

## Session Three: Participant Material

# Marks of United Methodist Identity

### Priest, Prophet, King

John Wesley urged the early Methodists to proclaim Christ “in all his offices.”<sup>1</sup> The reference was to the doctrine of the three offices of Christ, as priest, prophet, and king. The threefold office seemed to have particular resonance for Wesley, as it matched up with his understanding of salvation—of what we are saved from and of what we are saved to. If we are meant “to know, to love, and to enjoy [our] Creator to all eternity,”<sup>2</sup> and if in our present problematic state we are unable rightly to exercise those capacities for knowledge, love, and happiness, then what we need is a regeneration of those capacities. We need to be set free from our captivity to lies and distortions, misguided loves, and misplaced hopes. We need to be born again and nourished in a new life. This is the possibility that Christ brings to us and that the Holy Spirit actuates in us. Wesley wanted his preachers and his people to keep that comprehensive vision in mind, and not to settle for reductionist, one-office accounts of salvation. The realization of the *koinonia* for which we are created, and of which the church is to be both sign and servant, involves being freed from those conditions (both external and internal) that make us miserable, and entering into the harmony of knowledge, love, and joy with the Triune God and with all creation.

### General and Representative Ministry

To proclaim Christ in all his offices is not just the work of preachers. It is the work of the whole church, the calling of the whole people of God, personally and corporately; it is the general ministry of all Christians.

Although it informs and shapes the life and mission of the whole people of God, this threefold pattern also informs and shapes the ordained ministry. The United Methodist Church at its uniting conference in 1968 described ordained ministry as a “specialized ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order.”<sup>3</sup> This new formulation, which does not appear in the official depictions of ordained ministry in either of the predecessor denominations, reflected the influence of contemporary ecumenical conversation as well as the established patterns of a number of other Christian communities.

In The United Methodist Church, although we have deacons, elders (presbyters), and bishops, we do not have a *threefold ministry* in the sense in which that term is used in

other traditions or in the ecumenical discussion. We ordain deacons and elders; we do not ordain bishops, who are elected from among the elders to exercise a special supervisory role. Further, we do not at present practice sequential ordination, in which a person to be ordained as an elder must first be ordained as a deacon.

The United Methodist Church established a permanent ordained diaconate in 1996, and at the same time abolished the practice of sequential ordination. Now prospective deacons and prospective elders are on separate tracks, and the language indicating the character of the ministry to which each is ordained—in the case of a deacon, a ministry of “Word, Service, Justice, and Compassion,” and in the case of an elder, a ministry of “Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service”—is intended to indicate that although there may be common areas of responsibility there are also distinct areas in each that the other does not share.<sup>4</sup>

### The Scope of Grace

One marker of United Methodist identity has to do with the scope of grace, in two senses. One sense is our Wesleyan conviction—by no means exclusive to Wesleyans, but definitely claimed by this tradition—that God’s love extends to all of God’s creatures, and not just to some.

God’s grace is available to all, in equal measure. Among other things, this accounts for the emphasis placed in The United Methodist Church upon full inclusivity in membership and ministry, so that the church might be a faithful sign of the scope of God’s grace.

The second sense in which the scope of grace is a distinctive theme has to do not with its extent or reach, but with its aim or effect. It is the affirmation that as God’s grace is received in the freedom that it creates, it is transformative. It leads, as Wesley said, to a “real change” within the recipient.

Being born anew and receiving faith filled with love were for the early Methodists, and have been for their spiritual descendants, vivid experiential realities, leading to new personal and social consequences as that love is absorbed in personal renewal and expressed not only in direct and explicit witness to the gospel but also in community-building (*koinonia* activity) in a great variety of ways—from personal relationships to the founding of hospitals and universities, from the outreach ministries of local congregations to

participation in large-scale efforts for social amelioration and reform.

The impetus in the United Methodist heritage is to create and support institutions and practices that foster human well-being, and to challenge those that do not. At times the inward cleansing and renewal of the heart is emphasized, and at times it is the promotion of justice, mercy, and truth throughout the social order that receives more attention. We are at our best when we realize the close relationship between the two, and at something less than our best when we play them off against each other.

## Connectionalism

A second marker of United Methodist identity goes by the name of *connectionalism*. Our itinerant ministry, the superintendency (bishops and district superintendents), and the system of conferences are intended as instruments of connectionalism. All three are intended to foster an ethos and practice of mutual support and mutual accountability, of shared oversight and of the strengthening of all by the gifts of all.

We need forms of polity that are consistent with our core convictions. A specifically polity-related Wesleyan concept deserves further attention: the concept of Christian conference. *Conference*, in this usage, refers to a means of grace meant to foster our growth in holiness of heart and life.

It is one of the ways God helps us to help one another toward maturity in faith, hope, and love. It involves elements of prayerful, honest self-examination, of speaking the truth in love to one another, of mutual accountability and support, and of careful deliberation as to how we are to conduct ourselves in the future. The practice of Christian conference goes on under many forms, including one-on-one conversations between Christians, small group meetings of various kinds and for various purposes, and larger events such as those officially designated as *Conferences* in United Methodist parlance. Ideally, the practice of Christian conference is to some degree an aspect of virtually every encounter in the church. Wesley's relatively small regular conferences with his preachers included strong elements of the practice, although its normal structured settings within the early Methodist movement were the meetings of classes and bands within the local Methodist societies.

## Theological Reflection

The third mark of United Methodist identity is a commitment to theological reflection as the task of the whole

church. The presence in the *Book of Discipline* not only of doctrinal standards, but also of a statement on our theological task, indicates the importance of this commitment.

The theological task, though related to the Church's doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling to spread scriptural holiness. By their very character and content, our doctrinal standards not only permit but require the sort of responsible, thoughtful critical engagement that "Our Theological Task" describes. Our theological work must be "both critical and constructive," "both individual and communal," "contextual and incarnational," and "essentially practical."<sup>5</sup> To have given such attention and affirmation to the church's ongoing theological task is truly a hallmark of The United Methodist Church. It will stand us in good stead as we seek to embody our connectional covenant with theological creativity, flexibility, and dexterity in increasingly diverse contexts around the world.

## Going Further

"¶105. Section 4 – Our Theological Task," is found in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church —2012*.

## Notes

- 1 "The Law Established Through Faith – Discourse Two," Sermon #36 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon36>.
- 2 "God's Approbation of His Works," Sermon #56 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon56>.
- 3 ¶302 (p. 107) From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church —1968*. Copyright ©1968 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.
- 4 ¶¶329.1, 332 (pp. 246, 256) 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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