

Opting for the Margins, Again: Recovering an Episcopal Vision

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Even a casual observer of our times would likely agree with theologian David Tracy's observation that our present age is one "that cannot name itself."² Are we still, he muses, in the age of modernity, in which Western culture, safely at the center of history, extends its control with dazzling technological, scientific, and economic efficiency? Or are we, as the "anti-moderns" would have it, facing the advent of another dark age, the dawning of a new era of barbarism, in which relativism and subjectivism reign supreme, trampling underfoot the achievements of the Enlightenment heritage—reason, science, democracy, individual rights? Or, yet again, are we indeed entering a "postmodern" epoch, in which Western modernity stands exposed for what it always has been: a hubristic and dangerous-because-self-deceiving exercise in dominating, subjugating, and fabricating the world—natural, animal, human—based on the false pretensions a self-grounding, autonomous ego?³

Add to this intellectual vertigo the seismic demographic, cultural, economic, political, and religious shifts that are reshaping the landscape of our twenty-first-century world. Protracted ethnic, religious, and political conflicts around the globe are creating large-scale migration, displacement, and homelessness, and the emergence of an underclass of permanent refugees. In a "postmodern"⁴ age that supposedly marks the

¹ Many thanks to the colleagues who took the time to read drafts of this paper: Pat Barrett, Gwen Purushotham, Jerome King Del Pino, HiRho Park, and Von Unruh.

² David Tracy, "On Naming the Present," in *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 3.

³ For an illuminating account of the logic that produced the sovereign subject as *fabricator mundi* in modernity, see J.M. Kirsten, "Die postmoderne projek: Aspekte van die hedendaagse afskeid van die moderne," *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Wysbegeerte* 17/1:18-36.

⁴ I place the term *postmodern* in quotation marks because I agree with Richard J. Bernstein in his book *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) that the locution "postmodernity" is too vague and ambiguous to mark a definite transition in cultural and intellectual life. Bernstein rightly warns that glib talk of being "postmodern" encourages a "slide into a quasi-essentialism where we talk as if there are a set of determinate features that mark off the 'modern' from the 'postmodern.'" (200) For this reason, Bernstein recommends the term "modern/postmodern" to signify something more like a Heideggerian *Stimmung*—"one which is amorphous, protean, and shifting but nevertheless

“end of metanarratives,”⁵ global capitalism seems to have become the defining metanarrative—perhaps even the new religion, if religion is understood as a framework for orienting us to the world and our place in it.⁶ Increasingly the global market is being determined not by industrial production but by the virtual realities of the stock market and the free flow of capital. Far from leading to greater access for more people, the free flow of capital in fact benefits the elites who control the mechanisms of wealth creation. Thus, as theologian Joerg Rieger observes, “As the presence of capital increases, those who have no access to capital disappear from view.” Trillions of dollars, he notes, are exchanged in cyberspace on a daily basis without human contact and “without being affected by the life-and-death struggle of vast numbers of the global population.”⁷ Not surprisingly, the disparity between the prosperous and the poor around the globe has increased exponentially, leading to massive wealth concentrating in the hands of fewer and fewer, with those on the “underside” of the global market experiencing deepening poverty, isolation, and—most tragically—growing invisibility.⁸

Meanwhile, the centuries-long love affair between Christianity and Western culture—often called “Christendom”—appears to be unraveling. The vitality and growth of the faith are shifting to the Southern Hemisphere, with some commentators prognosticating that this distinctly conservative brand of Christianity will likely become normative by mid-century. Some even warn of a coming “clash of civilizations” within the Christian family.⁹ Perhaps predictably the demise of Christendom is most apparent in

exerts a powerful influence on the ways in which we think, act, and experience.” (11). I wonder if the compulsion to consider ourselves “post” modernity, as somehow “past” it, is not, ironically, an expression of the modern self’s typical grasp for control and mastery? Perhaps the most important issue in the desire to be done with modernity is ethical: by leaving modernity behind, one gives oneself permission to be released from the world created by modernity, with its challenges, pain, and suffering—the very world in which all of us, postmodernists included, live and from which most of us benefit daily.

⁵ French philosopher Jean Francois-Lyotard advances this argument in his celebrated book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁶ See Joerg Rieger, “Introduction: Watch the Money,” in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 7.

⁷ Joerg Rieger, “Introduction: Opting for the Margins in a Postmodern World,” in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-8.

⁸ See Rieger, “Introduction: Watch the Money,” 5-6.

⁹ For an authoritative guide to the demographic shifts in Christianity, see David Barrett, George Kurian and Todd Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also the influential text by Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) in which he traces in detail the reshaping of global Christianity. In “The Next Christianity,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2002), Jenkins prognosticates that it is “very likely that in a decade or two neither component of global Christianity [North or South] will recognize its counterpart as fully or

its traditional heartland, Europe, which is now commonly labeled “post-Christian.” Yet even the United States, for decades considered that most Christian of Christian countries, is witnessing the fading glow of the Constantinian era. Many American Christians, particularly those in the “mainline” denominations, appear largely oblivious to, or perhaps unbothered by, announcements of the church’s growing marginalization. Other, more conservative believers, well aware of Christianity’s diminishing cultural and political capital, are mounting concerted efforts to “keep America a Christian country.” Yet, Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall contends, slowly but surely the cultural disestablishment of the church is unfolding before our eyes.¹⁰ The signs of the “humiliation of the church”¹¹ are everywhere: witness the steady loss of authority of Christian symbols once at the heart of American cultural life; the decline in social, religious, and political influence, prestige, and privilege of the so-called mainline denominations; an erupting ethnic, cultural, and religious pluralism that is erasing the remaining vestiges of Christian hegemony; a ubiquitous consumer capitalism that privileges individual satisfaction over communal goods and threatens to treat even religious ideas and practices as so many possibilities in the insatiable play of self-creation; to name but a few. Perhaps most alarming for denominational leadership, note the increasing unraveling of predictable religious traditions and well-defined denominational identities. More and more congregations, observes United Methodist theologian Jackson Carroll, are trying out new organizational forms and ecclesial practices, a process of experimentation that owes less to denominational distinctives and more to the influence of “local circumstances, *de facto* congregationalism, borrowing models that others have found to be successful, and competition in the religious marketplace.”¹²

Last, but by no means least, is the reality of living in a world in the grip of fear.

authentically Christian.” (54, 59) See further the theologically astute commentary on the changing scene in global Christianity by noted missiologist Andrew F. Walls, especially “Christianity in the Western World: A Study in the Serial Nature of Christian Expansion,” in *The Cross-Cultural Progress in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) and “From Christendom to World Christianity: Missions and the Demographic Transformation of the Church,” in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

¹⁰ Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* (The United Church Publishing House, 1989), 12.

¹¹ The phrase was coined by Anton van den Heuvel; quoted in Hall, *The Future of the Church*, 2.

¹² Jackson W. Carroll, *Mainline to the Future: Congregations for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster

Daily we are inundated with stories of death, killing, torture, and rape. Ever more sophisticated “improvised explosive devices” kill growing numbers of people, penetrating vehicles and “green zones” formerly thought impregnable. Israelis and Palestinians glare at one another across walls built out of mortar, fear, and suspicion. The horror of 9/11 shook the American psyche to the core, catapulting security and safety into central preoccupations. Witness our frantic insistence on “securing our borders,” even to the extent of literally constructing a fence on parts of our southern border. Notice the steady drumbeat of urgent calls, from politicians to pundits to terrified citizens, to increase “homeland security,” even at the cost of long-held values and freedoms. Consider how the fevered debate over immigration in recent days has exposed a primal anxiety for a space that is secure, predictable, under control—protected from the foreigner, the “alien,” the “undocumented,” those on the *outside*, those who do not belong *here*. And so we erect walls, secure borders, and construct bunkers, physical and psychological and spiritual—“safe houses” for our fearful souls and our anxious spirits.

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

These signs of the times have not escaped the notice of United Methodist leaders at all levels of the denomination’s life, particularly the Council of Bishops. The United Methodist Church in the United States, the bishops tell us, has come to a “critical turning point in [its] history,”¹³ a “tipping point” that calls United Methodists to “rekindle our Wesleyan passion for souls.”¹⁴ Such calls for “rekindling” have taken the form of a variety of proposals for denominational “renewal” and “revitalization.” Two of these proposals, both episcopal initiatives, bear careful analysis, for they represent widely divergent if not contrasting visions of ecclesial renewal. The first proposal, beginning with *Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church* (hereafter *Vital Congregations*), is important because it represents the current trajectory of renewal discourse in the denomination—a vision and course of action championed enthusiastically today by bishops and other denominational leaders alike. The second

John Knox, 2000), 7.

¹³ The United Methodist Council of Bishops, *Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church. Foundation Document* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1990), 9.

¹⁴ Linda Green, “Bishops adopt calls for action for United Methodists,” *United Methodist News Service* (13 November 2006):1-2.

proposal was first suggested in 1996 in *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative*¹⁵ and subsequently restated and expanded in two further “foundation documents.” While it was discontinued in 2004, I contend that it is this initiative and not the dominant narrative that points the way to authentic renewal for our denomination. As I argue below, the bishops had it exactly right in *Children and Poverty* when they proposed that United Methodists would experience true renewal—and thus faithful discipleship—only in a journey to the margins in solidarity with “the least of these.” The dominant narrative, on the other hand, reveals a church increasingly preoccupied with its own survival in our uncertain and unsettling times. Anxious over its growing cultural disestablishment and its failing membership fortunes in the United States in the context of a rapidly changing global religious reality, this church, under the banner of “making disciples,” seeks newness of life by remaining firmly at the center—as a church of the middle class for the middle class. Thus, it experiences the church’s “humiliation” as a *threat* to its future. By contrast, and in the spirit of the bishops’ vision in *Children and Poverty*, I encourage United Methodists to view our increasing disestablishment as a *promise*¹⁶—as the beckoning of a cruciform discipleship on the margins it once knew and can know again.¹⁷ In this way we can grasp for our day the simple but profound truth Father Wesley and our early Methodist forebears understood so clearly: the church’s healing into faithfulness lies in the company of those despised, marginalized, and excluded by the political, cultural, and economic powers that be. Here, on this pilgrimage “downward,” from the center to the margins in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded,¹⁸

¹⁵ *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative* (1996) formed the “foundation document” for the initiative. Subsequently, two further “foundation documents” were issued: *Community with Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative* (2001) and *Our Shared Dream: The Beloved Community* (2003). In what follows, I use the abbreviation *Children and Poverty* when referring to the initiative as a whole over the span of its existence. I use *Community with Children and the Poor* and *Our Shared Dream*, respectively, in referring to the subsequent documents. The latter two documents are available on the Council’s website: <http://bishops.umc.org>.

¹⁶ Charles Bayer interprets the dying of Christendom as an opportunity for “discover[ing] and liv[ing] into a new ecclesial paradigm.” In this paradigm, he says, the church interprets its cultural and religious marginalization as providential in that it “re-turns” the church to the generative site for its mission and ministry: “the margins,” with and on behalf of the marginalized. See Charles H. Bayer, *A Resurrected Church: Christianity after the Death of Christendom* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 2.

¹⁷ Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall asks, “What is divine Providence trying to teach us in and through this historical eventuality, this reduction of the once-proud Christendom over the course of a century or two? Is it not possible that this reduction really *is* providential?” See *Future of the Church*, 34-35.

¹⁸ With Joerg Rieger, I acknowledge the danger that references to “the poor,” “the marginalized,” “the oppressed” may set up false universals that ultimately serve those who have the power to define others. People who are poor, marginalized, and excluded have names and faces; they are not categories. Yet, like Rieger, I

United Methodists can discover for our time the reason for which God has raised us up. For this reason, I call on denominational leaders to abandon the current path of renewal and for the bishops to lead the church in making the vision adumbrated so compellingly in *Children and Poverty* defining for United Methodist self-understanding and practice.

My argument proceeds as follows. I begin with an analysis of the abovementioned episcopal initiatives, showing how contrasting views of the place and role of the poor in each document lead to their widely divergent recommendations for the renewal the church needs and the road that would lead us there. In the process, I give reasons why *Children and Poverty* offers a more faithful vision of church for United Methodists. Then, in the second half of the paper, I identify a number of steps I believe would assist United Methodists in their journey to the margins.

TWO TALES OF RENEWAL

I begin with *Children and Poverty* for two reasons. It makes several theological moves that are essential for a United Methodist theology dedicated to ministry with the poor. I will affirm and expand on these claims in my own musings later in the paper. It also provides a useful context for explaining the blind spots in the dominant narrative that keep the poor at arms' length instead of making them integral to the church's identity, mission, and ministry.

The logic and basic assumptions of the argument are crucial. First, the bishops ground their argument in the *missio Dei*. Everything else follows from this starting point. God's dream for humanity—indeed, for all creation—is to be a community of “interdependency, mutuality, and harmony,” a dream that has become flesh in Jesus Christ. Second, under the conditions of alienation, injustice, and suffering brought on by our thwarting of the divine dream, God has chosen “the poor, the vulnerable, and the powerless as means of grace and transformation.” In other words, *here engagement with the poor is inscribed in the essence of God's mission in Christ*. Third, the church's fundamental calling is to imitate the *missio Dei*. Therefore, Christ invites his body to “intimate community with the vulnerable and the violated, the humiliated and the

continue to use these terms because they reveal the “false universals of those in power” and so enable “new forms of solidarity.” See Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 4.

impoverished.”¹⁹ In other words, the being and doing of the church derive from the being and doing of God. Thus, as imitators of the divine mission, *engagement with the poor is inscribed in the essence of the church’s mission and ministry*. Fourth, this calling necessarily prompts the question: What sort of community does the church need to be in order to be faithful to such a God? The bishops are clear that the status quo will not do. Indeed, they call for a “reshaping” of The United Methodist Church “in response to the God who is among ‘the least of these,’” and “the evaluation of everything the church is and does in the light of the impact on children and the impoverished.” The implications for the identity and ministry of the church are apparent. “We are convinced,” the bishops say, “that the reshaping of the church and the proclamation of the gospel cannot take place apart from a newly developed sense of community; that is, relationship of the church, including the bishops, with the economically impoverished and the most vulnerable of God’s children.”²⁰

In their third foundation document the bishops set out the contours of this new community, which they call “the Beloved Community.” As an expression of the Beloved Community, The United Methodist Church can be “‘a sign of hope . . . that division, destitution, despair, and death [are] being overcome’ by the love of God shown in Jesus-like living.”²¹ “Reconstituting the body” in the form of the Beloved Community reaches all the way into the structure and organization of the church. In their “call to action,” the bishops assert that “all aspects of the life of the church need to come under review,” from clergy compensation to how and where new congregations are started to how we design and locate church facilities to how the church recruits, nurtures, and deploys pastoral leaders to how “our connectional ecclesiology” can facilitate engagement with the poor.²²

I believe the bishops’ approach here is fundamentally right. However, it could be strengthened by clarifying and developing two aspects. The first concerns the rationale for the *missio Dei*: Why does God choose the poor and despised of the earth as a vehicle for redemption? What is it about the divine nature that prompts this move? The second has to do with clarifying just how the church’s mission and its character as community in

¹⁹ *Community with Children and the Poor*, 2, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 2, 4.

²¹ Issued in 2003 under the title *Our Shared Dream: The Beloved Community*. The quotation is from page 2.

²² *Community with Children and the Poor*, 8-9.

solidarity with the poor are to be conceived. I will argue later that community with the poor provides United Methodists with an opportunity for retrieving holiness as the church's mission. Further, in describing the character of the Beloved Community, the bishops say surprisingly little about just how such a community is to be sustained and nurtured—that is, the practices and disciplines needed to form, feed, and empower “Jesus-like living” on the margins. As I will argue, the means of grace are critical in shaping identity and enabling cruciform practice.²³ I return to both points in the second half of the paper.

* * *

The renewal narrative currently in vogue offers a very different picture of the church and its mission in the world. To get a clear sense of its contours, and, most important, of its weaknesses, it helps to use the above argument as a backdrop. What the analysis shows is just what the bishops had feared would prevent the church's “conversion” to “more complete community with the poor”: engagement with the poor is “an optional program” or “temporary missional emphasis” rather a catalyst to “reorder the church's priorities in accordance with the God revealed in Jesus Christ.”²⁴

To understand our present alienation from the poor, we need to begin with *Vital Congregations*, the episcopal initiative that provides the conceptual framework for the renewal talk that dominates the church's imagination today. In this initiative, the bishops offer guidance to congregations as they struggle “to realize their vision of vitality and faithfulness at this critical time in the church's life and mission.”²⁵ In describing this “critical time,” the bishops provide a compelling picture: we long for the comfort of a “Protestant establishment” now lost; we are aimless, lacking vision; we are preoccupied with church business; we are fearful of others, “people not like ourselves”; we mirror the values of culture more than we challenge them (as evident in our unwillingness to question the values that support our prosperity); we are preoccupied with our own survival, spending our energies on maintaining properties and programs, afraid to “risk

²³ Surprisingly, the means of grace and other classic Methodist disciplines for forming and sustaining ecclesial life receive virtually no attention in the bishops' argument. Indeed, the only reference to the means of grace comes when the bishops refer to the poor as a means of grace.

²⁴ *Community with Children and the Poor*, 2. While the bishops make these statements in reference to the failure of the initiative itself, I believe they reveal a broader disposition and practice in the church.

²⁵ *Vital Congregations*, 6.

death” for the sake of following Jesus.²⁶ The bishops speak powerfully of how our fixation on ourselves has contributed to our “forgetfulness of the poor.” In a provocative interpretation of Mark 2:1-12, in which four men bring a paralyzed man to Jesus for healing by lowering him on a stretcher through the roof, the bishops observe:

The United Methodist Church is the one on the stretcher. We are paralyzed by the loss of our culture’s support. We have let our institutional structures become a burden to us. Yet it is as though the ones who need us now—the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the estranged, the hopeless, the broken in spirit—have lifted us up and carried us to the Master. . . . The decision is ours. What will we do? Will we be moved to walk with Christ into the hurts and hopes of this world? Or will we continue in our inertia?²⁷

Anticipating what they would claim six years later, the bishops hint that the renewal of The United Methodist Church is possible only in a journey to the margins. It is only in the company of the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the estranged, the hopeless, and the broken in spirit—and through their mediation—that the church will experience the healing it so desperately needs. Yet, despite this generative image, the poor remains marginal in the bishops’ recommendations for congregational renewal. Why? The answer not only sheds light on the document but also helps explain the continued marginality of the poor in the current trajectory of renewal discourse. Let us see how this happens.

Most important to notice is that, unlike in *Children and Poverty*, the bishops here do not ground the identity, mission, and ministry of the church (and thus of congregations) *explicitly* in the *missio Dei*. Consequently, identification with the poor does not become definitive of the self-understanding and mission of the church either. As a result, the document lacks the vantage point from which to call for the radical reshaping of the church’s life the bishops would advocate later. Indeed, in the absence of this starting point the bishops make three moves that go a long way in explaining the assumptions about ministry with the poor in current calls for denominational revitalization.

First, the bishops fail to raise critical questions about United Methodism’s social location in the middle class—a reality that contributes greatly to the near invisibility of the poor in most congregations. American Methodism’s “rags to riches” journey from ragtag populist movement often at odds with the social, political, and religious powers-that-be to respectable middle-class “mainline” denomination at the cultural center, has

²⁶ *Vital Congregations*, 33-44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

been recounted ably elsewhere and need not detain us here.²⁸ Recent statistical data confirm that United Methodism in the United States today remains overwhelmingly a church of the middle class.²⁹ By not critically questioning the church's social location at the outset the bishops have set up the first roadblock in the church's movement to the margins. This blind spot leads to a second move (unsurprising in light of the first) that erects a further roadblock. This move has to do with the way the bishops understand the formation of congregational identity and mission. In part to counter what they see as a top-heavy, top-down bureaucracy that stifles congregational variety, creativity, and vitality, the bishops urge congregations to discern their own unique identities with reference to a specific locality, their particular "neighborhoods." Each congregation—be it rural or urban, downtown or uptown, inner city or suburb—is urged to discern its own "distinctive call and special gifts to be acted upon in a unique way in [its] particular place."³⁰ In arising in relation to a specific geography, the congregation's identity, as the "story of the corporate life of the faith community in [a particular] place,"³¹ establishes the congregation's sense of "home."

Now, no one disputes that, as historical entities, congregations necessarily discern and live out their identity as body of Christ in specific concrete contexts. The problem has to do with the bishops' *uncritical* alignment of congregational identity and "neighborhood." The episcopal leaders seem to ignore the fact neighborhoods are not innocent pieces of geography. They are formed and kept in place by a complex configuration of economic, social, political, racial, and class factors. As constructions, neighborhoods reflect and often reinforce the painful economic, class, and racial divisions endemic in American society. As such, these factors of economic and social status, class, race, and politics operate as criteria for deciding who belongs in the

²⁸ Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., speaks of United Methodism's "preferential option for the middle class." See his article "Wesley's Preferential Option for the Poor," *Quarterly Review* 9 (1989). Nathan O. Hatch provides an illuminating chronicle of Methodism's journey from marginal beginnings to middle-class. See his *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). See also David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). For an authoritative account to Methodism's origins in eighteenth-century Britain, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

²⁹ See the data cited in Steve W. Mansker, "Good News to the Poor? The United Methodist Church and Ministry with the Poor" (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2004), 11-12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

neighborhood and who doesn't, who is "neighbor" and who is not.³² Not surprisingly, those of us living in "uptown" neighborhoods rarely engage the folks living "downtown," except on those occasions when we "reach out" in acts of charity. The bishops' blindness to the way neighborhoods function to establish and maintain social distance and alienation (and, as a result, foster either paternalism or indifference) is exacerbated when they leave the choice of neighborhood to the individual congregation (a church, we are told, may "choose" to stay "downtown in the city" or in a rural area) and remind ethnic congregations of their "special mission" to their "own" neighborhoods.³³

Should it really surprise us that engagement with the poor and marginalized—the ones excluded from many of our neighborhoods—has become optional for most United Methodist churches? How could this ecclesial paradigm challenge a middle-class suburban congregation, many of whose members left "downtown" precisely in search of a "better neighborhood" in the suburbs, to consider those "on the other side of the tracks" as more than objects of benevolence? How could such a theology invite congregations to view the poor as integral to their identity as people of God when it endorses or, at the very least, acquiesces to societal structures that keep prosperous and poor apart? The fact is (as Wesley would attest³⁴) when the poor are marginal to a congregation's sense of neighborhood, it is very likely they will remain marginal its self-understanding and ministry as well. Thus, the fixation on the "local," bolstered by "the American predilection for local rule and principled congregationalism,"³⁵ keeps the church securely "immobile" in the middle, "inert" in the center, "paralyzed" in the middle class.³⁶

The third move is to install the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) as the central

³² Joerg Rieger makes a similar point in *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 189-90.

³³ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁴ In his sermon "On Visiting the Sick," Wesley made the point that in order to care about the poor in a way that transforms, one must be present with them. I suspect it is no different in the case of communities of faith. See *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 387-88.

³⁵ See Russell Richey, "Are the Local Church and Denominational Bureaucracy 'Twins'?" in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*. United Methodism and American Culture, eds. Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, and Dennis M. Campbell (Abingdon, 1999), 232-41 (quotation is on page 236), for an excellent discussion of the emergence and function of the construct of "local church" in the identity of United Methodism. See also the article by Thomas Edward Frank in the same volume "What Is the Common Discipline for Local Churches?" 219-31.

³⁶ The words "inertia," "immobility," and "paralysis" occur regularly in the dominant narrative to describe the current state of the church. See, for example, *Vital Congregations*, 21, 22, 35, 36; also Linda Green, "U.S. churches face crisis, discipleship leaders say," *United Methodist News Service* (21 March 2006):2.

mission of congregations.³⁷ To see how the injunction to “make disciples” threatens to exacerbate rather than overcome the marginality of the poor in our church, we need to move beyond *Vital Congregations* and observe how this charge has come to be understood and used in more recent renewal discourse, especially since its adoption as the official mission statement of the denomination at the 2000 General Conference.³⁸ Wrested from even the moderating theological context of *Vital Congregations*, uncoupled from the rich structures of Wesley’s “prescription” for forming Christians,³⁹ and increasingly tethered to denominational self-preoccupation, the injunction to make disciples has assumed a logic that virtually ensures that the poor will remain at arms’ length as objects of churchly benevolence. It is important to note that this logic arises precisely when the church forgets the basis of its identity and mission in the *missio Dei*. Increasingly anxious over unrelenting denominational decline, the church is tempted to take matters into its own hands. In this way a logic of community and mission takes hold that blocks that very “sense of community” the bishops in *Children and Poverty* considered essential to authentic discipleship and faithful proclamation of the gospel.⁴⁰ Let me explain.

Sarah Lancaster shows how the structure of the language of “making” limns a clear distinction between “disciples already ‘made’ reaching out to ‘make’ other disciples.”⁴¹ Thus is set up a notion of a community with sharply drawn boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders,” between “us” and “them”—and, in my view, by extension, between those who “have” and those who “don’t have.” Within this framework, the outsider projects a lack and so becomes the object of the insiders’ missional intentions. Making disciples, says Lancaster, amounts to making them “like us.”⁴² Now, of course neither Lancaster nor I would deny that new Christians *should* look and act differently insofar as they submit to the rhythms of the community’s shared disciplines. Indeed, we

³⁷ *Vital Congregations*, 10.

³⁸ The statement was first adopted in 1996 to frame the mission of the local church. The 2000 General Conference voted to make it the mission statement for the whole denomination (indeed, for all Christians). See Sarah Lancaster, “Our Mission Reconsidered: Do We Really ‘Make’ Disciples?” *Quarterly Review* 23/2 (Summer 2003): 117.

³⁹ For an excellent overview of Wesley’s understanding of disciple formation, see Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley’s Prescription for ‘Making Disciples of Jesus Christ’: Insights for the Twenty-First-Century Church,” *Quarterly Review* 23/1 (Spring 2003): 15-28. Maddox’s argument simply affirms the virtual absence in United Methodism of the formational structures Wesley considered essential to forming “real Christians.”

⁴⁰ See *Community with Children and the Poor*, 2.

⁴¹ Lancaster, “Our Mission Reconsidered,” 122.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 127.

would both insist upon it. The problem is that the logic of the current formulation of the mission statement obscures the priority of God's grace in the process of making disciples. Consequently, the church, however subtly, emerges as the primary actor;⁴³ and so "making" threatens to take on overtones of "creating," of products "made," which opens the door to attitudes of manipulation and control. In this way, the other easily becomes a *projected* other, an object for our (however noble) purposes.

Given the one-way nature of this logic of community and mission, it is not difficult to see how the poor and marginalized—the ultimate "outsiders" to most United Methodist congregations—are little more than objects of the congregation's outreach. The kind of reshaping of the church the bishops had envisioned in *Children and Poverty* is simply not possible on this model. Reordering the church's identity in solidarity with the poor requires community built on a two-way process.⁴⁴ Here, engagement with the poor becomes a means of grace in which a new sense of community takes form based on reciprocity, openness, and mutual respect—an ecclesial existence much like the Beloved Community the bishops envisioned earlier. As Joerg Rieger reminds us, the first step toward building such community is to give up the desire to control. Giving up control opens us to respect for both the human and the divine Other, thus making room for transformative encounters with God, who promises to meet us precisely in communion with the human other.⁴⁵

The logic of community that marginalizes the poor through mechanisms of projection and control continues in the bishops' most recent proposals for denominational

⁴³ In a judicious analysis of the current mission statement, Sarah Lancaster shows how the statement obscures the priority of God's grace—the fact that God is the "primary actor" in the process of "discipling." Grace is reduced to a "rationale" for the church's mission. See her article "Our Mission Reconsidered: Do We Really 'Make' Disciples?" *Quarterly Review* 23/2 (Summer 2003). In a similar vein, Thomas Frank comments, "[T]he emphasis here is on something *the church* does and for which *it* is responsible." See Thomas Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 162. Even the "process" described in the *Book of Discipline* for how disciples are "made" has all the markings of "systems theory," designed to improve corporate productivity and institutional effectiveness (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004* [Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004], ¶122). Sublimated, if not missing, in this foregrounding of the church's work is the Wesleyan emphasis on the asymmetry of divine grace and human response, "the mutualism of free grace and free response," anchored in the *missio Dei* as unmitigated gift. See Catherine Keller, "Salvation Flows: Eschatology for a Feminist Wesleyanism," *Quarterly Review* 23/4 (Winter 2003).

⁴⁴ See Joerg Rieger, "Theology and Mission between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism," *Mission Studies* 21/2 (2006) 212-22, for a discussion of mission as "outreach," "partnership," and "inreach" (the last model based on mission as a two-way process).

⁴⁵ See Joerg Rieger, "Beyond Burnout: New Creation and the Economics of Grace in Global Capitalism," *Quarterly Review* 24/1 (Spring 2004):72-73.

renewal. In 2004, the Council announced seven “vision pathways” to assist the church in its task of making disciples,⁴⁶ which they subsequently consolidated into an “action plan” consisting of four “areas of emphasis.” The poor and marginalized manage to show up in two of these: actions to “strengthen ministries with the poor” and to launch a “global health initiative” aimed at preventing and eliminating diseases that result from poverty.⁴⁷ “Partnering with the poor” involves collaboration among general agencies, which includes a proposal to the 2008 General Conference to “affirm ministry with the poor,” development of multilingual education resources aimed at influencing public policy, and the launching of six “pilot projects” for ministry with the poor, both in the United States and in the central conferences.⁴⁸ Laudable as these efforts are, as “emphases”—let alone as “pilot projects”—the poor remain marginal to the church’s vision of renewal. Moreover, in the “area of emphasis” devoted to starting new churches (aimed at stemming the forty-year membership decline in the United States), those on the margins (“new immigrant and refugee communities” and “expanding racial/ethnic populations”) appear to be of interest largely as prime target audiences in a comprehensive church growth strategy.⁴⁹ I trust I am wrong in detecting here a subtle, although surely unintended, instance of the proclivity to control and manipulate identified earlier. Be that as it may, the bishops need to clarify just how the poor and marginalized will figure into strategies to develop new congregations. For, as Theodore Jennings has shown, denominational church growth efforts tend to favor affluent areas while renewal initiatives for economically depressed areas face obstacles or, in some cases, even active discouragement.⁵⁰

RECOVERING AN EPISCOPAL VISION

If, as I have been arguing thus far, the bishops had it right in *Children and Poverty*, then how do United Methodists recover that generative vision for their life together

⁴⁶ Linda Green, “U.S. churches face crisis, discipleship leaders say,” *United Methodist News Service* (21 March 2006):1.

⁴⁷ Linda Green, “Connectional Table affirms four ‘provocative proposals,’” *United Methodist News Service* (1 November 2006):2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁹ Linda Green, “Bishops adopt calls to action for United Methodists,” *United Methodist News Service* (13 November 2006):2.

⁵⁰ See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., “Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Heritage,” in *Theology and*

today? The bishops were clear that implementing the initiative in The United Methodist Church would mean confronting “formidable challenges” and would require “many years of sustained focus.”⁵¹ The bishops’ decision in 2004 to discontinue the initiative shows just how intractable these challenges are. And yet, if we believe, as I do, that the bishops were right to claim that The United Methodist Church will experience authentic renewal only in solidarity with the poor, then recovering this episcopal vision is not optional. If so, then the question becomes: What would it take for this vision to become the dominant path toward renewal for United Methodists? There is no way, of course, in the few pages that remain to do justice to this complex question, nor will I try to. Instead, I conclude by suggesting four steps—one spiritual, three theological—that I believe would assist United Methodists in their journey to the margins.

Embracing the Gift of Downward Mobility

As the bishops were fully aware, persuading middle-class United Methodists that engagement with the poor belongs to the essence of the gospel will require nothing short of conversion. Crucial to this conversion is to discern in the church’s increasing cultural disestablishment not a threat but a gift—indeed, a movement of divine providence. Then, says Douglas John Hall, the church would be ready to exchange a theology of glory for a theology of the cross. Then it would be persuaded that “a theology which finds strength in weakness and significance in littleness and purity in brokenness might have something *entirely significant* to say to our world.”⁵² A United Methodist Church that understands this insight would interpret its journey to the margins not as a grudging concession to the inexorable play of social, political, and economic forces, or even as the result of a choice *it* has made. Rather, United Methodist would find themselves in solidarity with the poor because they have discovered, once more, that it is from here that they can say something entirely significant to the world—and that they can do so only because they have realized that it is from here that *God* is saying something entirely significant to the world.

In grasping this insight United Methodists would comprehend that it is precisely at the margins that they can learn truths about themselves and about God that they cannot

Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage, ed. James C. Logan (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 150-52.

⁵¹ *Community with Children and the Poor*, 2.

⁵² Hall, *Future of the Church*, 34.

learn while remaining at the center. Joerg Rieger's distinction between "common interest" and "special interest" illustrates the point well. Given their privilege, power, and relative wealth, says Rieger, those in the center, in the "middle"—be that in culture or in the church—decide what counts as the common interest. Everything that falls outside the common interest (such as ministry with those on the margins) is considered a "special interest." Since we're led to believe that the "middle" has it right (after all, everything not in the middle is by definition "extreme") and deserves what it has, the tensions that occur in creating and sustaining the common interest remain covered up. Thus emerges a key truth that the margins can teach the center: the center always exists in relation to the margins, and often on the backs of those on the margins.⁵³ Therefore, as long as United Methodists fail to question the dynamic that holds center and margins in place, they remain blind to their captivity to the political, cultural, and economic powers that be—and, consequently, their common interest will reflect rather than challenge the cultural common interest.

This is where the bishops' provocative insight into Mark 2 discussed earlier emerges with prophetic force: it truly is only in the company of "the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the estranged, the hopeless, the broken in spirit" that the church can find the healing it needs. It is in being carried to the Master by the victims of the center that the church can find the release from its captivity to the center and can experience the renewal it so desires—and needs. If it is the case that the church needs the poor for its own healing into faithfulness, then engagement with the poor cannot but be integral to its identity and mission. One-way acts of outreach, which ultimately serve to keep the poor at arms' length, will no longer do. Only in solidarity with the poor, based on relationships of mutual trust and respect, reciprocity and openness, can the church experience renewal at the hands of its Master.

Recovering the Priority of the *Missio Dei*

Ultimately, as the bishops saw so clearly, the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in community with the poor begins not with nostalgic trips down memory lane or stepped-up social action. Indeed, it begins not with us at all but with God. Thus, United

⁵³ Rieger, "What Do Margins and Center Have to Do with Each Other?," 16-17.

Methodists will need to reclaim the priority of the *missio Dei* for the church's identity and mission. Only in construing its mission and ministry *theocentrically* will the church recognize the call of the margins as a *divine* beckoning. Moreover, only in grasping the mystery of God's redemptive way with the world will the church comprehend why it is, what it is, and where it is in the world. For it once again will have the eyes to see the divine conspiracy to weave the Kingdom into being from the bottom up. United Methodists will understand, once more, that God has chosen the margins as the site for redeeming the world. By going where the pain is greatest God exposes the myriad ways in which the political, social, and, above all, the economic systems in our increasingly global world exclude, marginalize, and oppress. Thus, in identifying with those who suffer, God in Christ proclaims good news to the poor. And yet, precisely because the center does not exist apart from the margins—because the reality of the margins “is also part of the (mostly repressed) reality of those who are part of the powers that be”⁵⁴—the gospel comes as a word of liberation to the rich and powerful also, although they are unlikely to receive it as such!

Thus, in the logic of the divine love, God offers healing to the whole body by attending to where the pain is and to what causes the pain. In this way, the *tremendum et fascinans* reality of the uncontrollable God is able to save us all—“those forced to endure the greatest pressures in our time, and . . . those of us . . . used to exerting pressure.”⁵⁵ The church identifies with the poor, suffer their exclusion, oppression, and abuse, and with them resist the powers that be because this is God's way of healing a human community in pain, including the church. The church follows God to the margins because it has no other reason for being but to imitate the mystery of God's way with the world. The church's cruciform praxis flows from God's cruciform praxis.

It should be clear, then, that the church's option for the poor has nothing to do with the moral superiority of the poor or any special privileges they might have, let alone that the poor now assume the role of power and authority previously occupied by the center.⁵⁶ South African theologian Albert Nolan, writing during apartheid, puts the point succinctly: “The option for the poor is not a choice about the *recipients* of the gospel

⁵⁴ Rieger, “Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside,” 129.

⁵⁵ Rieger, “What Do Margins and Center Have to Do with Each Other?,” 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 135-36.

message, to *whom* we must preach the gospel; it is a matter of *what gospel* we preach to anyone at all.”⁵⁷

Nurturing a Holy People

The previous paragraphs bring us to what the bishops in *Children and Poverty* have called “the great challenge” facing The United Methodist Church; namely, how to understand our life together in such a way that the poor are genuine partners in the gospel and not merely objects of congregational benevolence. “We are convinced,” they claim, “that the reshaping of the church and the proclamation of the gospel cannot take place apart from a newly developed sense of community”⁵⁸—a vision of ecclesial life they later would identify and describe as the Beloved Community.

Articulating such an understanding ecclesial community would require attention to the role and interrelation of doctrine, theology, polity, and institutional structure in forming and nurturing the church’s identity and mission, a task that exceeds the confines of this paper. So I will restrict myself to two comments. First, United Methodists can take an important step toward an understanding of community in solidarity with the poor by embracing holiness and not disciple-making as the church’s mission. The fact is mission and community cannot be separated: they mutually imply and condition each other. As I trust is clear from my earlier analysis, the dynamic of community embedded in the current formulation of the church’s mission exhibits a logic that not only keeps the poor at arms’ length but also tempts the church into a posture of manipulation and control. By contrast, the logic of cruciform love at the heart of holiness, instantiating the self-emptying love expressed in the *missio Dei*, invites a dynamic of ecclesial life that nurtures just the kind of virtues needed for solidarity with the poor.

The bishops’ vision in *Children and Poverty* makes this move possible, since love is central to their argument for the church’s engagement with the poor and their description of the Beloved Community. Yet, curiously, they do not take this step. This is unfortunate. Precisely their rich heritage of holiness allows United Methodists both to address the

⁵⁷ Albert Nolan, “The Option for the Poor in South Africa,” in *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. DeGruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1985), 190.

⁵⁸ *Community with Children and the Poor*, 2.

shortcomings in the dominant renewal narrative and creatively to retrieve concepts, disciplines, and practices that enable construals of community and mission in which the poor are integral to the church's being and doing. Again, a few comments will need to suffice. First, holiness recovers the radical nature of love of God and neighbor envisioned by Wesley. For Wesley, the love that marks the Methodist "character" is unconditional, self-emptying, dispossessing, cruciform—giving itself with profligate abandon to God in the neighbor.⁵⁹ Thus, holy love exhibits a logic in which love is always to be directed *outward*, forever focused on the *other*. But, crucially, the neighbor *is a very particular other*—the stranger, the poor, the oppressed.⁶⁰ Second, holiness as radical love of God in the neighbor affirms the priority of the *missio Dei* as well as the mode of its presence in the world, which the church is summoned to imitate. Jennings puts the point well:

[Holiness] entails an imitation of the one who though he was rich, for our sakes became poor. It is . . . an embodiment of the practice of love that lives in sacrificial solidarity and unconditional generosity among those who are excluded by the religious and secular systems of deceit, destruction, and death. . . . [Holiness] is the imitation of the divine love under the concrete forms of social, political, economic and religious history.⁶¹

As *imitating* the divine love, the church's pursuit of holiness is forever a response: the church loves because *God* loves. As seeking holiness in community with those on the margins, the church loves *the way* God loves. Thus, in so embodying holy love in mission and community, United Methodists participate in the divine conspiracy to heal creation from the margins. Third, holiness as radical love of the marginal others fosters a spirituality on the margins, a "spirituality on the edge." Instead of opting for the safety of a "spirituality of security"—safely at the center—a spirituality on the edge embraces the precarity, instability, poverty, and vulnerability of marginality, because it lives from a God who has embraced poverty, vulnerability, marginality.⁶²

⁵⁹ John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," in *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley*, ed. by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 32-46. See particularly page 38.

⁶⁰ In his own way, John Wesley made a "preferential option for the poor," says Theodore Jennings, and Wesley understood holiness as the form in which this commitment finds concrete enactment, in both its personal and social dimensions. See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Wesley and the Poor: An Agenda for Wesleyans," in *The Portion of the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 32.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20, 32-33.

⁶² See Kerry Walters, *Jacob's Hip: Finding God in an Anxious Age* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 22. The

The logic of holiness can release the church from its current flirtation with ecclesiocentrism, from its tendency to fixate on institutional self-preoccupation—what Outler calls “*ecclesia per se*—institutional maintenance and management.”⁶³ As essentially other-directed, holiness allows United Methodists to restore a vision of the church that is theocentric, focusing not on perpetuating its own existence but on the mysteries of the *missio Dei* in the world. In so doing, the church is enabled both to restore the irreducible priority of the divine gracious initiative and properly to situate the place and role of the church in the divine mission in the world. God does not belong to the church or to any institution. Grace, as the uncanny presence-absence of the divine Other, can never be objectified or commodified, or made to function as a “rationale,” or even a “goal,” of the church’s mission. In its “divine wildness,”⁶⁴ the Spirit blows where it wills, inside and outside the church, on behalf of the church and in spite of the church, forever resisting closure, totalization, system.

Retrieving holiness thus construed as the church’s mission provides the basis for an ecclesial community grounded in mutual respect, openness, and reciprocity in which the poor are genuine partners in the gospel and not objects of churchly benevolence. The very definition of holiness as outlined above makes it impossible for the poor to be kept at arms’ length. Moreover, the logic of holiness subverts the impulse to control and manipulate inherent in community based on the mission to make disciples as it is currently interpreted. Finally, holiness provides the appropriate context for the injunction to make disciples. Situating the task of disciple-making within the larger mission of holiness allows a proper theological articulation of its nature and its place within the total mission and ministry of the church and, in so doing, forestalls its cooptation in the interest of institutional preoccupation. Thus, I believe Robert Neville is exactly right when he claims that the task of disciple-making is a *part* but not the *whole* of the church’s calling.⁶⁵ Making disciples, as teaching and learning the way of Jesus, is part of

phrase “spirituality on the edge” is his.

⁶³ Albert C. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 26.

⁶⁴ Robert Cummings Neville, *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 142.

⁶⁵ Robert Cummings Neville, “Is the Mission of The United Methodist Church to ‘Make Disciples of Jesus Christ’?” *Quarterly Review* 23/4 (Winter 2003):95.

that challenging yet joyous task of forming “real” Christians, as Wesley called it,⁶⁶ of forming selves skilled in the discipline and understanding of holiness as radical love of God and neighbor.⁶⁷

This brings me to my second comment. How is such a holy people to be *nurtured* and *sustained*? Again, an adequate response to this question is not possible here. I’ll confine myself to one observation. I believe the means of grace can play a crucial role not only in forming the virtues of holy love but also in assuring that engagement with the poor remains integral to the church’s life. Surprisingly, the bishops nowhere mention the means of grace, except to call the poor a means of grace and transformation.⁶⁸ First, as Wesley and the early Methodists knew so well, the means of grace, *both* works of piety *and* works of mercy, are essential in fostering the “holy tempers” of humility, openness, self-denial, and the like, so central to a community in true solidarity with the poor.⁶⁹ Second, as Joerg Rieger, Randy Maddox, Theodore Jennings, and others have pointed out, by designating the works of mercy as means of grace, Wesley took a crucial step in making engagement with the poor essential to the holy life.⁷⁰ This means solidarity with the poor can never be optional for the church, if it seeks the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.⁷¹ And precisely by shaping the virtues of gratitude, humility, and empathy, the works of mercy foster a community in which both the one who practices the means and the one who receives them are transformed.⁷² Engagement with the poor thus

⁶⁶ For an excellent discussion of discipleship as formation in the holy life, see Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley’s Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church.” Available online at *Pulpit & Pew*, <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/otherpub.html>.

⁶⁷ It is significant that in her reflection on the denomination’s mission statement, Elaine Robinson finds herself invoking the language of holiness to interpret the meaning of “making disciples.” Clearly, holiness is the encompassing context within which disciple-making should be understood. Why then not just straightforwardly adopt holiness as the church’s mission? See Elaine A. Robinson, “The Global Mission of The United Methodist Church,” in *Considering the Great Commission: Evangelism and Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit*, ed. W. Stephen Gunter and Elaine Robinson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 41-55.

⁶⁸ *Community with Children and the Poor*, 2.

⁶⁹ See Wesley’s classic essay “The Means of Grace,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. and annotated by Edward H. Sugden (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis and Taylor, 1955), 1:237-60.

⁷⁰ See Joerg Rieger, “Between God and the Poor: Rethinking the Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition” (83-100), and Randy Maddox, “‘Visit the Poor’: John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers” (59-82), in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Kingswood, 2002); Jennings, “The Portion of the Poor,” *Portion of the Poor*, 21-23.

⁷¹ In *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, Wesley’s classic statement of Christian perfection or holiness as love of God and neighbor, Wesley calls us to love the neighbor *as* our own souls, making the relationship to the neighbor integral to the self’s becoming. See John Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1966), 84.

⁷² See Wesley’s sermon “On Visiting the Sick,” in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed.

becomes a two-way street of mutual transformation.⁷³ In the dynamic flow of such mutual transformation a holy people is formed and sustained in which the divine conspiracy finds concrete embodiment. As such, the church becomes a prolepsis of the coming Reign—a foretaste of the divine *oikonomia* in which all of God’s creatures will have access to the conditions of life and everyone will have what it takes to live.⁷⁴ Precisely as a sign of God’s reign, the church must be a counterculture—a messianic community in which the social, political, and economic factors that divide, oppress, and exclude are resisted and overcome.

Encouraging a New Ecclesiological Imagination

United Methodists desperately need a new ecclesiological imagination if the fundamental reshaping of the church the bishops envisioned is to become a reality. For if my earlier analysis has merit, the model of church currently in vogue merely perpetuates our present alienation from the poor. Here our theologians can play a critical part. But this means United Methodist theology would need to shed its longstanding ambivalence about ecclesiology, epitomized in the tired “society versus church” debates.⁷⁵ And it must

Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 389, 390, 397.

⁷³ Rieger, “Between God and the Poor: Rethinking the Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition,” 90.

⁷⁴ See M. Douglas Meeks, “Economy and the Future of Liberation Theology in North America,” in *Liberating the Future*, 43-59. See also idem, “Trinity, Community, and Power,” in *Trinity, Community, and Power*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000), 15-32, where Meeks uses the logic of gifting at the heart of the trinitarian life to define the logic of holiness as kenotic love.

⁷⁵ Methodism’s skittishness (at times, even suspicion) about the need for a full-fledged ecclesiology has been well documented. Albert Outler’s classic essay has been extraordinarily influential in persuading Methodists to understand their “unique ecclesiological pattern” as designed “to function best *within* an encompassing environment of *catholicity* . . . the effectual and universal Christian *community*” and thus to forego efforts at a doctrine of the church complete with “bell, book, and candle.” See his classic essay “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *Doctrine of the Church*, 11-28. A more recent restatement of Outler’s vision is found in Michael G. Cartwright, “The Pathos and Promise of American Methodist Ecclesiology,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 47/1 (Spring 1992); 7-25. While discerning Methodism’s and United Methodism’s place within the *ecumene* remains a crucial task, William Abraham is surely correct when he urges United Methodists to accept the fact that “we are not an ecclesial crock. . . . We are a major Protestant denomination complete with orders, sacraments, standards of membership, sacraments, and the like. We need to own up to our ecclesial identity and come to terms with all that this involves” (see William J. Abraham, “Judicial Council Decision 1032 and Ecclesiology.” Paper presented at a consultation on Judicial Council Decision 1032, sponsored by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, February 15-16, 2007, Nashville, Tennessee; available online at <http://www.gbhem.org/asp/resourceLibrary.asp>). Indeed, it is precisely in attending systematically to a theology of church that United Methodists will be in a position to offer the universal church the power of their heritage, principally, as I argue here, their commitment to solidarity with the poor and marginalized. For excellent historical and theological reflections on Methodist and United Methodist ecclesiology, see the work of Russell E. Richey, particularly “Ecclesial Sensibilities in Nineteenth-Century American Methodism,” *Quarterly*

do so because the deaths of 35,000 children a day from poverty and preventable diseases have rendered deep-running, sustained theological reflection on the nature, mission, and ministry of the church a moral and spiritual obligation.⁷⁶ As Joerg Rieger has pointed out, “no theology can afford not to give an account of what God is doing among those who suffer the most.”⁷⁷ Yet, despite important recent contributions that deserve careful study and retrieval,⁷⁸ Methodist theology for the most part continues to reflect social and intellectual paradigms and interests largely unaffected by the suffering of the world’s poor.⁷⁹

The paradigm shift in being and doing church involved in a journey from the center to the margins requires careful theological guidance if it is going to have the theological, spiritual, and institutional integrity to sustain it over the long haul. But this guidance depends upon an ecclesiological imagination grounded in approaches to the theological task normed and focused by a commitment to “the least of these.” Thus, United Methodist theology can take a crucial step by taking as a fundamental commitment Richard Heitzenrater’s challenge to “let the deprivations of all our neighbors help shape our moral imagination, our ethical consciousness, our theological categories, and our social programs.”⁸⁰

The need to locate United Methodist theology intentionally and self-consciously

Review 4/1 (Spring 1984): 31-42; and more recently *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice*. United Methodism and American Culture, ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

⁷⁶ At the height of apartheid in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church declared a *status confessionis*, challenging the churches to take a public stand in the face of a system that called into question the very essence of the gospel. Does the plight of the poor in our world today not rise to a similar status? See the essays in *n Oomblik van Waarheid* (E.T. *A Moment of Truth*), ed. G.D. Cloete and D.J. Smit (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1984).

⁷⁷ See Rieger, “Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside,” 137.

⁷⁸ See especially the work of Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). See also M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995); Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2002); and especially Joerg Rieger and John J. Vincent, *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2003).

⁷⁹ In his spirited analysis of the current state of Wesleyan theology, William Abraham cites Wesleyan theologies devoted to the margins (for example, the work of Joerg Rieger) as examples of the polemic of competing theologies that has led to the exhaustion of Wesleyan theology. This depiction of such proposals as “special interest” theologies is perhaps not surprising, given that both Abraham’s analysis and his proposals for the future of Wesleyan theology remain confined to the agenda and interests of a First World context. See William J. Abraham, “The End of Wesleyan Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40/1 (Spring 2005):7-25.

⁸⁰ Richard P. Heitzenrater, “The Poor and the People Called Methodists,” in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, 38.

“between God and the excluded”⁸¹ is much more than an academic matter. Today, one out of three United Methodists lives outside the United States. And if current denominational figures are any indication, the growth will increase dramatically in the years ahead.⁸² As United Methodists outside the United States become more numerous, the disparity in wealth, power, and influence between United Methodists in the First World and their brothers and sisters in impoverished Third World settings will become increasingly difficult to ignore. The denomination and its theologians will need to confront the theological, moral, and institutional implications of this emerging reality for our theology and practice of church—particularly in light of our stated commitment to be a “global” church. It is critical that the theological perspectives of United Methodist theologians from both First and Third worlds be heard fully—and equally—in the dialogue. As with our engagement with the poor, so with our approach to theology: one-way relationships must end. Two-way conversations open opportunities for the realities of poverty, suffering, and exclusion, as well as the social, political, and economic mechanisms that enable and perpetuate them—realities that impact the daily lives of growing numbers of United Methodists around the world—to shape our theological and ecclesial consciousness in new ways. Such conversations will no doubt be challenging and unsettling, at times even painful, particularly for those of us in the First World. Yet, if sustained with courage and openness, these encounters could play a crucial role not only in the renewal of the church’s theological mind (Rom. 12:2) but also in prompting, guiding, and accompanying the church’s journey to the margins.

Consequently, one of the most critical contributions that United Methodist theologians can make is to provide the church with ecclesiological models that incorporate thorough analyses of the political, social, and economic structures of the twenty-first-century world, particularly the increasingly all-defining reality of global capitalism. There is no avoiding this admittedly complex task. Theological proposals that fail to reflect a deep understanding of the structures, relationships, and exclusionary

⁸¹ The phrase belongs to Joerg Rieger. See his *God and the Excluded* for an incisive critique of current models of theology and his own innovative proposal for theological approaches normed by a commitment to those on the “underside of history.”

⁸² According to the latest figures from the General Council on Finance and Administration, United Methodist annual conferences in Africa and the Philippines grew at spectacular rates: West Africa at 415 percent, Congo at 129 percent, Africa at 233 percent, and the Philippines at 200 percent. See “Open hearts. Open Minds. Open

dynamics of the global market will offer the church little guidance in interpreting the gospel in actual situations of suffering. As a result the integrity of the church's witness suffers, because the church will lack crucial intellectual and practical resources for discerning with integrity *how*, *when*, and *where* to resist the powers in the diverse and multifaceted contexts in which the gospel summons it to act. Fortunately, for some time now a number of theologians, among them United Methodist theologians, have been interpreting the challenges of the emerging global market in their theological proposals.⁸³ The urgency of the times demands that this practice become central to all United Methodist theology.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, many people may consider it foolishness to think that a denomination as large and as diverse and, some would argue, as fractured, as The United Methodist Church could be persuaded to opt for the margins, again. After all, didn't the bishops warn us that such an effort faces "formidable challenges" and would require "many years of sustained focus"? And doesn't their decision to discontinue the initiative on children and poverty signal that such an undertaking is simply not possible? Perhaps it does. And yet we face a dilemma: If, as *Children and Poverty* suggests, and as I have argued as well, solidarity with the poor is an imperative of the gospel, then opting for the margins is not an option after all. It is an act of obedience—which means we do not have a choice *not* to undertake this journey in cruciform discipleship.

Doors. This Is Our Story," General Council on Finance and Administration (2007), 17.

⁸³ Several United Methodist theologians are doing important work on theology and economy. Here is just a sampling of names and literature. Prominent is the groundbreaking work of Joerg Rieger. See, for example, "Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside," in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed., Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 124-41 (the volume as a whole is an excellent resource); "Introduction: Opting for the Margins in a Postmodern World" and "Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World," in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) (the article in the same volume, titled "On [Re]Centering the Margins: A Euro-African Perspective on the Option for the Poor," by Euro-American theologian David N. Field is a treasure); "What Do Margins and Center Have to Do with Each Other? The Future of Methodist Traditions and Theology," in *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition*, ed. Joerg Rieger and John J. Vincent (Nashville: Kingswood, 2003), 15-29. See also the seminal work of M. Douglas Meeks in *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), as well as M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995). Finally, see Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

Yet, where do we begin? What would provide the momentum for such a movement of renewal? The burden of my paper has been to suggest that theological reformulation of the nature and mission of the church is a crucial—even a foundational—step in this movement. But theology alone is not enough. Neither are pronouncements from the denominational hierarchy, including episcopal initiatives. Indeed, Joerg Rieger argues that, to be successful, the renewal of the church embodied in *Children and Poverty* must take the form of a “reformation from below.”⁸⁴ He has a point. So one way to begin a momentum toward renewal is to identify, connect, and support the many United Methodist congregations, pastors, laypeople, and organizations who are *already* living their faith in solidarity with the poor—and to find ways to tell their stories. United Methodists familiar with their heritage know the potential of grassroots movements to effect transformation and renewal in the church.

And yet the denominational leadership can also play a role. As the bishops pointed out in *Children and Poverty*, a crucial part of reshaping the church in solidarity with the poor is to raise critical questions about polity and practices of ministry, including how we compensate, evaluate, and appoint clergy; how and where we start new churches; how we recruit, form, support, and deploy pastoral leaders; and how general agencies are structured and decide their priorities.⁸⁵ If the general agencies, particularly the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the General Board of Discipleship, whose portfolios include oversight of clergy ministry and new congregational development, were to reorder their vision, mission, and responsibilities to reflect their solidarity with the poor, then a significant force for the reshaping of the church would be opened up.

Finally, the Council of Bishops can be an important catalyst in prompting and sustaining this momentum toward the margins. They can begin, as I have suggested, by recovering the vision for the church’s renewal they proposed in *Children and Poverty* and by situating the current initiatives at making disciples within that larger theological framework. Second, they can advocate for this vision in key decision-making and legislative venues, such as the Connectional Table and General Conference. Third, they can support, encourage, and reward grassroots efforts such as those mentioned above in

⁸⁴ Rieger, “What Do Margins and Center Have to Do with Each Other?”, 24, 27.

⁸⁵ *Community with Children and the Poor*, 8-9.

their annual conferences. Finally, they can initiate, encourage, and support provocative approaches to pastoral ministry, such as forms of itinerancy that recover Wesley's system of employing persons drawn from the social and economic margins of society ministering to those on the social and economic margins.⁸⁶ Indeed, such innovations open important opportunities for the United Methodist Order of Deacons to live into its potential as the community set apart to lead in "connecting the church with the most needy, neglected, and marginalized among the children of God."⁸⁷

Perhaps, taken together, these modest efforts, and many others besides, will become the mustard seeds that, finding fertile soil, flourish into trees (Matt. 13:31-32) whose leaves offer healing to the church and to the world (Rev. 22:2).

⁸⁶ John McEllhenny makes this argument in "Itinerancy is Dead—But It Can Live Again," *Quarterly Review* 23/1 (Spring 2003):59-70. He picks gays and lesbians as a marginal group that could benefit from such experiments in itinerancy. His suggestion is equally suitable for those who living on the economic fringes of our world.

⁸⁷ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶328.