we have a considerable store of affirmations concerning the church, drawn from resources throughout the broader Christian tradition and found in our hymnody and liturgy as well as in official statements of doctrine and polity.

Our Historical Journey

The United Methodist Church traces its origins to certain movements of Christian renewal and revitalization within the established churches of Europe in the seventeenth century and of a number of such movements in eighteenth-century Britain. Its leader, John Wesley, was an ordained minister in the Church of England. His aim was not to create a new church, separate from the Church of England, but to help that church toward a recovery of its spiritual vitality and its mission. He and the early Methodists adopted some unconventional ways to bring the gospel of Christ to many sorts of people who were not being reached, or were not being reached effectively, by the established church. Wesley's own practice of traveling to where the people were and preaching—in an open field, if necessary—wherever and whenever a group of hearers could be gathered, his commissioning and training of lay preachers to do likewise, and the organization of those hearers who were receiving the gospel into small groups for mutual support and growth in grace, led to the emergence of a “connection” of people across Britain and Ireland that eventually (and only after Wesley's death) took on the full identity of a distinct manifestation of the Christian church.

Meanwhile, on the continent of Europe another movement known as Pietism had been underway within the churches of the Protestant Reformation. Like Wesley and his people, the Pietists were intent upon realizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and upon the spread of the gospel. Like the Methodists, they included in their mission efforts to improve the conditions of life among the poor and vulnerable, to support popular education and the dissemination of knowledge, and to be a Christian presence where such a presence had not yet been known. In fact, a significant influence on John Wesley's life and thought was his acquaintance with representatives of this movement, with whom he engaged at various points in his life. He and the Pietists had their differences, but they also recognized a deep kinship.

Participants in both the Methodist movement and varie-

ties of Pietism (which would help to shape the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association) made their way to North America, where they encountered each other as well as some other awakening movements within the Christian churches already present there. They continued their efforts in this new context. Both Methodists and Pietists struggled with their relationships to the churches from which they came, and both movements eventually found themselves taking the form of distinct churches. For the most part, it was not doctrinal differences but practical circumstances, such as the American Revolution, that led to their making that transition. As they took on a churchly identity, the movements bore witness in various ways to the radical aims and effect of God's grace.

There has followed a complex and often ambiguous history of accomplishments and failures, growth and loss, separations and unions, over the past two centuries and more—a very human history, in which God has been steadily at work both within and despite human plans, decisions, and actions. A heritage of racism and related difficulties around culture and social class has affected our common life and our efforts at mission in both overt and subtle ways throughout our history, even as our core convictions have offered a constant challenge to overcome it. The United Methodist Church is an heir to, and itself a part of, this history, with its burden and its promise.

The dramatic recent growth of The United Methodist Church in parts of Africa and Asia, and the increasing visibility and involvement of United Methodists from other countries in its leadership, are gradually bringing United Methodists in the United States to a greater (if belated) awareness that theirs is, if not a “global” or “worldwide” church, at least not simply an American denomination. This reality brings a number of new factors into play. It challenges the adequacy of a polity that has been essentially U.S.-centric, taking for granted a basic, normative national identity for the denomination. It greatly expands the range of cultural differences to be found within the church, and the range of issues that the church faces in carrying out its mission. At these and other points, our common self-understanding as a church has lagged behind the pace of change in our actual situation. Wherever we United Methodists find ourselves, we need fresh vision, and a broadening of horizons.

Church as Community

In the classic creeds, the church is mentioned immediately after the Holy Spirit. In the Apostles' Creed they are affirmed literally in the same breath: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church. . . ." Evidently, in the judgment of the makers of the creeds and of those who have affirmed their faith with them through the centuries, the church has something to do with the Spirit's giving of life. It is *communion* that the Spirit gives, and that animates—or we might say, creates—the church. In the Greek of the New Testament, the term is *koinonia*.

Aspects of our own Wesleyan heritage resonate deeply with this affirmation of the centrality of *koinonia* to the life and mission of the church. When John Wesley, in a late sermon on "The New Creation," wished to portray the final goal of human life—the end for which we are created, and to which we are to be restored through Christ—he used these words: "And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!"¹ For Wesley, and for his followers, we are given a foretaste of this goal, and more than a foretaste, here and now. Salvation is "a present thing," Wesley declared; the term rightly embraces "the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory."² Human beings are "created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and to enjoy [their] Creator to all eternity."³ Wesley's understanding of our "fallen" state involves the distortion or loss of those capacities for knowledge, love, and joy—in short, for communion with God and with one another—and salvation involves their recovery and their eventual fulfillment in glory, when (as his brother Charles memorably wrote) we are to be "lost in wonder, love, and praise."⁴

To the extent that these Wesleyan themes still inform our witness, hymnody, and common life, we have ample reason to make our own the affirmation that communion is the gift by which the church lives, and the gift that it is called to offer the world.

Definitions of Church

Among the standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church are the Articles of Religion brought into the union by The Methodist Church and the Confession of Faith brought into it by the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Each contains an article on the church, along with other material relevant to the subject. The two principal ar-

ticles are these: First, from the Articles of Religion, Article XIII—Of the Church:

The visible church of Christ is a congregation . . . 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.

And from the Confession of Faith, Article V—The Church:

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 . . . , 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.⁵

The second definition, reflecting the Evangelical United Brethren heritage, contains basic elements of the first, but enriches it in several ways. It makes more explicit the element of faithful response with such terms as "redemptive fellowship" and with reference to the church's mission, and it also includes the adjectives from the Nicene Creed identifying the church as "one, holy, apostolic and catholic."

Going Further

United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching On the Nature, Mission, and Faithfulness of the Church is a resource paper available at <http://www.tinyurl.com/UMCNMF>.

Notes

- 1 "The New Creation," Sermon #64 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon64>.
- 2 "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Sermon #43 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon43>.
- 3 "God's Approbation of His Works," Sermon #56 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon56>.
- 4 "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," by Charles Wesley. 1747. The words set to a new tune can be found at <http://www.tinyurl.com/DMLoveDivine>.
- 5 "Section 3—Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules." From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2012*. Copyright ©2012 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

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