

**“Holy Peoples or A Holy People?:
Reflections and Questions for Faithful (United Methodist)
Ecclesiology, Formation, and Evangelism”**

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I. Introduction

I'm quite certain that my parishioner thought I had lost my mind. I had suggested to the one person in the church who had faithfully prepared the coffee for the congregation once a week for over a decade that the best thing we could do would be to convert the Narthex of the church into a space that resembled something like a “Starbucks” coffee shop. This meant that rather than appearing to be what it was, a vestibule of dark wood and stained glass, leading into an equally traditional sanctuary designed and installed by generations long passed on, the Narthex might reflect some updated looks and smells: spot lighting, comfortable seating, espresso drinks steaming, and so on. I explained that this is what churches were doing to attract younger people: generations missing from the church but fully present just a block or two away dropping disposable income on caffeine and sugar. I defied her to find one of them who knew what a Narthex even was in the first place. Did we want to be relevant or not? Did we want to grow or not? Did we want to succeed or not?

My argument was not convincing enough; To this day, that church still drinks cheap coffee and they enter the sanctuary through a little space called the Narthex. But I remain confused: did I succeed, or did I fail? Can I take it as a good sign that rather than giving into the contemporary tendency to break down every vestige of tradition in the interest of maximizing an image of relevance, a line had been drawn there: the coffee bar was out, but the stained glass was in? Some might suggest that this was just that kind of success: a story of a church realizing that it is called to be a part of the Church, consonant with the two thousand years of history, practice and tradition that lies behind this present moment. To do any less might be the sign of a failure

to participate in the ecumenical life of the Church catholic, and thus, it is simply not up to any of us to reject or replace what we have been faithfully entrusted to hand on in the same faithful way. Of course, others might not agree at all with that analysis, and so might hear this Narthex story as a story of failure. A story of a church falling short of relevance that might have transformed an old narthex and sanctuary into a welcome kiosk, coffee bar, and worship center. As some might put it, this was a decision for “tradition” over “mission,” and consequently, a failure of the church to be faithful to its evangelistic calling.¹

After several years and long consideration, however, I take it that this is neither a story of failure or success, but that this story is rather best understood as a *warning*—a warning that there is more at stake here than narthexes and coffee, more than can be limited by a conversation of “tradition” versus “mission”. Instead, I take this story as a warning that the conversations we have within the church regarding ecclesiology, the ministries of formation and evangelism, and the meaning of reform and renewal are all subject to limitations and subversions of which we are not often even aware. Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that the influences of modernity and particularly, late-modern capitalism and consumer culture have limited our imaginations and stifled our conversations about church, formation, and evangelism to the extent that we are misled by the impulse to seek “relevance” or “success” as the church, rather than to answer the calling to be “a holy people” together in the world.

I will begin by offering some description of the powers and principalities of secular modernity and late-modern capitalism and the ways these powers place the church in service to the state and market, which consequently reduce focus in ministry to concern for the realm of the individual. From there we will seek to display these influences at work in contemporary

¹ George G. Hunter, III. *Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2003), 18.

discussions of Wesleyan/Methodist ecclesiology, formation, and evangelism. Throughout, however, we will also seek the streams of tradition both in the wider Christian family and within the Wesleyan/Methodist family that nurture an alternative ecclesial identity and practice. It is these offerings that envision the church as “a holy people” that can shape our imagination and practice in ways that will guide us to be the Church in the world, serving not the state, not the market, but Jesus as Lord.

II. Where Are We? and How Did We Get Here?

In truth, the warning I seek to issue here is one long sounded by others who have helped to awaken us and to deepen our understanding of the particularly difficult relationship of theology, church, and modernity. For the purposes of this article, I wish to turn to just two: David Yeago in his article “Messiah’s People: The Culture of the Church in the Midst of the Nations,”² and Vincent Miller in his recent book, Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture.³ Together, they reveal to us the difficult truth that in times like these, it is easier than we think to serve principalities and powers such as the State and the Market rather than the Lord we know as Jesus Christ. In leaning on the diagnostic analysis in the first part of his essay, I believe Yeago will assist us in seeing this broader picture of the church’s place in modernity, while Miller’s analysis will further clarify the distinctive danger to faithful identity and practice the turn to market and consumer culture represents.

² David Yeago, “Messiah’s People: The Culture of the Church in the Midst of the Nations,” *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. VI, No. 1, 146-171.

³ Vincent J. Miller, Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture (New York: Continuum, 2005)

David Yeago, Messiah's People

In his article written at the end of the twentieth century, Yeago reflects on a long standing issue of ecclesial and theological concern: namely, the relationship of church and culture, or church and society. He argues that the eventual fusion of the divided church(es) with various nation states in the post-reformation period created the environment that led to the European wars of religion—years of “misery” which fueled the development of the Enlightenment and a “secular” rationality that set itself apart from the dangerous and destructive influence of “sacred” religious knowledge. Secular rationality posited that behind or beneath all religious descriptions of reality lay a deeper truth, what Yeago calls a “more basic ‘secular’ account which was always there underneath.”⁴ These were not considered equal, but differing accounts or simply rival traditions offering different perspectives on the same phenomena; rather, Yeago argues, the sacred was the “varnish” on reality that could be “scraped off” to discover the more fundamental, secular, or natural truth, an “understanding of reality we all have in common, transcending all our divisive particularities, including religious ones.”⁵

With this development, Yeago argues that the stage was set for the modern adaptation of that tradition, mapping the sacred and secular split onto the differentiation between the “public” and the “private.” In this “modern settlement” the secular is rendered the outward public reality while the sacred traditions are relegated to the interior world of the private individual or sectarian movement. Thus banished from an existence that could be considered “outside of” or “different from” that larger public secular reality, the church was consequently reduced to being a “private ‘voluntary association’ of like-minded individuals *within* a public order governed by secular

⁴ Yeago, 147.

⁵ Ibid., 148.

rationality.”⁶ As such, the church is then set in a perpetual struggle to discover its purpose, its “reason for being,” within the boundaries of that secular space and thus, also subject to defining those aims in light of the “projects and aspirations of that larger order.”⁷ This perpetual struggle for purpose has been described by Reinhard Hütter as the church’s “ceaseless crisis of legitimation.”⁸

So, in other words, with the acceptance of the relationship of “public” and “secular” in modernity, the church was allowed to occupy the space that was left over—the private sector where the church can be a voluntary association of individuals involved in religion, much as the Rotary Club is a voluntary association of individuals involved in business networking and community service. However, Yeago goes further to argue that in this modern settlement, the church as a voluntary association of individuals involved in religion had to define the shape of that involvement in ways that could remain intelligible within that larger secular order. To put it another way, the church will make sense in modernity only if and just to the extent that it has a function that somehow serves the secular order. “Thus,” Yeago writes,

“...the problem of the Church’s mission, is defined as the problem of the *relevance* of the ideas and values, the message, or the religious experience which the church conveys to the particular larger culture of which the church is a part. What role could these ideas, this message, this experience play within this culture? How could they be ‘meaningful’ in this cultural setting? What legitimate place could they find there? What function could they fulfill in the life of the surrounding culture?”⁹

⁶ Ibid. Yeago argues that in the modern settlement, the church is not “allowed” to be what he calls “a distinctive public community in its own right, the present civic assembly of the eschatological city, constituting a new public order which occupies its own public space in the midst of the nations.” See p. 148. I wonder somewhat about the use of the word “public” to describe the church, particularly as the term is used in the modern settlement’s bifurcation of public and private. Rhetorically, I see how he uses it to make his point about how the church may be “public” in the way secular rationality is seen as “public.” But I take his use of “public” here to mean “visible,” and thus, I wonder whether a better way to describe the church would be to use a term like “alternative politics” in the place of “public.”

⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

If the Rotary Club exists as a service club that does good deeds in the community while offering fellowship and networking opportunities for local business professionals, then how will the church form itself to offer up to the community a similarly helpful set of goods and services? Usually the result of this is, as Yeago argues, that the church “figures only as the vehicle for something essentially disembodied and non-public: a set of beliefs and values, an abstract ‘message,’ an inward religious experience”¹⁰ and not a public, visible community that constitutes a different way of living “in the world”, but not being “of the world.”

Placed in this situation seeking relevance, the Church according to Yeago most often turns to one of the two forms of recognized “public life” in liberal societies—the state or the market. If they turn to the state, the churches tend to take on relevance in relationship to the social and political projects also being pursued in the context of the state. “That is, the church can seek a reason for being by associating itself with one or another of the parties and movements which seek to influence the state and get its monopoly of coercive power behind their own agendas.”¹¹ “The church legitimates itself by taking on the socially recognized role of a motivational support-system for socio-political struggle.”¹²

However, in turning to the market, the church accepts the role of becoming another “provider of goods and services to consumers” without realizing that the market is “governed by the principle of subjective value: goods and services have whatever value consumers choose, for whatever reason, to place upon them. This means that legitimacy in the culture of the market is identical with market share.”¹³ “Thus on this approach we will come to measure the church’s

¹⁰ Ibid., 148.

¹¹ Ibid., 165.

¹² Ibid., 166.

¹³ Ibid.

legitimacy by consumer response, by the popularity of its product and the share of the religion-market it acquires.”¹⁴

While the journey to this point has been complex (and I do not pretend to have communicated the full extent of Yeago’s argument), it has been necessary to suggest that the practical questions of whether a church should consider developing its property to mimic contemporary bookstores or coffee shops is a question that must lead us to some deep reflection on the nature of ecclesiology, culture, and modernity. While I do believe Yeago is quite right to point to both the state and the market as targets in the church’s ongoing search for legitimacy and relevance in modernity, space does not allow focus on both; and thus, I turn now to another source to deepen reflection on the ways the Church pursues the relationship with the second of the two powers named by Yeago: the market. With the deeper analysis of the rise of capitalism, consumer culture and the voracious practice of commodification endemic to those systems, Vincent Miller helps us understand in deeper (and perhaps more frightening) ways the necessity of the warning being sounded here.

Vincent Miller, Consuming Religion

In his book, Vincent Miller offers us an account of the rise of capitalism and the transformation in life it brought to the U.S. in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the advent of the “Fordist” Era, social reality began to change concomitantly with the shift from an economic focus on production to consumption. In this economic reality, the decline of the self-sustaining household made room for the development of the single family home, which, Miller argues represented “a milestone in the shunting of the need for social standing into consumption

¹⁴ Ibid., 167.

in a way that ensures the endless perpetuation of consumer desire.”¹⁵ The single family home reduced the focus on multi-generational family and narrowed afterward to what became the norm: the nuclear family. The nuclear family sought an autonomous lifestyle, increasingly insulated from extended family and other social connections, and sustained by the security of wages (rather than the support of the extended family and community) and a market of technology that sustained a household for the smaller family unit. Miller points out that this shift to an increasingly isolated existence fueled by consumption represented one of the thickest roots beneath what would sprout as the modern woes of advanced capitalism and consumer culture: individualism, materialism, and the decreasing capacity to care well for one another.¹⁶ Part of this care, of course, is the formative role elder generations offer to younger generations, which is also mitigated as generations in the extended family are separated from one another by the move to the nuclear family. As Miller puts it, this created a norm wherein “each generation is freer to make its own choices regarding cultural and religious practices from the options they encounter. These choices of culture are increasingly drawn from commercial offerings as consumption becomes a means of establishing and expressing identity.”¹⁷

This effect intensified over the course of the twentieth century, as the alienation of the single-family home was exacerbated in the Post-Fordist Era, beginning in the 1970’s. In this period of economic instability, facing diminishing return from mass market production, advanced capitalism shifted to new strategies to sustain the cycle of production and consumption vital to the future growth and expansion of the economic system. While some of these strategies

¹⁵ Miller, 50.

¹⁶ Miller writes, “The individualism and materialism rightly condemned by papal encyclicals, ethicists, and cultural critics have their foundation in the very material social structure of the single-family home.” And thus, being isolated from the neighborhood, the community, and even the welfare of others in the world, the “geography of the single family home makes it very likely that we will care more about the feeding of our pets than about the millions of children who go to bed hungry around us.” 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

involved changes to the systems of labor management and methods of production, my interest is in the developments made to increase consumption. The primary strategy developed to this end was the development of the niche market. Flexibility in production methods allowed the development of specialized products for particular groups of people, identified by the growing capacity of information technology to make finer distinctions of desires within varying demographics.¹⁸ This had an even more fragmentary effect. While the move to the single family home created the socially isolated nuclear family, the development of targeted niche marketing carried that disintegration even further, considering each member of the nuclear family a viable consumer to whom marketing could be directed. Further individualized, each member of the nuclear family was empowered to make consumptive choices as individuals, for themselves, and apart from consideration of the needs of others, not just those in the extended family or in the wider community (local and global) but even those “others” who live under the same roof.¹⁹

While naming these developments helps to explain the rise of a nation of consumers, Miller also offers help in explaining how such a consumer culture effects the appropriation and practice of religious traditions. The market excelled at developing products, commodities, especially shaped for each niche in order to maximize the potential for sales and profits. In that environment, the market will take anything and everything that it can in order to package it and offer it as a “new” product to the consumptive public, meaning that almost no line is drawn around that which cannot be subjected to commodification and consumption, including of

¹⁸ As an example of this development, Miller offers the story of the H.J. Heinz Company that in the Fordist era built its reputation in the mustard market with its signature square-faceted jar and familiar label and logo: they sold their singular product on the basis of their reputation. In the Post-Fordist era, however, Heinz began to develop new kinds of mustard, most notably, Grey Poupon, which fed a market of young professionals (Yuppies) seeking a more gourmet experience not offered by the plain yellow mustard they ate while growing up. The impact of the development of these markets to address these specialized forms of desire is captured in a quote Miller finds from another study on post-fordist capitalism: as one “yuppie” puts it— “All I want is a place where I can buy twelve kinds of mustard.” See Miller, 67-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

course, all forms of culture, religious and otherwise. In fact, "...the most profound challenge of consumerism," as Miller puts it "[is] the commodification of culture—the reduction of religious beliefs, symbols, and values to objects of consumption."²⁰ Such beliefs, symbols, values, and practices, Miller explains,

“are abstracted from their conditions of production, presented as objects valuable in themselves, shorn of their interrelations with the other symbols, beliefs, and practices that determine their meaning, and function in their traditional contexts. Unmoored from these contexts, their ‘semantic mass’ is greatly reduced. Cultural commodities become more susceptible to manipulation and misappropriation, free-floating signifiers that can be put to uses unrelated, indeed contradictory, to the meanings they bear.”²¹

Thus, individuals inside and outside of the Christian tradition are able to purchase a crucifix, either because it is an item of devotion and prayer, or because they agree with Madonna who once said, “Crucifixes are sexy.”²² The point here is to note how even these religious symbols, beliefs, and practices are subject to commodification that allows for their purchase by individuals in the consumer culture.

It is here that we can see the force of Miller and Yeago’s accounts in concert with one another as we can see how what Miller describes fits into the diagnosis Yeago offers. It is with the establishment of the “products” (religious symbols and practices) and the cultivation of the “consumers” (individuals in niche markets) that the late-Capitalist market economy provides contemporary congregations and their leaders with the nearly irresistible temptation to accept their placement in modernity, relegated to the realm of the “private,” and in this light, left to seek relevance and legitimacy through consumer popularity. If, indeed, this is part of the story within which we find ourselves in the contemporary (United Methodist) Church, what shall we do?

²⁰ Ibid., 19.

²¹ Ibid., 66.

²² Ibid., 79.

To begin, Miller suggests that theology and theological reflection on ecclesiology and practices must take these realities into account.²³ Indeed, Miller suggests that interaction within our religious traditions is even a dangerous task for these very reasons. This is so because due to the pervasive nature of the market's formation of consumer culture, we, too, will be subject to the same tendency to commodify aspects of our own tradition. It will be a temptation even for us to take such symbols, beliefs and practices and to abstract them, to reify them, and to place them in service to a goal that seems worthy to us, but that may indeed be perpetuating the problem to which Yeago points, namely, the continuing eclipse of the church in the acceptance of the modern settlement, the church serving the market by seeking relevance which is actually catering to the individual shopper. It is necessary then that as we turn to a consideration of conversations within the North American (United Methodist) Church, we must be self-critical before we can be constructive, seeking to name the ways even our own theological reflections have been influenced by these powers.

Hopefully the importance of this is clearer now; These developments Miller describes, seen within Yeago's larger narrative, give more texture to the situation in which we find ourselves as (North American/United Methodist) Christians, as we come to see in greater detail the "imaginary" of reality that pervasively and even unconsciously operates in ways that distort our perception and our actions, exercising within the church the constant temptation to serve the market through a focus on the individual shaped by consumer culture. We may begin to see the impact of this as we begin to see and name the deep, almost imperceptible pull to allow the boundaries of our theological-practical imagination and discussion to be limited not by concerns for faithfulness but rather by our concern for relevance, legitimacy, and success. I hope it is

²³ As he puts it, "theology must consider the systems that present elements of tradition in a commodified fashion and the formation of believers' interpretive habits that incline them to engage tradition as a commodity." P. 66.

clearer that despite our best intentions, we are constantly invited to serve another lord—not the one we know as Jesus, but rather, Mammon.

III. Contemporary United Methodist Reflections: Ecclesiology, Evangelism, Formation

According to a United Methodist news source, in her recent address to the Council of Bishops, Council President, Bishop Janice Riggle Huie suggested that “United Methodists need to get past their perception of themselves as an institution and once again become a ‘movement’ that responds “nimble” to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ This means, the Bishops hope, that there will be a “renewed desire for United Methodist churches to become more effective and fruitful” and that there will develop throughout all levels of the church “a unity in the Spirit that can help transform both the church and the world.”²⁵

In presenting the options of “institution” and “movement,” Bishop Huie offers us in the North American United Methodist Church a set of ecclesiological choices that have been before us (truly as Methodists in both Britain and in North America) it seems from our very beginning: to paraphrase Asbury, “Are we a church, or are we no church?”²⁶ Are we an institution or are we a movement? While this is a simplification, I think it can be argued that given the Methodist movement’s roots in the relationship of the so-called “authentic” church within the “institutional” church, the Pietist “ecclesiolae in ecclesia,” and given the contemporary United Methodist Church’s similarity to the institutional Church within which Wesley first launched his

²⁴ Robin Russell, “Council of Bishops Report: Getting Nimble Again: Bishop Calls Methodism a ‘Movement’”, UM News Service, May 10, 2007.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The actual quote is: “We were a Church, and no Church.” Francis Asbury, “Valedictory Address,” to Bishop McKendree, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, Volume 3, Letters*. J. Manning Potts, et. al., eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 476-477. This quote was found online at the Northwest Nazarene University web page: www.wesley.nnu.edu; I also found it with the citation listed above in L. Gregory Jones and Michael G. Cartwright, “Vital Congregations: Toward a Wesleyan Vision for the United Methodist Church’s Identity and Mission,” in *The Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective*. Alan G. Padgett, ed. (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 97, n. 23.

movement, these two polarities (little church or “movement” and institutional church) serve as the apparent ecclesiological options that fund many of our discussions concerning United Methodist identity, practice, and renewal.²⁷

For instance, offering a perspective from the “outside,” (as an Anglican) and speaking to the British Methodist context, Martyn Percy seemingly agrees with Bishop Huie, as he succinctly states, “[Methodism] has a clear future as a movement.”²⁸ It can serve as a model to other ecclesial communions to display the importance of both evangelical and social concern and, at the same time, avoid the layers of institution and structure that resemble what he calls the “modernist mega-organization.”²⁹ Ted Campbell, writing about Wesley’s seeming inconsistency regarding his interpretation of the Sacrament of Baptism, suggests the opposite.³⁰ His encouragement is not to create stultifying institutional organization but rather to have the contemporary church realize that it is simply not facing the same situation that Wesley faced. As a result, he argues that contemporary (United) Methodism must exercise care to be both the movement it has always been, as well as a Church, thus holding together both the institutional and personal, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the instituted and the prudential means of

²⁷ To reiterate, however, I am not suggesting that these options foreclose on an ongoing conversation about what does constitute the complicated synthesis that is Wesleyan ecclesiology, nor the even more complicated ecclesiological story of the movement that followed in Britain and North America after Wesley’s death. As many scholars have pointed out, while he did not develop a formal ecclesiology, Wesley was influenced (of course) by his Anglican tradition, as well as by Puritan traditions. Nonetheless, it does seem to me that the Pietist ecclesiological influence was significant, and if not just for Wesley, then also certainly for the tradition that followed him. In other words, this is to say that the polarity between church/institution and sect/movement does play a significant role in determining ecclesiological discourse, and has consequent impact on conversations about what constitutes proper forms of “renewal” in the church. See Howard Snyder, The Radical Wesley: Patterns for Church Renewal. (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1980).

²⁸ Martyn Percy, “Back to the Future: A Search for a Thoroughly Modern Methodist Ecclesiology,” in Unmasking Methodist Theology, Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones, Helen Wareing, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 210.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ted A. Campbell, “Conversion and Baptism in Wesleyan Spirituality,” in Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition, Kenneth Collins and John Tyson, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 160-174.

grace.³¹ And here, it might be noted, he sounds somewhat like Albert Outler who argued in his well known piece from the Oxford Institute of 1962 that Methodism is properly an “evangelical order within a ‘catholic’ church,” but that in this time in which we wait for that “really valid alternative of authentic Christian unity,” Methodism must constitute a church responsible for catechetical, liturgical, and sacramental forms of ecclesial practices.³² Brian Beck suggests that these polarities exist almost as options for the choice of contemporary Methodism, such that one way leads to a deep emphasis on the movement and the “Wesley way” while the other leads to an affirmation of the “catholicity, the holiness, and the apostolicity of the church of Christ of which the creed speaks.”³³ For his part, Beck believes the choice has already been made for the latter, and that increasingly any desire to move toward the former is just not “practical politics.”³⁴

Again, remembering Yeago and Miller, my interest here is not to display anything approximating the breadth of Wesleyan/Methodist ecclesiology as much as it is to show that our conversations may be subject to distortion as they continue unaware of their placement in and potential service of the contemporary market. So, this is to ask whether in the encouragement to rediscover the nature of Methodism as a movement, we should pay special attention to the argument that institutional “baggage” disallows “nimble” movement which is required for responsive ministry and the renewed possibility of churches becoming “effective and fruitful.” Is it possible that this reflects what Vincent Miller describes in post-Fordist consumer culture as the development of “flexibility” among industries in the effort to overcome the limitations to growth that arrived with the economic downturn of the 1970’s? Moving away from “the inertia

³¹ Ibid., 173.

³² Albert Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: The Essays of Albert C. Outler, Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 225-6.

³³ Brian Beck, “The *Large Minutes*: Ecclesiological Implications” in Methodism Across the Pond: Perspectives Past and Present on the Church in Britain and America, Richard Sykes, ed., (Oxford, England: Applied Theology Press, 2005), 23-4.

³⁴ Ibid., 24.

of the massive, integrated institutions of mid-century capitalism,” corporations in the United States sought to institute forms of flexibility into their labor, production, and marketing. For corporations in America, this translated into changes that sought to loosen the grip of labor unions in order to create a more “flexible” work force, giving workers varied tasks and rewarding them for innovation. New forms of demographic data were gathered to identify niche markets for a new cadre of “flexible” goods focused on differing desires.³⁵ No longer able to pursue growth through the Fordist-era drive for “expansion” (complete coverage of an entire homogeneous market with a primary product), Post-Fordist Capitalism pursued “intensification,” wherein the products being sold were diversified, broken down into various types in order to meet the differing desires of various niche markets.³⁶

I certainly do not want to suggest that this is, in fact, what we do see unfolding in this current ecclesiological discussion. However, giving weight to Miller’s warning about the ease with which we can capitulate to the market’s formation of our assumptions, I simply want to ask whether it is even possible that the move to be “nimble” as a “movement” rather than as an “institution” is a move we are borrowing from the story of the twentieth century American corporation as we too are facing shrinking bottom lines and increasingly disinterested consumers? To what extent does the calling to be “nimble” mirror a calling to be “flexible,” and, more importantly, to what end? Are we seeking a more flexible movement in the Church in order to more quickly and adequately respond to the particular needs presented by various emerging groups of potential members, so identified by demographic studies highlighting “lifestyle segments” (themselves created by the marketing industry)? This is all to ask: Is this

³⁵ Miller, 66-68.

³⁶ Remember here Miller’s example of the movement of the Heinz company from “yellow mustard” to “Grey Poupon.” See n. 18.

possibly another effort to determine the church's function and relevance in changing circumstances within the boundaries and definitions given to the church by the secular market?

Moving the other direction, one might ask: can our desire to be more a Church than a movement be influenced by similar ends? On the one hand, our desire to embrace the larger identity and practices of the church catholic reflects a vision for a Church that is truly "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." The fruit of the ecumenical movement and liturgical renewal suggest the importance of this ongoing search for unity. However, we are also recognizing how even this movement can be subjected to the same forces detailed by Miller. For example, Craig Carter notes how Robert Webber's book Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals are Attracted to the Liturgical Church offered several reasons why those steeped in evangelical piety were being drawn to more liturgical ecclesial traditions. Namely, he writes "they are seeking a form of worship in which mystery has a place, they appreciate the emphasis on sacramental reality, they find Anglican worship to be more God-centered, Christ-centered, and Scripture-centered, and they desire a more holistic spirituality that embraces the whole church throughout history."³⁷ While these are noble goals, Carter is critical of Webber just to the extent that Webber does not suggest that these practices be considered normative, and goes to lengths to "present the Anglican option merely as a choice that is right for him."³⁸ This constitutes an extension of "the cafeteria menu to include the liturgical option" and therefore cannot be "a radical challenge to modern individualism."³⁹

We can begin to see how this reveals the influence of the consumer market. More deeply liturgical practices of worship and more historical practices of prayer and spiritual formation are

³⁷ Craig A. Carter, "Beyond Theocracy and Individualism: The Significance of John Howard Yoder's Ecclesiology for Evangelicalism," in The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology, Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Trier, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 174.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

increasingly offered to the contemporary church not as means that lead to a more profound appreciation of and participation in a greater ecclesial unity, but rather, as “new” programs that will awaken interest, and hopefully—stimulate growth in the dormant church.

Where this connects more explicitly with the contemporary United Methodist Church is in the UMC’s interest in the Emergent/Emerging Church, as the latter movement itself represents an ongoing experiment of cross-traditional appropriation of liturgical and formative Christian practices.⁴⁰ As one leader in the emergent movement describing his community put it:

“Individually, each [member] adopts what practices they want and asks for help. Some do the Book of Common Prayer, some the divine hours, and some the Eastern Orthodox prayer book.”⁴¹

These practices from within the church catholic are examples of what Miller describes to us as the commodification of religion, inasmuch as they are extracted from the tradition and offered in “free-floating” forms to contemporary religious consumers. While the search for a greater catholicity in the life and practice of the United Methodist Church can be seen as good, it is no less insulated from the drive of the market that seeks to appropriate even those traditions in the interest of seeing the church be “effective,” “successful,” and “relevant.”

It is not only our tendency in the (North American/United Methodist) church to divide our ecclesiological reflections between the options of institutional church and revival movement, but it is also an aspect of our tradition to consider the church in functional terms. More specifically, the church finds its order as it effectively facilitates the spiritual growth of individuals along the *via salutis*. The church, as such, is an environment or a context where the

⁴⁰ The UMC has shown interest in the Emergent/Emerging Church as it appears to some to be a movement of younger generations in other (more evangelical) church traditions that may be instructive for the UMC’s own efforts to reach out to these missing generations. In other words, we UM’s are tempted to determine that “if it works for the Emergent Church, then we should do it too.” While this does not characterize the totality of the UMC’s interest in Emergent, it does certainly represent more than just a temptation. For one example of a purposeful conversation about the connections between the UMC and Emergent, see www.umerging.org.

⁴¹ Quote from Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 230.

means can be sought that serve the ends understood as growth in grace and love of God and neighbor, a group of people together “working out their own salvation”. Of course, this is a very important point. It is true that Wesley insisted that such formation was only intelligible to the extent that it remained communal. As Wesley preached, Christianity is a social religion, not a solitary pursuit. Nevertheless, while the community was indispensable, the community served a particular purpose, as means focused on the end. Again, here is Wesley; he asks ‘What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God; and to build them up in his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable, as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.’”⁴²

The point is not so much what Wesley did or did not believe about the functional nature of church order, but rather, again, how the indications in Wesley that suggest his support for such a position continue to fund contemporary ecclesiological reflection for United Methodists that may be subject to adoption and distortion in the current consumer market. For instance, one distinguished professor of evangelism suggests that Wesley’s approach to pursuing evangelism through the Methodist movement was

“remarkably close to that of today’s Church Growth movement. For instance, [Wesley] was an unapologetic pragmatist in the choice and development of strategies, models, and methods [for evangelism]. The supreme standard for evaluating any evangelism approach was its outcomes, that is, whether or not the approach helped to achieve the perennial apostolic objectives of discipling of people and the growth of the true Church.”⁴³

The comparison to the contemporary Church Growth movement founded in the thought of Donald McGavran is significant, inasmuch as the Church Growth movement itself is subject to the critique that it reflects norms and pursues goals endemic to the project of the modern

⁴² John Wesley, from “Letter of June 25, 1746 to ‘John Smith’,” quoted in Geoffrey Wainwright, The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 211.

⁴³ George G. Hunter, III. To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 43.

market.⁴⁴ More specifically, therefore, this comparison allows contemporary interpreters to determine that church order is flexible as a “means” in pursuit of the “end” (effective evangelization resulting in church growth) and that such a conclusion is warranted because it was simply what we see in Wesley.⁴⁵ It seems to me that it is exactly this sort of calculus that leads shrinking congregations and desperate pastors to engage in conversations about transforming the Narthex into a Starbucks, employing strategies to offer particular “spiritual” experiences shaped to reach the particular desires of a specific niche market, seeking in it all to be relevant, which is, as Yeago reminds us, just a front for the deeper search for the church’s legitimacy in the cultures of modernity.⁴⁶

It is difficult to consider ecclesiological possibilities for contemporary United Methodism that do not consider the similarities of the current situation to the context within which early Methodism emerged, with the pernicious difference, of course, that now it is Methodism itself (in the form of the United Methodist Church) that has become the institution seeking renewal through a return to the status and practices of a movement. Yet, despite the similarity of the historical situation between Wesley’s time and ours, namely, establishment church seemingly

⁴⁴ For instance, the “homogeneous unit” principle sounds very much like forms of niche marketing, not to mention that such a principle could of course lead to the instantiation of the same racial/ethnic and economic divisions in the society within the church. The way this continues to suppress the church’s offering a distinctive and alternative “public” is obvious. See also the critiques of Church Growth and marketing by Alan Padgett, “The Church Growth Movement: A Wesleyan Critique” in *The Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective* Alan G. Padgett, ed. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 137-147, and (especially) Phil Kenneson, “Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire.” *Modern Theology* 9 (1993): 319-418.

⁴⁵ There is, of course, an entire industry of resources, writings, and consultancy formed around these very concerns, seeking to increase the effectiveness of congregational evangelism resulting in congregational revitalization and growth.

⁴⁶ It is important to point out that there are voices that argue that such a reading of Wesley as an ecclesiastical utilitarian are wrong. Sondra Higgins Matthaëi suggests that for Wesley, the importance of the community of the church reflecting connection with God and neighbor was so significant that it constituted both “means” and “end” in the Way of Salvation. See Sondra Higgins Matthaëi, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 61. See also Philip Meadows, “Embodying Conversion,” in *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 223-239, where Meadows argues that Wesley’s flexibility in adapting church structures was guided by the ecclesiastically shaped virtue of prudence which is a fuller vision of what constituted “practical divinity.” My point is not to enter the debate regarding what Wesley did or did not say or think or do, but rather to suggest how he might still be read and his thought applied in ways reflecting the critiques of Yeago and Miller.

requiring experiential renewal, we cannot map these ecclesiological options (ecclesiolae in ecclesia) on to the contemporary moment without facing the risk that they might play into the hands of the market culture, described to us by Yeago and Miller. In other words, by privileging one ecclesiological option over the other, we neglect to discover that both in the modern settlement are susceptible to adaptation as efforts to secure the legitimacy and the relevance of the church. By choosing one or the other, we are tempted by the hope to rediscover a function for the church that will lead to fruitful and effective results. This is also certainly the aim in considerations of the “functional” nature of Wesleyan/Methodist ecclesiology; once again, we are tempted to retrieve elements of the tradition that cannot but help be distorted in their application in often unwitting service to the state and to the market.

By suggesting this, I do not want to lower the value of what I believe Wesley has given us; indeed, it is in the contours of the early movement that I also believe we find our way for the future of Methodism as both Church and Movement. Therefore, I want to move from here toward more constructive proposals addressing what I believe will be necessary as we seek to be faithful in these challenging times. Wesley’s account of formation and his ecclesiological synthesis do represent a tradition that gives shape to a holy people. But note that the language here is intentionally plural, or collective, rather than singular. In the face of the all-encompassing market and in search for a way to be church that does not “settle” for the hegemony of secular rationality, I believe that we must consider the church as a holy people *before* we consider the church as constituted by holy people. In other words, rather than capitulating to the forces of the market that tend to particularize and individualize the members of the single-family household, and rather than allowing this to shape our conversations about what the church is and should be in order to serve this “market,” a different vision is required.

Resisting the placement of religion in the private sphere (as opposed to the public) and subverting the reflexive focus on the needs of the individual, Methodist ecclesiology must seek a broader vision, an “ecclesial” vision of its life. Thus, we must ask first, “How are we a holy people in the world?”

To do this, we will have to search deep within as well as beyond our own tradition, to fund ecclesiological imagination that goes beyond the polarity of *ecclesiolae* (the church of vital experience) and *ecclesia* (the church of institution and tradition), as well as beyond the limited vision of “functional ecclesiology.” I believe that help can be found in a consideration of the ecclesiological vision nurtured by the Radical Reformers and articulated most forcefully by the Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder. Indeed, I also believe and hope to show how such a consideration will assist us to see how the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition itself can offer guidance for faithful considerations of ecclesiology that may assist us in our resistance to the modern pull to seek relevance and legitimacy in service to state or market. Finally, I will consider the impact this form of reflection might have on some of our contemporary conversations about formation and evangelism for the ongoing life of the church in modernity in the hope that such examples might indicate a direction for the ongoing discipline we must learn to negotiate a faithful way through these modern times.

IV. Ecclesiology: Church as “A People in the World”

We find guidance as we seek to consider the church first “a holy people” rather than either an institution or a movement, or as a functional housing for a more primary set of experiences that are “spiritual” and offered as such to the consumer market. This becomes the antidote that Yeago offers in his own article, when he suggests that to resist the forces of modernity which relegate the church to servanthood to the market or the state

“would mean [the church] learning a whole new socio-cultural self-identification. It would mean finding concrete modes of communal behavior which deny that the church is a ‘part’ of either the political or the economic culture of modern societies. It would mean fashioning an ecclesial public identity that is legitimated by the Church’s own communal meta-narrative, not by its claim to be relevant to some other community’s issues and projects. It would mean nurturing a sense of distinctive peoplehood which would give Christian congregations of all sorts of reasons to be interested in one another, and cause disunity to be felt like a wound.”⁴⁷

Yeago searches here for the church to constitute an alternative “public” that will not so easily be eclipsed by the modern forces of state and market as it is empowered and able to stand out in relief from both.

Although he does not mention it, Yeago here seems to reflect an ecclesiological vision displayed in the thought of John Howard Yoder. In his essay, “A People in the World,” in contrast to other ecclesiological traditions developed out of the Reformation, Yoder describes the distinctive witness of the radical reformer’s ecclesiology.⁴⁸ He writes:

“The work of God is the calling of a people, whether in the Old Covenant or the New. The church is then not simply the bearer of the message of reconciliation, in the way a newspaper or a telephone company can bear any message with which it has been entrusted. Nor is the church simply the result of a message, as an alumni association is the product of a school or the crowd in the theater is the product of the reputation of the film. That men and women are called together to a new social wholeness is itself the work of God, which gives meaning to history, from which both personal conversion (whereby individuals are called into this meaning) and missionary instrumentalities are derived.”⁴⁹

Here we witness the collapse of the difference between “means” and “ends,” the elimination of any differentiation between the Church and the message it proclaims which is a forceful rejection of any commitment to what I have called a functional ecclesiology. If the “kerygma” is not separable from the “koinonia” then it cannot be deployed on its own apart from the embodied people and community that is the church. On the same terms, it follows

⁴⁷ Yeago, 170.

⁴⁸ John Howard Yoder, “A People in the World,” in The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical, Michael G. Cartwright, ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 65-101.

⁴⁹ Yoder, 74.

that neither then can the church be described in organizational terms that can be seen to favor the polarities of “movement” or “institution,” because, of course, according to Yoder, the Church is a “people in the world,” which is to say that in some sense, the church is neither “movement” nor “institution,” but is rather, and always, both. Just to the extent that there are certain practices, ways of life that constitute the particular “social wholeness” of the church, there must be “institution” enough to insure the continuation of these practices across space and time, as well as in concert with the Christian tradition.⁵⁰ At the same time, a “people in the world” cannot but be located anywhere other than in history, which is to say, in time, in *particularity*. As a result, a “people in the world” will always be, to some extent, “in motion” or, in other words, a “movement” seeking to embody the “missionary instrumentalities” particular to its identity.

For the purposes of this paper, these features of a “peoplehood” ecclesiology provide us with a vision to see the church as more than the voluntary association that is given to nurture the “private” spiritual lives of modern peoples. Without a message that can be packaged, without practices that must be commodified and marketed to interested individual religious consumers, the Church as a “people in the world” resists these forms of accommodation to and appropriation by the modern market. Further, and as a result, this means that the church’s relevance is not determined by the share of consumer preference it is able to create. In fact, the church does not seek relevance, in this way, at all. The church as a “people in the world” simply “is,” which means that it may appear both intelligible and unintelligible to the consumer culture, perhaps relevant or irrelevant, as the consumer

⁵⁰ See John Howard Yoder, Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992).;

culture is not granted the authority to determine the content and course of the Church's ministry. In other words, the Lord of the Church is not the market, but is, rather, Jesus.

A helpful example of this is found, I believe, in a small article by Phil Kenneson where he suggests that the church in modernity that seeks function and purpose can find guidance in the concept of the church as the "embodied presence" of "visible grace." More specifically, he argues, the Church itself mediates God's presence as the Church embodies a life in the world that is a "sign, sacrament, and herald of God's presence and God's reign."⁵¹ What is instructive about Kenneson's contribution is the way he begins his reflections not with an account of the ways the church meets the needs of various individuals or groups of people, or how the church is constituted by the work of grace in the lives of believers along the Way of Salvation. Instead, like Yoder and Yeago, Kenneson suggests a vision of church that takes seriously at the beginning a vision of God's work through the holy people called the church. As he puts it:

“...the church has too often believed that the message it announced could be separated from the life it embodied. But the church must never understand its vocation as involving the proclamation of a disembodied message, as if such were possible. Because all messages are embodied messages, the perennial challenge for the church is to remember that its embodied life—a life made possible by the reconciling work of the Spirit—is itself part of the good news of reconciliation.”⁵²

His vision resists any attempt to begin an ecclesiological account with a focus on the work of God in the soul of the individual believer but rather makes a reflection on the holiness and vocation of the church the primary focus. This does not foreclose on conversations that can and must follow concerning formation into such a community, accounts which may very well be constituted by the insights we gain from within the Wesleyan tradition of “heart religion.” But it

⁵¹ Phil Kenneson, “Visible Grace: The Church as God's Embodied Presence,” in Grace Upon Grace: Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Langford, Robert K. Johnston, L. Gregory Jones, Jonathan R. Wilson, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 169-179.

⁵² Kenneson, 175.

does represent a way we can begin to train ourselves not to begin in search of such accounts. In this calculus, the first question is not: “How can the church reach out more effectively?” or “What set of experiences can we offer that will help the Church remain relevant in this culture?” Rather, we seek to ask, “How is our life together the sign, sacrament, and herald of God’s presence and reign?” In other words, “How are we the People of God together?”

One significant element within the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition that might serve to answer such a question is the practice or principle of connectionalism, or as it is referred to in the British Methodist context, “connexionalism.” Considered a feature (present, if not named as such) in the early Methodist movement, connectionalism referred to a basic set of practices and structures that sought to insure the presence of unity primarily among the preachers but eventually extending as well to the general members of the Methodist societies in England. Retaining such connection was not a primary concern in the earliest days of the movement, as the visible and practical source of unity for all of Methodism lay in the one person of John Wesley; he was the one point with which all others in Methodism remained “in connection.” However, as Richard Heitzenrater points out, “connexionalism” began with the preachers in the movement: “Wesley came to realize that this sense of connectedness of the preachers to him should also be strengthened by an explicit expression of covenantal relationship among themselves... Therefore a covenant was drawn up in 1752 in which the preachers declared that they would speak and act in union with each other.”⁵³ Eventually, this sense of unity spread beyond the preachers to include the members of the movement as well; as Wesley wrote to the people of Trowbridge within a year of his own death, “I have only one thing in view—to keep all

⁵³ Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Connectionalism and Itinerancy: Wesleyan Principles and Practice,” in Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity, United Methodism and American Culture. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 29.

the Methodists in Great Britain *one connected people*.”⁵⁴ Brian Beck leads us to see Wesley’s same commitment to unity focused on the fledgling American church when he quotes Wesley’s last letter to the Methodists overseas wherein he “urges them to declare clearly that ‘the Methodists are *one people* in all the world [and] that it is their full determination so to continue.’”⁵⁵ It is from this desire that structures and practices develop in the Methodist movement to insure this connectedness and unity: the structure of the Conference and the practices of Holy Conferencing.

Despite these efforts to insure unity and common identity, as Methodism began to evolve from “movement” to “church,” connectionalism came to describe the institutional structures bureaucracy of the church rather than the interconnected nature of a missionary movement. Indeed, despite efforts to counter this development in more recent years, this has remained the case, and the “connection” is still often used in common parlance among United Methodists to refer not to the bonds of unity shared in ministry but rather, to the structures and institutions that exist at the level of the Conference, Jurisdiction, and General Church.

Countering this, attention has been paid more recently in both the British Methodist Church and in the United Methodist Church to the theological commitments inherent in the connectional concept. Focus has been placed particularly on the explicit linkage of connectionalism to the growing awareness of the relationship of koinonia and ecclesiology developed in ecumenical theology.⁵⁶ These moves were generated primarily from work at the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30-31, emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Brian Beck, “Connexion and Koinonia: Wesley’s Legacy and the Ecumenical Ideal,” in Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism, Randy Maddox, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 131, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ A significant contribution made in this conversation can be found in the work of Brian Beck; see Brian Beck, “Connexion and Koinonia: Wesley’s Legacy and the Ecumenical Ideal,” in Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism, Randy Maddox, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 129-141. See also David Carter, Love Bade Me Welcome: A British Methodist Perspective on the Church (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2002). As Carter notes, the connection between koinonia and connexionalism played a significant role in the

WCC meeting at Canberra in 1991 and particularly from the Faith and Order gathering in Santiago de Compostela in 1993, where the unity of the Church was grounded in the concept of koinonia:

“Koinonia is above all, a gracious fellowship in Christ expressing the richness of the gift received by creation and humankind from God. It is a many dimensional dynamic in the faith, life, and witness of those who worship the Triune God, confess the apostolic faith, share in the Gospel and sacramental living, and seek to be faithful to God in Church and world...”⁵⁷

However, to go further, the report makes clear that this koinonia is not just a horizontal description of the unity shared among the visible Church in the world across space, but is also descriptive of a vertical relationship; koinonia is grounded in the very nature of God as Trinity.

Again, quoting from the Santiago Report:

“The interdependence of unity and diversity which is the essence of the Church’s koinonia is rooted in the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the perfect expression of unity and diversity and the ultimate reality of relational life.”⁵⁸

Consequently, the connection is made between the common life of members in mission and ministry within the Methodist movement and the unity displayed in the koinonia of the early church, and both in the perichoretic inter-relations of the Godhead. To participate in the unity of the church is to participate in the unity of God’s inner life, and in this way, the “connexion” cannot be limited to a descriptive term for the structures of ecclesial organization; instead, connectionalism is given theological freight: it is the means by which Methodists are a “People”

development of the ecclesiological study in the British Methodist Church, “Called to Love and Praise: A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church,” (Peterborough, UK: Methodist Publishing House, 1999); interestingly, this is not mentioned at all in a piece from Bruce Robbins written at roughly the same time in the United Methodist context; see Bruce W. Robbins, “Connection and Koinonia: Wesleyan and Ecumenical Perspectives on the Church,” in *Doctrines and Discipline, United Methodism and American Culture, Volume 3*. Dennis M. Campbell, William B. Lawrence, and Russell E. Richey, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 199-212.

⁵⁷ Quote from the Santiago report, in Beck, “Connexion and Koinonia,” 137.

⁵⁸ Santiago Report, quoted in Beck, “Connexion and Koinonia,” 137.

in the world, connected deeply to one another and to the Triune God who calls us together in worship and sends us out in mission.

While I do believe “connexionalism” so understood may be a helpful memory to inform contemporary practice, it must also be considered with two caveats attached. One relates to critiques made of the linkage of koinonia and connectionalism, and the other to the history of the concept of “connexion” itself.

The first issue is raised most particularly in an article by David M. Chapman entitled, “Koinonia, Connexion, and Episcopate: Methodist Ecclesiology in the Twentieth Century.”⁵⁹ Chapman argues that the linking between connexion and koinonia is misguided just to the extent that these terms are presented as in some sense interchangeable. While he believes that there is something to be gained by a deeper connection between the concept of connexionalism and koinonia, he does not believe that connexionalism as structural unity can be equated to the deeper and more significant unity represented by Baptism into the Body of Christ and sustained by participation in the Eucharist. “Thus is it koinonia rather than connexionalism which gets to the heart of the inward spiritual reality of Christian unity.” So, “whereas connexionalism expresses the structural implications of koinonia, koinonia is the invisible reality to which connexionalism bears witness. They are the visible and invisible bonds of Christian unity.”⁶⁰ With this differentiation in mind, Chapman warns against privileging connexion over koinonia, suggesting that to do this is to undervalue the greater importance of the sacramental unity that is constitutive of koinonia. He asks, “To what extent are we justified in continuing to attach greater ecclesiological significance to Wesley’s network of societies than to his sacramental theology

⁵⁹ David M. Chapman, “Koinonia, Connexion and Episcopate: Methodist Ecclesiology in the Twentieth Century,” in Methodism Across the Pond: Perspectives Past and Present on the Church in Britain and America, Richard Sykes, ed. (Oxford, UK: Applied Theology Press, 2005), 4-10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

and practice?”⁶¹ While Chapman’s question does not necessarily foreclose on the possibility that such reclamation of connexionalism might be a helpful marker of Methodist ecclesiological identity, it does remind us that we must continually attend to the ways Methodist identity as a “holy people” in the world is nurtured not only in our own tradition, but in the tradition of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

The second caveat to keep in mind is to simply mark here that the history of the concept of “connexion” itself must be further explored before we more firmly establish it as the warrant for ecclesiological identity that resists the pull to serve the contemporary market. I suggest this because the history of the term “connexion” itself places it first and foremost in economic and political contexts from which the term was appropriated to describe developing ecclesial structures and practices. Bruce Robbins draws this insight from Thomas Frank, who himself finds the connection made in Rack’s Reasonable Enthusiast, where the term “connexion” is said to “apply to a ‘tradesman’s clientele’ or to a ‘politician’s personal following.’”⁶² While this is reflective of the original understanding of connexionalism in the Methodist movement as a connection of preachers and leaders with John Wesley himself, one wonders whether these original connections to economics and politics played any part in the shaping of the imagination that led to the understanding of connectionalism and the “machinery” of Methodism (particularly in the United States) in the century following Wesley’s death. Is there comparable historical evidence to be drawn from economic and political contexts that track the effects of a shift from connectionalism to a “person” to connectionalism to a “structure”? While space does not allow a more thorough study of the etymology of the term, there is no doubt as to the history of what “connectionalism” became in the church; again, here we remember the nature of the celebrated

⁶¹ Ibid., 6.

⁶² Robbins, 201. See also Beck, “Connexion and Koinonia,” where he remarks “In the eighteenth century, [connexionalism] could be used of commercial and political associations as well as religious ones.” p. 130.

“machinery” of Methodism in the nineteenth century. Thus, on these grounds it might be suggested that “connectionalism” itself is a less helpful element of our tradition, marked as it is as a descriptive term with roots in service to economic and political structures and with a history of misuse along the way. On the other hand, this may lead us back to Chapman’s argument regarding the proper relationship between connexion and koinonia: to the extent that connectionalism reflects the unity and the practices tied by ecumenical theology to the concept of koinonia, we may still find in connectionalism a hopeful warrant for deeper Methodist ecclesial identity as a holy people in the world.

Turning in another direction within our tradition, consideration also might be given to the place of the General Rules in forming the identity of Methodists as a “Holy People” in the world. For instance, L. Gregory Jones and Michael Cartwright argue that the General Rules functioned in the Methodist movement not only as a form of discipline to shape holy lives, but also, and more importantly, as a warrant for broader ecclesiological claims. They write, “one of the primary factors enabling the ‘people *called* Methodist’ to become the ‘*people* called Methodist’ in early Methodism was the practice of the ‘General Rules’ through the class meetings and gatherings of the societies.”⁶³ Formed by the rules, Methodists constituted a people “called out by God to embody an evangelical mission on behalf of the wider church.”⁶⁴ However, the authors go on to argue that in American Methodism, the steady depreciation of the formative role the General Rules played joined forces with an eventual differentiation made between doctrine and moral practice and that both contributed to a loss of a sense of “peoplehood.”⁶⁵ This, then,

⁶³ L. Gregory Jones and Michael G. Cartwright, “Vital Congregations: Toward a Wesleyan Vision for the United Methodist Church’s Identity and Mission,” in The Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective. Alan G. Padgett, ed. (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 96, n. 22.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 98, n. 27.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 107. Another important and instructive account of this loss is detailed in Randy Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” in Methodism in its Cultural

becomes the avenue that leads to renewal as well: “we would submit that we must *reconstruct* what it would mean to be a ‘people of God’ in the world.”⁶⁶

The question now turns in a more practical direction: How can we envision what it means to be a “people in the world”? What difference would it make if we began our conversations about the church and its ministry in the world in just this way? How might distinct practices in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition be retrieved in new ways reflecting this primary vision—not of being a movement, or an institutional church, but rather, a vision of being “people of God” or “a holy people”? In addressing these questions, I briefly want to make some suggestions about the possible impact a vision of “peoplehood” might have on the particular ministries of formation and evangelism, in the hope that continued conversation and discussion might follow.

V. Formation: Shaping a People In the World

What is the difference between formation of “a holy people” and the formation “of holy people”? The concerns I have tried to raise in this paper concern the ways the latter construction may be subject to misappropriations by the prior formation we share in the ways of the modern market. I have suggested that the ecclesiological vision of the church as a distinct “people in the world,” may provide us with the resource necessary to shape an imagination that will resist the pull of consumer culture to reduce our conversation about formation to “programs” that serve individuals in different niche markets and to “strategies” that can render our offerings “relevant” to the culture(s) we are trying to reach. This focus on the nature of the church as a distinct people puts a renewed emphasis on the importance of Christian formation in the congregation.

Milieu, Tim Macquiban, ed. (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 131-160. Particularly interesting is Maddox’s portrayal of American Methodism as a “countercultural community” in an earlier period, 1772-1816.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 119.

Yeago agrees, as he ends his article with a clear call for an emphasis in this very direction. He writes,

“[A Church seeking this life] would have a distinctive and living communal culture, with its roots in Israelite narrative, gospel story, sacramental practice, and the liturgical drama, a communal culture with at least sufficient density that converts and children would actually need a serious initiation into it. It would not achieve moral perfection, nor escape ethical confusion, but it would have its own distinctive ethos, shaped by its identity-defining stories, with its own definitions of the virtues and its own ‘take’ on the structure of moral questions. In its evangelization, it would not plead with people to find room for faith in their lives; it would invite them to leave home, socio-culturally speaking, like Abraham of old, and be given new lives in a new country, in the assembly of the Messiah, the public order of the heavenly city. In so doing, moreover, it would necessarily rediscover what ‘conversion’ is and what ‘catechesis’ means.”⁶⁷

However, such a contribution remains the suggestion of a vision, and we seek now more embodied guidance, particularly for our context as those in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition(s).

Again, turning to the contribution of Jones and Cartwright, we find the suggestion that the formation necessary in the American (United) Methodist movement is first a formation into the awareness of our peoplehood. They suggest that this involves first, the need “to learn to *remember*, to cultivate that memory which enables us to understand our history as United Methodists” and also “to learn to *re-member*, to learn once again how to gather together as a disciplined peoplehood.”⁶⁸ Not surprisingly for Wesleyans, the way forward in this formation is to place emphasis on that which takes place in community. But, very intentionally, the authors argue that the nature of the community is itself a very important issue. This is so because “community” or “believing community” are terms that are subject to distortion to the extent that there can be several forms of “believing communities” that in actuality have very little shared life. Such a “thin” (or as they put it, “minimalist”) concept of community, they argue, reflects (following Bellah) “lifestyle enclaves—places where people go (often, in MacIntyre’s terms, for

⁶⁷ Yeago, 170-1.

⁶⁸ Jones and Cartwright, 110.

‘aesthetic’ or ‘therapeutic’ reasons) to find people like themselves, but lacking the substance of community.”⁶⁹

In contrast, Jones and Cartwright portray a thicker description of community that is not so easily enjoyed, but is rather “achieved through particular practices, skills, and habits.”⁷⁰ They map the characteristics of such communities in three descriptions; such communities, first, “entail a willingness to engage in shared practices and disciplines” that lead to forms of learned common life; Second, they refuse to be “captured by the dominant images and ethos of wider society,” but rather seek to recover “biblical and theological notions of community and discipleship”; and third, they realize that the achievement of such community comes as a gift from the Holy Spirit.⁷¹ Perhaps most significant is the conclusion that the sole telos of this formation is not the Christian Perfection of the individual disciple within the community, but rather, the “achievement” of true Christian community into which one is formed. Salvation is embodiment into the constitutive practices and ways of the Church. This, it seems to me, helps to collapse any differentiation between the life of the community and the ministry of formation within the community. Both describe the same habits and practices that constitute the life of the community.

Some more specific guidance is found in Randy Maddox’s article “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism.” Maddox identifies forms of “Social Grace” embodied by the Church that are both practices of formation and constitutive practices of the Church being the Church. These are: “Social grace as corporate liturgical worship and eucharist,” “Social grace as mutual encouragement and support,” “Social grace as

⁶⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 114.

mutual accountability,” and “Social grace as presence in the society at large.”⁷² Although limitations of space prevent me from sharing more of Maddox’s description of these forms, they stand here as examples of practices in the Methodist tradition that may assist us in shaping the imagination necessary to see ourselves as a people—rather than as practices that can be offered to the Church as means to be adopted in the hope for growth. The clear focus throughout is the emphasis placed on the practices that nurture not only the trajectory of the individual’s soul but rather, the life of a community—a people in the world.

VI. Evangelism: A People Witnessing to the World

If this point holds for the ministry of formation, then we might believe the same will impact our conversation about the ministry of evangelism. Like formation, the practice of evangelism in the church constituted as “a holy people” will take its primary cue as the collective work of “a people in the world” rather than as individuals seeking to reach individuals. Indeed, as in the consideration of Christian formation, any attempt to separate the ministry of evangelism or the proclamation of the gospel from the community which proclaims it must be resisted. Yoder makes this point when he clarifies that, “...peoplehood and mission, fellowship and witness, are not two desiderata, each capable of existing or of being missed independently of one another; each is the condition of the genuineness of the other.”⁷³

How might this guide our conversations about the ministry of evangelism? I believe we can find guidance here in the suggestions offered by Samuel Wells in his recent book, God’s Companions: ReImagining Christian Ethics.⁷⁴ He suggests that the evangelism of the church can

⁷² Maddox, 133-134.

⁷³ Yoder, 78.

⁷⁴ Samuel Wells, God’s Companions: ReImagining Christian Ethics (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

be understood as an invitation that takes two forms: one which he calls “prophetic evangelism,” and that which he calls “priestly evangelism.” Each of these treatments deserves some brief attention.

Wells argues that “prophetic evangelism” refers to all those activities “whose principal or entire purpose is to bring people face to face with God, especially when such people have forgotten or never known what it means to worship him, to be his friends, and eat with him.”⁷⁵ The primary way this takes place, according to Wells, is through the church’s work of “witness,” understood to be a subtle, yet constant and visible presence of the church in the world that is eventually noticed by the world exactly because of its presence and constancy. A further delineation of this prophetic mode is found beyond evangelism as prophetic “witness” when it becomes prophetic “martyrdom.” While these terms are, of course, synonymous, Wells believes that it is helpful to suggest the role of martyr as an escalation of Christian witness as presence that more directly challenges the very order of things in the world, and thus, suggests a different and riskier set of consequences for the Christian evangelist; whereas evangelism in the mode of witness may result in inviting the world’s ridicule, evangelism as martyr may invite the world’s wrath.⁷⁶

This prophetic evangelism is distinguished from Wells’ second type of evangelism, “Priestly Evangelism.” Turning toward the witness of the internal life of the church, priestly evangelism refers to “activity that falls appropriately within the common life of the church, and is conducted for its own sake, but through which the grace of God may nonetheless touch a person and inspire them to discover more of the hope that is in the hearts of Christians.”⁷⁷ In other words, if one is exposed to the inherent beauty found in the lives of Christians and in the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 58.

shared life of the Christian community and comes to see it as both “habitable” and “attractive,” then perhaps this too can be a persuasive form of witness as one responds with the decision to enter the catechumenate. This is not to be limited to the interior life of the church, however, and thus Wells offers a second mode of priestly evangelism understood as “humble” involvement outside the church in the local community, the church essentially being the church in the neighborhood where it has been placed. With this, the differentiation from prophetic evangelism seems to be the stance of the church in relationship to the world: prophetic evangelism is an inherent challenge to the way of the world, while priestly evangelism is a mode of the church’s grace-full presence in the world.⁷⁸

Wells does not exclude, however, an account of evangelism that makes room for a more familiar rendering as interpersonal proclamation and invitation. Indeed, he suggests, “evangelism names a variety of practices by which the Church invites all people to worship God, to be his friends, and to eat with him” and thus, evangelism is a term that can be used to describe “all those conversations, events, communications, gestures, encounters through which a person comes to hear and receive that invitation made by God through the Church.”⁷⁹ What is important, however, is—again—the encouragement to consider this practice as the work not only of individuals to other individuals, but as the witness of the life of the Christian community presented as the ways of life of a particular people within the world. While his model is subject to questions and challenge, it stands here as an example of the ways an ecclesial vision can shape the ways we think about Christian practices, in the hope that such practices will resist the risks of commodification and individualism.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 61-62.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 57-8.

VII. Conclusion

With the assistance of David Yeago, I have argued that, in service to late modern capitalist consumer culture, the church discovers its relevance as it gains cultural legitimacy delivered in the form of a majority preference of consumers on the market. However, with Vincent Miller, we have seen that participation in that market requires the commodification of religious traditions, packaged and sold to specific members of the nuclear family living together in the single-family household. And thus, as such it cannot help but to serve to perpetuate the individualism that reigns in our culture, duplicating it in the church, disciplining and policing our imaginations such that we think of the church in exactly this way.

I have tried to show how these forces influence contemporary conversations over ecclesiological options, as well as trajectories for renewal and reinvigorated Christian practices, often unaware in these circumstances of how they are invited to serve the demands of the state and the market. In response to this, I have argued that the church must seek the disciplines that shape our imaginations to consider the church as a holy people *before* we consider the church as constituted by holy people, and I have tried to display how such an imagination can at least challenge, if not change the assumptions operating in our considerations of ecclesiology, formation, and evangelism in the contemporary United Methodist Church.

It is exactly this that allows me to look back at the last month of my time as the pastor of the church mentioned at the beginning of this paper with something like a mixture of pride and gratitude for the work of the Holy Spirit. In response to the request of a member of the church, we recreated an old practice long since dormant in the congregation: we sat down and had dinner together. It was a regular part of the congregation's life until the forces of life became too complicated to get people of such various age groups together in one place for a shared meal.

The number of directions families traveled each day to work, to shop, to entertain their children required a pace that never allowed the leisure of a meal shared at church, at least not a meal that was not tied to some other practical purpose (a meeting or some other event of some kind). As a result, the church responded: we created events that fit into the harried schedules of families with children, others for families with youth, and others still to meet the needs of our young adults, our “empty nesters” and our seniors who preferred to not to be called “older” adults but “better” adults. This is what allowed us to remain relevant to the people we tried to serve. As a result, we had not eaten together in that way for some time.

I remain convinced that the meal shared last July in that overheated social hall, had it been seen by anyone else in that neighborhood or in the city, would have stood out as a strange “waste of time”⁸⁰ Nothing else was accomplished other than being a time when and a place where the younger adults and the “better” adults, the families and widows, the children and youth sat down, prayed thanksgiving, and ate a meal together. It surely was the most counter-cultural thing that church ever did while I was the pastor. And yet, it was simply what Jesus told us we should do.

⁸⁰ Here I am adapting the title of Marva Dawn’s book A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

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