

# A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS: VOCATION, MISSION, AND CHURCH IN WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVE

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The twelfth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, meeting at Christ Church, the Oxford college of John and Charles Wesley, took as its theme “To Serve the Present Age, My Calling to Fulfill.” In the tercentenary year of his birth it was obviously appropriate to take this famous line from a hymn of Charles Wesley’s as the Institute’s theme. How to serve the present age with anything approximating a Christian calling, however, is a matter of considerable complication. Seven Methodist theologians from Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe, and North America assumed the challenge in presentations from which the essays comprised in this book stemmed.

The challenge of addressing the theme of “vocation, mission, and church” in our time is immense. Where can Christian calling take place and be nurtured in our highly secularized societies? Has not mission, at least as practiced by Christians in the developed societies, been utterly discredited, charged with being complicit in spreading globally the political economies and cultures of competitive markets? Didn’t the ecumenical movement seemingly collapse because of antagonism from various parts of the world church about the meaning and practice of mission? Do we not hear

a cry from Christians on every continent about an “ecclesiological deficit”? And what, after all, does the variegated Wesleyan tradition have to offer in addressing these questions?

It is not surprising that some tensions and different perspectives appear in these essays, since these questions are addressed from the perspective of different continents and from churches in different cultural, political, and economic situations. The three essayists from Africa, Asia, and Latin America make us keenly aware that Methodism was delivered to their regions by missionaries who had adapted Methodism to the nineteenth-century North American and European contexts. In the process some of the most important theological contributions of Wesley were lost. Even when the themes are the same, contemporary Methodism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America develops differing views of discipleship, sanctification, and church from Methodism in the developed countries. Discipleship in mainland China during the Cultural Revolution or in South Africa under apartheid looks different from its developed world expressions. But precisely because the essays offer different slants on these urgent matters, they also offer a Wesleyan conferring that is resourceful and encouraging for world Methodism.

All the essays fall within the creative tension of two questions: How can the church simultaneously serve Christ and the world if it lives according to the standards of the world and does not stand apart from the world? But, on the other hand, how can the church serve Christ and the world if it does not stand in solidarity with the world God loves with God’s whole being? The essays wager that there is a distinctive Wesleyan answer to the church’s ancient question: How to be in the world but not of it? The Wesleyan response has to do with holding together in tension inward and outward holiness, worship and mission in the world, grace given and grace lived, and preparatory waiting and prophetic act.

Several themes emerge as these Wesleyan theologians wrestle with how to account for (1) the connection between the doctrine of the church and God’s own life and work, (2) the human constituency of the church, (3) the church’s mission in a time of global crisis, (4) Christian vocation, (5) the Wesleyan centrality of sanctification, and (6) human dignity in a pluralist world.

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*THE CHURCH AS GOD'S CREATION*

William Willimon maintains that for Methodists the burning question of "ecclesiological deficit" is at heart a failure to understand Wesley's insistence that the church is an expression of the life and work of God. We try to craft "church" before we ask, *Who is God, and what is God doing?* The starting point for a doctrine of the church should rather be the worship of the God whose "processions" of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit show forth God's self-giving to God's creation. The inward and outer movements of God's triune life vivify the rhythm of the church's inner and outer life.

Willimon decries the subjectivity of some Wesleyan theology that tries to derive the church from human affectivity and will. This descent into subjectivity serves an accommodation to consumerism and promotes an unsure activism in the church that does not follow where God proceeds. The proclamation of the church is reduced to getting with the "message" rather than transforming life through an encounter in Jesus with the triune God. "Because of our limp theology, our anthropology becomes too stable, and the purpose of our preaching is adjustment, confirmation rather than conversion. Preaching thus becomes another means of self-cultivation as well as a well-reasoned defense against true transformation." A Wesleyan ecclesiology will stress that our vocation and service "to the present age" are a call for transformative justice that begins with our own transformation by God's grace. We dare not think of outward mission without our inward conversion.

But it is Wesley's "lively trinitarian God of constant processions" that also leads to Wesley's emphasis on God's presence among the suffering and the excluded. It is not our subjectivity that makes the true church present. Rather, the church is present where Christ is present. According to 1 Peter, Christ is present among the *paraoikoi*, the strangers, the homeless who dwell beyond the hearth. The church as Christ's "home for the homeless," then, must go beyond itself to find itself in Christ. Any Wesleyan view of a calling into the church and into the church's mission to the world will focus on the power God gives us for intimacy with the poor. There is in Methodism a widespread sense that the coming church will look different from the present church, though we struggle to imagine what

will emerge. What we do know from a Wesleyan identity is that we will meet the future of the church in God's presence with the poor.

### *THE CHURCH AS THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD*

All the authors in this volume deal in one way or another with how God constitutes the church as a crucial issue in constructing an ecclesiology. Lung-kwong Lo develops his ecclesiology through a series of images of the church as "the people of God" and relates these images to the Asian concept of *minjung*, a term meaning "the mass of the people." Transcending the boundaries of social classes, *minjung* represents people who suffer different kinds of oppression. In a similar fashion, but from the context of South Africa, Ivan Abrahams calls on the African concepts of *Ubuntu* and *Botho* (meaning "a person is a person because of other persons") as a way of speaking about the humaneness and dignity of the diverse people Christ seeks to bring into the economy of life. In the Latin American context Paulo Mattos points to the early Wesleyan revival's focus on the poor as the recipients of the gospel's promise as a needed direction for the Brazilian Methodist Church. In fact, all three authors stress that the Methodist movement was started as a reform movement inside the Church of England and was directed toward the poor.

One value of remembering early Methodism as a movement to the poor is its reflection of the New Testament depiction of the church as "home for the homeless." As a way of discussing the difficulty of thinking and living the church in Latin America, Mattos traces some of the weaknesses of North American Methodism brought to Brazil by missionaries. Wesley's understanding of the corporate nature of Christianity, expressed in bands, classes, societies, and conferences, was subordinated to North American middle-class individualism and salvation as a private matter. He discusses, among other factors, the effect of the camp meeting's emotional impact on lessening the corporate nature of conference, upsetting the balance between social and personal holiness.

The view of the church that Lo, Abrahams, and Mattos are developing is of a "congregation in the wilderness," on the move,

not defined by the confining stasis of its surroundings, a community always under construction by the power of the Holy Spirit, held together by the risen Christ's self-giving to the lost and forsaken.

### *THE CHURCH SHAPED BY MISSION*

After five decades of severe crisis in relating Christian mission and the *oikoumene*, there is no doubt that we must have a rebirth of both and that neither can be reborn without the other. The ecumenical movement in the last century was epitomized by the conviction that the being of the church is the *missio Dei*, that is, the triune God's way of redeeming the world. It was often said that the church *is* mission. But churches in the developed and developing worlds disagreed on the meaning and method of mission. In the developing world the church is usually a minority institution, often a movement of oppressed people, whereas in some countries of the West it has been a majority, sanctioned if not misused by the powerful. The beginnings of the Wesleyan movement are more reflected by the former. What in the Wesleyan tradition could contribute today to new perceptions and practices of mission?

The authors of this volume generally agree that regaining a sense of being a Wesleyan *movement* would be salutary to Methodist churches. This is, of course, easier said than done. Methodist churches in different parts of the world relate to the power structures in their contexts in different ways. With the present enormous crisis of the global fiscal system, all parts of the world may be faced with a radical redefinition of power. What until only recently was seen as the imperial power of the United States and Europe suddenly looks quite different. We are entering a period of great danger, especially if countries losing economic control resort to military means of maintaining their superiority, but it may also be a time when power can be reimagined and more justly distributed in the world.

If churches that for more than a century have shaped themselves according to corporate economy can reshape themselves to stand in greater solidarity with those who are excluded from the reigning political economy, they could create new models of mission as

cooperative seeking of human dignity for all and equity in the goods necessary for the flourishing of human life.

A concern that looms large in this volume's treatment of mission is slavery. Both Abrahams and Mattos draw heavily on John Wesley's stand on abolition of slavery to formulate a calling for Wesleyan churches to join the struggle to end today's slavery brought on by globalized capitalism. Even chattel slavery, the enormous worldwide traffic in human beings, has not ended in our time, and there are many other kinds of slavery, including a plethora of addictions in our consumerist societies. Here again we must be cognizant of Wesley's insistence on the inner and outer freedom from slavery. Paul spoke of our ultimate captivity being our "slavery to the law of sin and death." A new understanding of mission in the oikoumene in our time will emphasize this universal threat of slavery in the heart of every human being and every culture. The grace that works through love in a mission serving God's justice in the world has to work also in freeing us from our spiritual captivity to falsely constructed systems of security.

### *CHRISTIAN VOCATION*

Who will receive a vocation to enter into this mission? In what place and time in our self-absorbed cultures can a person hear and respond to such a call? Are people hearing the calling of God to mission in Methodist and Wesleyan congregations throughout the world? Baptism is a participation in God's love that is at once a call to mission, a call to give oneself to God's mission of redeeming the world. But through baptism the Holy Spirit calls the ministry of the church into being because there can be no mission without the community of disciples who follow Jesus. The call to mission entails and necessitates the call to church. In Christ the vocation is universal, but the call to mission comes to persons and communities in particular times and places. To the "gospel feast" all for whom Christ has died are called, but the feast is held as an occasion within the turmoil, suffering, and joy of a definite place. The limitless nature of God's grace comes to rest in a setting that is just as peculiar as the everyday relations of a community.

Tim Macquiban claims that Methodists can learn much about the universal and particular character of Christian calling from Charles Wesley's hymns. In the same way Wesley in his "re-creative thought enabled Scripture to speak to our human condition in what it means to be a Christian, we can re-create a Wesleyan understanding of our calling, vocation, and work in the twenty-first century to serve the present age." Wesley's hymns join biblical narrative with grace-filled experience to help shape our Methodist identity and give us a deeper understanding of our calling. The vocational hymns then become "for us subversive acts of profound hope in a fractured world making sense of who we are and how we act in this Wesleyan tradition, connecting heart and mind, worship and work."

Several aspects of Christian vocation are prominent in Wesley's hymns. A constant theme in the hymns is: no vocation without following Jesus. A Wesleyan sense of vocation to service and mission is centered in the tradition of the *imitatio Christi*. Because vocations are decided by the diverse gifts given to members of the congregation, discerning the gifts of baptized persons is a primary task of the congregation. Making fruitful the gifts given one is a primary responsibility of a person called and sent into Christ's ministry of healing and reconciliation. God gives gifts for ministry that are appropriate to an individual person and to the time and place in which the person is called.

A Wesleyan emphasis is that vocation takes place in and through the experience of living the gospel. Calling means actually living the gifts God gives through the gospel: repentance, giving, forgiving, and hospitality. Vocation is the wrenching experience of giving up one's take on the world and being grasped by God's love of the world. It is giving one's life in response to God's giving Godself for the redemption of the world (John 3:16). It is forgiving those who sin against me as God has forgiven me. It is, as Charles so often reminds us, extending hospitality to the stranger, making home for the homeless.

For Methodists to serve the present age in renewed mission and *oikoumene* would mean a revived practice of vocation in congregation and families. The original Wesleyan insistence that the ministry of clergy exists for the sake of the formation of the ministry of the laity is decisive to vocation in our time.

It is also imperative for us to regain the Wesleyan sense of the way service opens up the experience of grace. The vocation of “making room for the stranger” is already an experience of the joy of the kingdom. As Macquiban makes clear, Charles Wesley’s hymns have a vivid sense of the way the Holy Spirit brings the promised future into present work and suffering so that heaven is already experienced under the conditions of history.

### *HOLINESS AND LOVE*

As Marjorie Suchocki, Lo, and Macquiban amply demonstrate, sanctification is the substance of Wesleyan ecclesiology. According to Suchocki, “our self-understanding as Methodists and our contribution to ecumenical ecclesiology are to clarify the sense in which Christian perfection illumines the traditional formulations of the church.” Sanctification is the “process of being continuously formed in the image of God.” Sanctification is participation in God’s love and therefore love of neighbor. According to 1 Corinthians 1, the power of God is God’s self-giving in the cross of Christ. Love is the power by which God creates, provisions, and redeems the creation. If love is the power of God’s self-giving that gives us the power to serve life, it is not too strong to say that sanctification is the milieu of vocation, the substance of the church, and the power of mission.

The church is not *sui generis*, as many schemes for trying to revive the church in our time seem to think. As Suchocki expresses the point, “The church exists to participate in the love of God, and if God loves the world, and if love cares for the fullness of well-being, then the church, which is strengthened in love through word and sacrament, necessarily expends itself in service to the needs of the world.” Sanctification cannot be undertaken singly but only in the company of disciples. This is so because love adapts to the condition of the loved one and thus constantly occasions the transformation of each that brings into being the community of all. Precisely because perfection is empowerment for love, its sign is the “webs of care for one another’s well-being.”

Christian perfection cannot be separated from the reality of word and sacrament that serve the making present and incarnating

of God's love. Word and sacrament are God's means of grace by which we are formed in the image of God. They shape our lives in the here and now according to the love that has been expressed in Jesus and for the sake of what is coming in God's grace.

Sanctification as God's gift that brings us into the communion of God's love is the presupposition of our service of the present age.

### *THE CHURCH IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY: THE GOSPEL AND HUMAN DIGNITY*

But how practically are we to serve the present age? There may be a dawning realization that unless the world community creates a more just economy and a wiser care of the earth, the present age is in dire jeopardy. But how should the ecumenical church work cooperatively in serving this broken world? Robin Lovin's essay makes a crucial contribution here in seeking a way to establish human rights that could be understood by churches in different political and economic contexts as an essential component of mission. Lovin is quite aware of the suspicion of human rights on many fronts, and he takes seriously the modern conflict between vocation as delimitation of work roles and the modern Enlightenment ideal of human dignity.

The Wesleyan movement, argues Lovin, is a creative resource for contemporary humanizing mission because it occurred in the transition to modernity and yet was able to affirm the value of both work and human dignity. Perhaps no theologian esteemed work within one's vocation more than did John Wesley. But at the same time, Wesley recognized the God-given dignity of the poor and others who could not gain social recognition by work. It is this simple dignity that Wesley believed fitted the poor and marginalized for a Christian vocation. Following Jesus, Wesley insisted that redemption of the poor, no matter how poor, included their work in service to others. On the other hand, Wesley taught that those who thought their dignity precluded their need to work are deeply mistaken. The gospel's gift of dignity, purely and simply, entails vocation and work.

Lovin argues that serving the present age in mission will mean that Christian mission cannot be closed in on itself. In Wesley and

the early Methodists we find a pluralistic understanding of politics and society. Pluralism exists because “human goods exist in the forms that people create and maintain in concrete social situations, in their interactions with one another across all the lines of race, religion, ethnicity, and class that initially divide them.” These goods can be understood theologically and legally in various ways, but no institution, including church and state, can claim to be the source of their existence or the definer of their meaning for those who share in them. The God-given dignity of human beings means that they cannot be sacrificed to the workings of markets, movements, ideologies, or laws. Only when states and international institutions recognize the reality of the conditions of human dignity will we be able to make declarations of human rights actually effective. Thus, Lovin proposes, to serve the present age and fulfill our calling, our mission should be focused on creating the conditions under which all human beings can experience what human dignity means.

Lovin is proposing something like a Wesleyan “experimental” mission. He urges that “marginal Christianity” is effective when it depends on shared experience rather than expecting its marching orders from above. Like Wesley, it should go ahead with what should and can be done, and ask for forgiveness later. It should depend less on its own programs and rather support people in accomplishing what they are seeking, and thereby transform the “order of social possibilities.” Accepting and fulfilling this calling, says Lovin, “will not just be a service to our neighbors, but a working out of our own salvation. It will not be just an application of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a separate, secular reality, but a way of understanding how the love of God fills all things and reaches every person.”

All of these essays attest to God’s abundant grace and yet do so with eyes open to the contradictions of God’s grace in Methodist churches as well as in the world. In the midst of continuing warfare, fragile governments, massive hunger, and threatened world depression, we live with a chastened hope. Our calling is to work together with all humanity to shape the different future God promises and thereby serve the present age. By serving God’s promise of home for the homeless, we anticipate that time when God will make this world God’s home.