

Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism

Rex D. Matthews

NB: This paper is very much a work-in-progress and is intended only for discussion by members of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. Please refrain from public quotation or attribution without the specific consent of the author.

Introduction

A recent decision by the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church stimulated a good deal of controversy across the denomination. That decision stated that “the pastor in charge of a United Methodist church or charge is solely responsible for making the determination of a person’s readiness to receive the vows of membership.” It further stated that a pastor in charge “cannot be ordered by the district superintendent or bishop to admit into membership a person deemed not ready or able to meet the requirements of the vows of church membership of The United Methodist Church,” and concluded that the 2004 *Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church “invests discretion in the pastor in charge to make the determination of a person’s readiness to affirm the vows of membership.”¹

In a “Pastoral Letter to the People of The United Methodist Church” issued in response to that Judicial Council decision, the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church plainly affirms the “Wesleyan practice” that “pastors are accountable to the bishop, [district] superintendent, and the clergy on matters of ministry and membership.” Bishop Peter Weaver, at the time the President of the Council of Bishops, was quoted in published news reports as saying that

¹ The complete text of Judicial Council Decision 1032 (29 October 2005) is available on the main web site of The United Methodist Church:
http://archives.umc.org/interior_judicial.asp?mid=263&JDID=1098&JDMOD=VWD&SN=1001&EN=1032

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

“The local pastor does have authority” with respect to determining whether a person is “ready” for church membership but only “in the context of the theology and values of The United Methodist Church.”² Subsequently the Judicial Council has denied petitions to reconsider its original decision, which now stands as the binding interpretation of church law on the matter for The United Methodist Church, unless and until it is overturned by a subsequent Judicial Council decision (which seems highly unlikely given the current composition of the Council) or through legislative enactment by the UMC General Conference, which next meets in April 2008.³

Leaving aside the specifics of the pastoral situation which gave rise to it,⁴ Judicial Council Decision 1032 and the controversy that it engendered reveal a significant ecclesiological tension within The United Methodist Church (and perhaps also within the Wesleyan tradition more

² The full text of the text of “A Pastoral Letter to the People of The United Methodist Church from the Council of Bishops” (2 November 2005) is available on the web site of the Council of Bishops: <http://bishops.umc.org//interior.asp?mid=10171>.

Bishop Peter Weaver’s comments were included in a United Methodist News Service report, “United Methodist bishops affirm church membership open to all” (3 November 2005): http://www.umc.org/site/c.gjJTJbMUIuE/b.1156261/k.CBF0/United_Methodist_bishops_affirm_church_membership_open_to_all.htm

³ See Judicial Council Decision 1041 (28 April 2006) on the main web site of The United Methodist Church: http://archives.umc.org/interior_judicial.asp?mid=263&JDID=1120&JDMOD=VWD&SN=1001&EN=1072

Numerous individual members and groups, boards and agencies, and annual conferences of the UMC have passed resolutions expressing views about decision 1032 ranging from support to condemnation and submitted proposals for legislative action by the 2008 General Conference.

⁴ The specifics of the pastoral situation were described in United Methodist News Service report, “Pastor denies membership to homosexual, placed on leave” (July 26, 2005): http://www.umc.org/site/c.gjJTJbMUIuE/b.913795/k.C5AC/Pastor_denies_membership_to_homosexual_member_placed_on_leave.htm

The consequences of Judicial Council Decision 1032 were discussed in a subsequent United Methodist News Service report, “Church court reinstates pastor who denied membership to gay man” (31 October 2005): http://www.umc.org/site/c.gjJTJbMUIuE/b.1144999/k.E558/Church_court_reinstates_pastor_who_denied_membership_to_gay_man.htm.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

broadly). Methodists, particularly in America, have never completely come to theological terms with implications of the historical development of Methodism from its origin a series of voluntary societies existing within the context of the Church of England to its present existence as a worldwide church (or family of churches).

Albert Outler began his essay entitled “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” with this observation: “In the way it is posed here this question is a trap for the unwary. The answer ‘yes’ says too much; ‘no’ says too little.”⁵ As Outler’s comment suggests, Methodist folks, at least in The United Methodist Church, seem to be caught between an understanding of the church as being a “fellowship of saints” or a “holy club” (and so properly as highly selective or exclusive in membership), inherited from the time of John Wesley and his societies, and an understanding of the church as being a “hospital (or schoolhouse) for sinners” (and so necessarily as broadly inclusive in membership) — or to invoke the classic distinction of Ernst Troeltsch, between “sect” and “church.”

This paper investigates the changing nature of church membership in relationship to pastoral authority in The United Methodist Church and its directly antecedent bodies from the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 to the present. It does so primarily by examining the conditions and requirements for church membership, and the mechanism of admission to church membership, stated in the *Disciplines* of those bodies. By doing so, it seeks to help illumine the process by which Methodism in America evolved from being a group of voluntary societies existing within the context of a church to being a church (or churches).

⁵ Albert C. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, edited by Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 212.

Background: Wesley’s Methodist Societies

As is well known, John Wesley explicitly stated in the General Rules of the Methodist societies that there was “one only condition previously required in those who desire admission” into those societies, namely, “a desire ‘to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins’.” The door to membership in the Methodist societies was thus open to anyone having the necessary desire to be a part of them. It was Wesley’s conviction, however, that “wherever this [desire] is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits.” Consequently Wesley expected that those who desired to continue as society members “should continue to evidence their desire of salvation” by following the General Rules, which can be summarized under three main points: (1) “doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind”; (2) “doing good, by being, in every kind, merciful after their power”; and (3) “attending upon all the ordinances of God.”⁶

As is equally well known, Wesley had no reluctance about enforcing these rules strictly, and felt quite free to eject “disorderly walkers” from membership in the Methodist societies by refusing to renew their class tickets. When he ejected someone from the Methodist societies, however, he was not tossing them out of a church, precisely because Methodism was not (yet) a church, but a voluntary parachurch organization existing alongside of the institutional structures of the Church of England. Wesley was quite clear that the purpose of the Methodist societies was “not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”⁷

⁶ “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies” (1743), in *The Works of The Rev. John Wesley*, edited by Thomas Jackson, 3rd edition, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 8:269–70. Hereafter *Works* (Jackson).

⁷ *Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others from the Year 1744, to the Year 1789*, Q. 3, in *Works* (Jackson) 8:299. Hereafter the “Large Minutes.”

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

In writing about the early development of Wesley’s Methodist societies, Frank Baker notes that “although it was assumed that the bulk of the members were or would become loyal Anglicans, no creedal or ecclesiastical test was imposed” as a condition of Methodist society membership. What was imposed instead was an “ethical test” of whether or not individuals exhibited a pattern of daily living in accordance with their professed desire of salvation. After the publication of the General Rules in 1743, writes Baker, “Applicants were still *admitted* into membership upon a mere profession of ‘a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and be saved from their sins,’ but they could only be *continued* in membership as they proved the sincerity of their professed desire by translating words into deeds.”⁸

The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1784–1844

The sacramental crisis engendered by the American Revolution forced the Methodists in America to take the step of organizing their own church. With the disintegration and formal disestablishment of the Church of England in the former British colonies, now the new American states, American Methodists found themselves deprived of any access to the sacraments, since none of their preachers were ordained. As is well known, John Wesley provided for the new church abridgments of the Articles of Religion and of the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, along with his own writings (particularly his *Sermons* and his *Notes on the New Testament*). He also, reluctantly but in his view necessarily, crossed the Rubicon of ordination, which his brother Charles saw entailing separation from the Church of England, an implication that John stoutly denied until his death. Having provided what he judged to be all the necessary

⁸ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville & New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 78–79.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

elements for the formation of a new church, Wesley advised the American Methodists to “stand fast in that liberty wherewith God had so strangely made them free.”⁹

Curiously, when Wesley abridged the Book of Common Prayer to produce *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, he omitted (among other elements) the service of confirmation. If it really was Wesley’s intention to provide the American Methodists with everything that was necessary for the formation of a new church, why did he leave out this particular item? How was one to become a member of the newly-formed church? Nolan B. Harmon poses several possible reasons for Wesley’s omission of an order of confirmation from the *Sunday Service*, refusing to choose among them:

Whether Mr. Wesley believed that the terms of admission to the United Societies were sufficient, and expected these to be the gate to the Methodist Church in America with no further ceremony; or whether his Office for the Baptism of Adults, with its demand for assent to the Apostles’ Creed which it contains, was esteemed by him a proper gate to the Church; or whether he stopped short of giving his “Superintendent” a power approximating Confirmation as practiced by the Bishop in England; or whether he ignored, disapproved, or merely left this whole matter to his “Brethren in North America”—let another say and the writer will pay diligent attention. The outstanding fact is that there was no Office corresponding to Confirmation sent by Mr. Wesley to America. . . . Doubtless there was always some very fervent service of prayer and thanksgiving whenever new members came into the congregation, but . . . there was no regular form for the reception of such members.¹⁰

Norman W. Spellman asserts that Wesley’s omission of an order of confirmation was clearly intentional, arguing that in Wesley’s view, baptism was all that was necessary to admit one to the church universal, of which the new Methodist Episcopal Church was a part:

⁹ Wesley, letter to “Our Brethren in America” (Sept. 10, 1784) quoted in Baker, p. 272.

¹⁰ Nolan B. Harmon, *The Rite and Ritual of Episcopal Methodism* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1926), pp. 56–57. Harmon goes on to note the creation of orders for the reception of new members by the American Methodist churches at a later point in their history; those orders will be discussed below.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

As the Methodist societies in England has been *ecclesiolae* within the *ecclesia*—the Church of England—so the Methodist Church in America was to be within the holy catholic Church. . . . Apparently in order to stress membership in the holy catholic Church, Wesley did not give the American Methodists a formal ritual for membership. He intended that they should continue the more informal method of admission, stated in the General Rules of the United Societies. . . .¹¹

When the American Methodists met in the “Christmas Conference” of 1784 to establish what they decided to name the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), they adopted an edited version of the British “Large Minutes” as the basic template for the polity of the new church. The first American Methodist *Discipline*, published in 1785, revised Wesley’s statement about the purpose of the Methodist movement to make it appropriate to the American setting: “To reform the continent, and to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.”¹² It included the following provisions related to society membership, derived directly from the British “Large Minutes”:

- Q. 16. How shall we prevent improper Persons from insinuating into the Society?
A. 1. Give Tickets to none till they are recommended by a Leader, with whom they have met at least two Months on Trial.
2. Give Notes to none but those who are recommended by one you know, or until they have met three of four Times in a Class.
3. Give them the Rules the first Time they meet.
Q. 17. When shall we admit new Members?

¹¹ Norman W. Spellman, “The Formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” in *The History of American Methodism*, gen. ed. Emory Stevens Bucke, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 1:221–22.

¹² *Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury and Others, at a Conference, Begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th of December, in the Year 1784. Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia: Printed by Charles Cist, 1785), Q. 4, p. 4. Hereafter, for convenience, successive editions will be referred to simply as the *Discipline*, preceded by the initials of the relevant Methodist church body and followed by the year of publication, without indication of the full facts of publication.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

A. In large Towns, admit them to the Bands at the quarterly Love-Feast following the Quarterly Meeting: Into the Society, on the Sunday following the Quarterly Meeting. Then also read the names of them that are excluded.¹³

In 1787, the MEC restructured the *Discipline* into sections that were “arranged under proper heads, and methodized in a more acceptable and easy manner.” The provisions related to society membership now appear for the first time in a section headed “On Class-Meeting.” The question about “improper persons” above (Q. 16 in 1785) becomes Question 3 and is textually unchanged. The question about admitting new members (Q. 17 in 1785) becomes Question 4 and is significantly revised, as is the question about “negligent members” (Q. 65 in 1785):

Quest. 4. How shall we be more strict in receiving and excluding Members?

Answ. In large Societies, we may read the Names of those that are received, once a Quarter.

Quest. 5. What shall we do with those Members of Society who wilfully and repeatedly neglect to meet their class?

Answ. 1. Let the Elder, Deacon, of one of the Preachers, visit them, wherever it is practicable, and explain to them the Consequences if they continue to neglect, viz., Exclusion.

2. If they do not amend, let the Deacon exclude them in the Society; shewing that they are laid aside for a Breach of our Rules of Discipline, and not for immoral Conduct.¹⁴

In 1788 an entirely new section appears in the *Discipline*, for the first time setting out a process for “bringing to Trial, finding guilty, reproof, suspending, and excluding disorderly Members from Society and Church-Privileges,” distinguishing between “capital” offences and cases of neglect or imprudent conduct or the like. In both cases, if reform does not follow reproof by a class leader or preacher, then the accused is to be brought before the society of which he (or she) is a member, or a select number of them, in the presence of bishop, elder,

¹³ MEC *Discipline* 1785, Q. 16 & 17, p. 9; cf. the “Large Minutes,” Q. 14, in *Works* (Jackson), 8:307.

¹⁴ MEC *Discipline* 1787, §10, p. 17.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

deacon, or preacher, and allowed to hear the charges and evidence brought against him (or her) and to provide a defense. If the charges are judged to be proved and the accused shows no sign of repentance, then the offender must be “cut off.” If, however, there is a “murmur or complaint that justice is not done,” the accused person must be allowed an appeal to the quarterly meeting, and permitted to have his case reconsidered before a bishop, presiding elder, or deacon, with the preachers, stewards and leaders who may be present.” If the case against the accused is then sustained, expulsion follows, and “such persons as are thus excommunicated, shall have no privileges of society and sacrament in our church, without contrition, and proper trial.” And a note follows stipulating that “From this time forward, no person shall be owned as a member of our church, without six months trial.”¹⁵

These developments in regard to membership in the period between 1785 and 1788 are the context within which a new statement on pastoral authority and responsibility must be understood. In 1792 the MEC added a new section to the *Discipline* entitled “Of the Duties of those who have the Charge of Circuits.” Here we find for the first time an enumeration of the specific duties of the elder, deacon, or preacher who has special charge of a circuit. The first five items in the list are as follows:

1. To see that the other Preachers in his Circuit behave well, and want nothing.
2. To renew the Tickets quarterly, and regulate the bands.
3. To meet the Stewards and Leaders as often as possible.
4. To appoint all the Stewards and Leaders, and change them when he sees it necessary.
5. To receive, try, and expel members according to the form of Discipline.¹⁶

¹⁵ MEC *Discipline* 1788, §32, pp. 40–41. The text of Quest. 3 in the section “On Class-Meeting” (§9, p. 14–15) was accordingly revised to indicate a trial or probationary period of six months. The length of the trial or probationary period was not thereafter changed by the MEC until 1908, when it was eliminated altogether.

¹⁶ MEC *Discipline* 1792, §X, p. 24.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

This language about pastoral authority stands basically unaltered in all subsequent MEC *Disciplines* down to 1848. In contrast, the language about membership undergoes significant revision in 1836 and again in 1840. In 1836, the primary question about membership changes from “How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the Society?” (going back to the 1785 MEC *Discipline* and the British “Large Minutes”) to “How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the Church?” And the answer also changes, to state formally for the first time that baptism is a prerequisite for membership in the MEC: “Let none be received into the church, until they are recommended by a leader with whom they have met at least six months on trial, and have been baptized.”¹⁷

Here in 1836, for the first time in American Methodism, language that is characteristic of “church” is conjoined with the older language that is characteristic of “society.” Until now, people were admitted to the Society through the mechanism the issuance of class tickets by the pastor based on the prior recommendation of a class leader with whom the candidates had met during a six months trial period. Now the language shifts, speaking of members as being “received into the church,” and making baptism a requirement of reception into the church in addition to recommendation by a class leader. In 1840, the membership language is changed again, adding the requirement of a formal public examination of the candidate for membership by the pastor before the church:

Quest. 3 How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the Church?

Ans. 1. Let none be received into the Church until they are recommended by a leader with whom they have met at least six months on trial, and have been baptized; and shall, on examination by the minister in charge, before the Church, give satisfactory assurances both of the correctness of their faith, and their willingness to observe and keep the rules of the Church. Nevertheless, if a member in good standing in any

¹⁷ MEC *Discipline* 1836, §II, Q. 3, p. 81.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

other orthodox Church shall desire to unite with us, such applicant may, by giving satisfactory answers to the usual inquiries, be received at once into full fellowship.

Answ. 2. Let none be admitted on trial, except they are well recommended by one you know, or until they have met twice or thrice in class.

Answ. 3. Read the rules to them the first time they meet.¹⁸

The language about both church membership and pastoral authority were unchanged in the MEC *Discipline* of 1844, the last to be issued before the tragic division between northern and southern Methodists in America over the issue of slavery and related issues of church polity, namely, the powers and authority of the General Conference in relation to the powers and authority of the bishops of the church.

The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1844–1939

When the southern Methodists in America decided to separate from their northern brethren in accordance with the Plan of Separation approved by the General Conference of 1844, they faced the challenge of forming a new church. The organizing conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) was held in 1845 (in Louisville, KY), and the first General Conference of the new church met in 1846 (in Petersburg, VA). The first MECS *Discipline* was that of 1846, and it simply replicated most of the provisions of the MEC *Discipline* of 1844, including those concerned with church membership and pastoral authority. The 1846 MECS *Discipline* reproduced the question “How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the church?” and its related answers from the 1844 MEC *Discipline*, but placed it in a new section with the heading “Of the Reception of Members into the Church.”¹⁹ The

¹⁸ MEC *Discipline* 1840, §II, Q. 3, pp. 91–92.

¹⁹ MECS *Discipline* 1846, Chapter III, §I, pp. 71–72. Cf. MEC *Discipline* 1844, §II, pp. 86–87.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

MECS also adopted the language about pastoral authority and responsibility from the 1844 MEC *Discipline*, indicating that one of “the duties of the elder, deacon or preacher, who has the special charge of Circuits” is “To receive, try, and expel members according to the form of Discipline.”²⁰ Although the enumeration of the section will change over time, this provision of the MECS *Discipline* will be textually unaltered in every subsequent edition through 1938.

In 1866, as the MECS struggled to reorganize and reinvigorate itself following the horrors of the Civil War, it made major alterations in the section of its *Discipline* concerning the reception of members into the Church. Attendance at class meeting as requirement for church membership was eliminated, as was any specified probationary period for new members, and a new order for the reception of new members was included in the *Discipline* “to be used by such ministers as may see proper to do so”:

Quest. How shall persons be received into the Church?

Ans. 1. When persons offer themselves for Church membership, let the preacher in charge inquire into their spiritual condition, and see that they are acquainted with the moral discipline of the Church, and receive them into the Church when they have given satisfactory assurances of their desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins; also of the genuineness of their faith, and of their willingness to keep the rules of the church.

2. When satisfied on these points, let the preacher bring the candidates before the congregation, whenever practicable and baptize them, if they have not been baptized; and if they have been, propound to them the questions, and receive the answers contained in the baptismal vow—excepting, of course, the third question and answer—as follows:

Quest. Dost thou renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow or be led by them?

Ans: I renounce them all.

Quest. Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth? and in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son our Lord? and that he was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary? that he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried? that he rose again the third day? that he ascended into

²⁰ MECS *Discipline* 1846, Chapter II, §X, p. 43

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and from thence shall come again, at the end of the world to judge the quick and the dead?

And dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost, the Church of God, the communion of saints, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the body, and everlasting life after death?

Ans. All this I steadfastly believe.

Quest. Wilt thou then obediently keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?

Ans. I will endeavor so to do, God being my helper.²¹

Here the question is no longer “How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the Church?” but rather “How shall persons be received into the Church?” The language is much different here, with the pastor taking charge. Gone is any reference to a recommendation by a class leader with whom candidates for membership have met at least six months on trial, and indeed to any specific probationary period at all. The pastor is now in control of the process. The pastor is here instructed to inquire into the “spiritual condition” of potential members and the “genuineness of their faith,” among other things, and once he is “satisfied” on all points, he is to baptize them if they have not already been baptized and then administer to them the vows of church membership. Decisions about church membership appear to rest entirely on the shoulders of the pastor; there is no longer any specifically designated role for local church lay leadership in relation to membership decisions.²²

In 1870 the MECS included an newly revised order for the reception of new members in the *Ritual* for the first time, removing the specific doctrinal and ethical questions to be asked of

²¹ MECS *Discipline* 1866, Chapter III, §I, pp. 90–93.

²² It seems possible that the high rate of casualties suffered by Confederate armies during the Civil War had reduced the effective lay leadership of the MECS to the point at which the sort of pastoral authority and control of local church affairs exhibited by the 1866 MECS *Discipline* was seen as necessary. At the same time, it is worth noting that in 1866 “lay leadership” necessarily meant *male* lay leadership; women were not yet accorded representation or voting rights in any branch of American Methodism, let alone permitted to serve as clergy.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

potential members by the pastor from the *Discipline*. From 1870 to 1938, the section of the MECS *Discipline* relating to receiving members into the church was basically unchanged, reading as follows:

Quest. How shall members be received into the Church?

Ans. 1. When persons offer themselves for Church membership, let the preacher in charge inquire into their spiritual condition, and receive them into the Church when they have given satisfactory assurances of their desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins; and also, of the genuineness of their faith, and of their willingness to keep the rules of the Church.

2. When satisfied on these points, let the minister bring the candidates before the congregation, whenever practicable, and receive them according to the prescribed form.²³

The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1844–1939

In 1848 the MEC followed the precedent of the MECS (in 1846) by moving regulations concerning church membership out of the “Class-Meetings” section of the *Discipline* into a new section headed “Of the Reception of Members into the Church.” The provisions for the reception of members were basically unaltered. In 1864 the MEC for the first time included in the *Discipline* an liturgical order for the reception of new members, followed by the MECS in 1866. And in 1868, the MEC revised its language about church membership to refer to recommendation by the Leaders’ and Stewards’ Meeting:

Chapter II: The Membership of the Church

Q. 1: How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the Church?

A. Let no one be received into the church until such person has been at least six months on trial, and has been recommended by the Leaders’ and Stewards’ Meeting, or where no such meeting is held, by the Leader, and has been baptized; and shall on

²³ MECS *Discipline* 1870, Chapter IV, §I, pp. 103–104. Cf. MECS *Discipline* 1938, Chapter XVII, §1, ¶632, p. 331, which adds the following to the end of the text of Ans. 1 above: “. . . and only after they have been instructed in these rules and in the baptismal and Church vows, and have agreed to accept and observe them.”

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

examination by the minister in charge before the Church, give satisfactory assurances both of the correctness of his faith, and his willingness to observe and keep the rules of the Church.²⁴

In 1892 the MEC made a significant change in the language of the *Discipline* concerning pastoral authority. Since 1792, one of the stated responsibilities of the pastor in charge of a circuit had been “To receive, try and expel Members according to the form of the Discipline.” This language is changed in 1892 to “To receive persons on Probation, and into Full Membership after Probation; to receive and dismiss members by Certificate; and to administer the Discipline within his charge.”²⁵ Gone is the language articulating the power of the pastor to “try” and to “expel” members save as that may fall within the orbit of administration of the *Discipline*. Also implicit here is a formal distinction between the categories of probationary and full membership; this has been an implicit distinction since 1785 but it is explicitly articulated for the first time by the MEC in 1892.

In 1908 the MEC removed a specific time limit on probation for membership (which dated back to 1788) and placed responsibility for determining the “fitness” of a candidate for membership jointly upon the pastor and the Official Board, or the Leaders and Stewards’ Meeting (here seemingly spoken of as a single meeting), who much concur in making this determination:

Chapter I — The Membership of the Church, Article I — Admission into the Church

¶48. In order to prevent improper persons from gaining admission into the Church, and in order to exercise the power of Godly admonition and discipline . . .

3. Let no one be admitted into full membership in the Church until he has been recommended by the Official Board or the Leaders and Stewards’ Meeting, with the approval of the Pastor; has been baptized, and, on examination has given satisfactory assurances both of the correctness of his faith and of his willingness to observe and keep the rules.²⁶

²⁴ MEC *Discipline* 1868, Chapter II, p. 38–39.

²⁵ MEC *Discipline* 1892, ¶189, p. 104–05.

²⁶ MEC *Discipline* 1908, ¶48, p. 47.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

Eight years later, the “improper persons” language of this article, which goes back to the 1785 MEC *Discipline* and the British “Large Minutes,” is replaced in the 1916 MEC *Discipline* by a different explanation and rationale:

¶48. In order that the doors of the Church may not be closed to any person seeking to be saved from his sins, and yet the Church be properly safeguarded against the hasty admission of any unworthy person; and in order that all those who have not had previous instruction in the doctrines of the Church may have the advantages of its mean of grace, the ritual shall provide two forms for the reception of membership.²⁷

Why was the Official Board given a specific role in the church membership process by the MEC in 1908? It seems clear that the answer relates to the decline of the class meeting, in its original sense, as a functional small-group unit within the MEC (the MECS had eliminated class membership as necessary to church membership in 1866, at the point of its major reorganization after the Civil War). By 1936 the comparable provision of the *Discipline* says that “Baptized persons who give satisfactory evidence of their Christian character and of their knowledge of the rules and regulations of the Methodist Episcopal Church, *upon recommendation of the Official Board or the Board of Stewards, with the approval of the Pastor*, shall be received into full membership on Confession of Faith according to the forms in the Ritual.”²⁸ Here the reference to the Leader’s Meeting, introduced in 1868 and still present in 1908, has been eliminated.

Interlude: From Society to Church

The notion of Methodism as a society was deeply ingrained, and endured in the language and structures of American Methodism, and in the consciousness and self-understanding of

²⁷ MEC *Discipline* 1916, ¶48, p. 51. The two forms of reception mentioned here relate to probationary membership and full membership.

²⁸ MEC *Discipline* 1936, ¶111.3(b), p. 66, emphasis added.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

Methodist folks in America, far into the nineteenth century. In 1816 the MEC replaced the word “connection” throughout the *Discipline* with the word “church.” It also replaced the word “society” with the word “church” in the sections of the *Discipline* concerning membership. The term “society” continued to be used elsewhere in the MEC *Discipline however*, until 1848, when the MEC followed a decision made by the MECS in its first *Discipline* (1844) and moved provisions concerning membership out of the “Class Meetings” section into a new section entitled “Of Receiving Members into the Church.” In 1854 the MECS omitted from its *Discipline* the section on “band-societies” and began to refer to “church members” rather than to “members in Society” in the *Minutes*. In 1856 the MEC followed the MECS and omitted the section on “band-societies” from its *Discipline*. In 1858 the MECS substituted the words “church” and “churches” for the words “society” and “societies” throughout its *Discipline* except in the General Rules, where the older language was retained for historical reasons.

The story of the decline of the class meeting—of the shift from what Wesley and Asbury would have understood a “class meeting” to be to what folks nowadays generally know and experience as the Sunday-school class—has been told by many, but most recently and effectively by David Lowes Watson and Philip F. Hardt.²⁹ The band had disappeared from American Methodism long before the class effectively ceased to function. The decline of the bands and classes and the transmutation of the latter into Sunday-school classes is a very important part of the story of the transformation of Methodism in America from “society” into “church,” along with the growth of “station” churches and the gradual “dismounting” of the circuit riders.

²⁹ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985); Philip F. Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism: The Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000)

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

As Elmer T. Clark notes in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, class meetings in the classical sense had almost disappeared from the American Methodist scene by the beginning of the twentieth century, and when the pastors of some larger churches found it expedient to divide their congregations into geographical groups under lay sub-pastors, they chose to call the groups “units” rather than to use the old name “classes.”³⁰ The name “class” was by this time so closely associated with the Sunday-school class that it was apparently not seen as useful for the purpose of these “new” small groups. In 1920 the MEC General Conference endorsed this practice as a partial revival of the old class meeting system by inserting “or units” into the section of the *Discipline* relating to class meetings, which still survived as a kind of historic relic. The MECS finally omitted the section on “class meetings” from the *Discipline* altogether in 1934, a step that the MEC did not take before the 1939 reunion.

One could easily compile from church publications and episcopal addresses a long litany of laments by bishops and other American Methodist church leaders about the decline of the class meeting in second half of the nineteenth century. Discussion about the matter even found its way into the British Methodist press. An editorial in November 10, 1865 edition of *The Methodist Recorder*, commenting on recent membership reports from the Methodist churches in America, noted approvingly that “the English method of reckoning members is much more strict and searching than the American” and commented that “in England, as a general rule, continued attendance at Class is necessary to continual membership; in America it is not necessary.” This provoked a response by a correspondent signing himself as “Liberal,” who agreed with the judgment of the editorial but who had a different view about its implications:

³⁰ Elmer T. Clark, “Class Meetings in American Methodism,” in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, gen. ed. Nolan B. Harmon, 2 vols. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), p. 520.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

British Methodism insists upon meeting in Class as the condition of Church membership; American Methodism does not. In the one case, the Class Meeting is the cornerstone, the basis upon which the entire superstructure is raised; in the other, it is adopted as an accessory of strength and security to the building reared to some extent independently of it. . . . the British Methodist must go through the Class Meeting as the only door to the sheep-fold; while the American has access by a gate which, in all deference to your opinion of it, does not appear to my mind to be any less strait. . . . I am inclined to think our American brethren are ahead of us in this matter, and that we might take a leaf out of their book with advantage to ourselves. Methodism should surely be as capable of adapting herself to circumstances in this country as in the United States. In its embryo state, as a Society of individuals within the Church, Methodism might with propriety insist upon its own terms. Exclusion from the ‘Society’ was not then exclusion from the Church. But seeing that the ‘Society’ has expanded into a ‘Church’, it becomes a fair question whether the ‘Society’ foundation is broad enough to meet all the requirements of the more comprehensive ‘Church’ edifice. In the light of the New Testament, your present correspondent is inclined to think not.³¹

The class meeting survived far longer in British than in American Methodism, as did its correlate, the Leaders’ Meeting, which in the British tradition was a weekly gathering of the class leaders and the stewards of a local society (later, church), chaired by the preacher in charge of the circuit. As Frank Baker notes, the Leader’s Meeting served only an advisory function throughout Wesley’s lifetime; all major decisions, including decisions about society membership, were made by Wesley himself or by his designated “helpers.” However, in 1797, the British Conference gave the Leader’s Meeting the right to veto candidates for membership, thus reducing at least slightly the authority of the preachers in regard to society (now, church) membership.

As Baker continues,

The spiritual influence of the class leaders was very high indeed, but their administrative power remained very limited. The undercurrent of dissatisfaction about this was one of the factors in the rise of most of the major disputes within Wesleyan Methodism. Most of the daughter bodies reduced ministerial prerogative and increased the power of the lay leaders, and gradually this liberalizing tendency affected the parent body also. At Methodist Union in 1932 this was unequivocally written into the constitution of the new Methodist Church. The local Leaders’ Meeting now possesses much

³¹ *A History of The Methodist Church in Great Britain*, gen. eds. Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George, and Gordon Rupp, Volume 4 (London: Epworth Press, 1988), pp. 530–32.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

greater authority, having complete oversight of the spiritual welfare of the society, including the appointment of leaders and stewards, and the admission and discipline of members.³²

The Methodist Protestant Church, 1830–1939

The MEC General Conference of 1808 adopted the principle of a delegated conference; from that point on, each Annual Conference was to elect representatives to General Conference. But only the itinerant clergy were eligible to vote, and only itinerant clergy could be elected. Local preachers and laymen (not to mention lay women) were all ignored in the process. Unhappiness over this state of affairs, perhaps exacerbated in the Jacksonian era of American politics, combined with long-standing grievances about the “arbitrary exercise of power” by the bishops and their refusal to allow the election of presiding elders, eventually led to the withdrawal of about 10% of the membership and clergy of the MEC in the late 1820s and to formal organization of the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC) at a convention in Baltimore in 1830. The MPC Constitution from the start articulated several key “elementary principles,” among them that “no person who loves the Lord Jesus Christ, and obeys the gospel of God our Savior, ought to be deprived of church membership”; that “no minister or member should be excommunicated except for immorality; the propagation of unchristian doctrines; or for the neglect of the duties enjoined by the word of God”; that “the pastoral or ministerial office and duties are of divine appointment and all elders in the church of God are equal; but ministers are forbidden to be lords over God’s heritage, or to have dominion over the faith of the saints”; and that “whatever power

³² Frank Baker, “Leaders, Leaders’ Meeting,” in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, p. 1403. The Methodist Church was formed in the UK in 1932 by the union of the Wesleyan Methodist Church (1891), the Primitive Methodist Church (1811/1902), and the United Methodist Church (1907); the Wesleyan Reform Union (1857) and the Independent Methodists (1806/1898) remained apart.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

may be necessary to the formation of rules and regulations, is inherent in the ministers and members of the Church; but so much of that power may be delegated, from time to time, upon a plan of representation, as they may judge necessary and proper.”³³

In keeping with these key principles, the MPC from its formation insisted that probationary membership was open to all persons who express “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and be saved by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, with an avowed determination to walk in all the commandments of God blameless,” but those who wish to continue therein and to progress to full membership in the church “must give evidence of their desire and determination, by conforming to such rules of moral discipline as the word of God requires” (the strong echo of the conditions for membership in Wesley’s societies is clearly intentional).³⁴ The process by which one could become a member of the MPC were stated with clarity as follows:

1. Application for admission to church fellowship must be made to the superintendent, or in his absence, to any minister, preacher or leader, whose duty it shall be, with the consent of the society or class, to enter the name of the applicant on the list of probationers.

2. In stations, where the church does not direct any other mode, admittance to full membership shall be the vote of a majority of the leaders, at a regular leaders' meeting; but no person shall be admitted to full membership by a leaders' meeting, without a recommendation from the class of which he or she is a member.

3. In circuits, the list of probationers shall be occasionally read over, by one of the officiating ministers; and, in every instance where a majority of the society or class vote for the admission of any person whose name stands on the list, the probationer shall be admitted to full membership.³⁵

The 1834 MPC *Discipline* mandated that probationers may become full members of the church only after they have been probation for a minimum of four months, and also clarified how

³³ “The Constitution of the Methodist Protestant Church,” §3, 4, 6 and 8, from the MPC *Discipline* 1831, pp. 14–15.

³⁴ The Constitution of the MPC, Article II, MPC *Discipline* 1831, p. 17.

³⁵ MPC *Discipline* 1831, p. 35.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

objections to a candidate for membership should be handled: “In the event of an objection being made by any person present, the matter shall be referred to the leaders' meeting, in stations; and in circuits, to the superintendent and the leader of the class.”³⁶ In 1874, the MPC stipulated that baptism is a condition for full membership and clarified the process by which one becomes a probationary or full member:

I. Application for admission to probationary membership, in any circuit, mission or station, must be made to the superintendent, the assistant or to the supernumerary assistant; and in their absence, to any other minister, preacher, or leader officiating, whose duty it shall be, when there is no objection made by the class or society, to report the name or names of such probationer or probationers to the superintendent, to be by him entered on the list of probationers. In the event of an objection being made by any person present, the matter shall be referred to a called or regularly occurring meeting of the church. No person shall be elected to full membership who has not been baptized, or who refuses to receive the ordinance of baptism.

II. Admissions to full membership, in stations, circuits or missions, shall be by a majority of the church of which the applicant is a member. Persons in good standing, coming from any church of a different denomination, shall be received in the same manner.³⁷

In 1892, the MPC *Discipline* for the first time clearly defined the pastor as “the minister who shall be appointed by the Annual Conference to the charge of a station or circuit . . . and shall be amenable to the Annual Conduct for his official conduct” and stated the duties of that office in these terms:

1. It shall be the duty of every pastor to preach the word, administer the ordinances, execute the discipline, and faithfully discharge all the duties belonging to the ministerial and pastoral office; to read and explain such portions of the Constitution and Discipline, as he may deem necessary to give our people suitable information in regard to our ecclesiastical economy.

2. To receive persons on probation, assign them to classes, when they do not select for themselves, and execute discipline.³⁸

³⁶ MPC *Discipline* 1834, p. 35–36.

³⁷ MPC *Discipline* 1874, pp. 34–35.

³⁸ MPC *Discipline* 1892, p. 29; pp. 109–12.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

The MPC also determined in 1892 that infant children should be considered to be probationers and with the consent of their parents or guardians should be enrolled in classes, and expressed the hope that they would confess Christ “as soon as their knowledge and experience shall enable them to do so.”³⁹ The MPC affirmed in 1896 that children are eligible to become full members “if the church is satisfied with their spiritual experience.”⁴⁰ In 1916 the MPC revised its Ritual to include an “enlargement and enrichment of the Order of Worship” and added a form for the reception of new members.

Throughout its history the MPC maintained its strongly democratic principles and made admission to church membership contingent not on the approval of pastors or preachers but on a majority vote of the current church members. Pastoral authority in relation to church membership was thus more restricted in the MPC than in the other branch of American Methodism.



Author’s Note: I have not yet completed the research necessary to write the sections of this paper that are needed on the Evangelical Association (EA, 1807/1816–1922) and the Evangelical Church (EC, 1922–1946), the Church of the United Brethren (UBC, 1800–1946), and the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC, 1946–1968).



The Methodist Church, 1939–1968

The “great reunion” of 1939 brought back together the sundered branches of American Episcopal Methodism, North (MEC, 1784) and South (MECS, 1845), along with the Methodist Protestants (MPC, 1830), to form what was called simply The Methodist Church (MC). The negotiations leading up to the reunion were long and difficult, and each of the three churches that

³⁹ MPC *Discipline* 1892, p. 51.

MPC *Discipline* 1896, p. 52.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

were coming together found itself compelled to make what they felt to be hard choices and painful compromises. The MPC perhaps gave up the most, being forced to leave behind its highly democratic principles and strongly congregationalist instincts and to accept once more the authority of bishops. The MECS, with considerable reluctance, accepted the role of the General Conference as the supreme authority in the new Church. In return, the MEC, with considerable reluctance, agreed to the creation of Jurisdictions within the Church—five of them on a regional geographic basis, one of them (the so-called Central Jurisdiction) on the basis of racial identity—and to the provision that the election of bishops in the new Church would take place within the Jurisdictions, not across the Church at large.

The three churches that were reuniting found themselves forced to make a single policy for pastoral authority in relation to church membership from three significantly different traditions. Coming into the reunion, the MEC maintained a probationary membership stage, which the MECS had abandoned in 1866. In the MEC, fitness for full membership was determined by the Official Board and approved by the pastor. The MECS had been consistent from its beginning in 1844 that it was the pastor’s duty “To receive, try and expel members according to the form of the Discipline” and since 1866 had held that fitness for membership was explicitly determined by the pastor. One of the “elementary principles” of the MPC, stated in every *Discipline* from 1831 through 1936, is that “No person who loves the Lord Jesus Christ, and obeys the gospel of God our Savior, ought to be deprived of church membership,” and it made admission to church membership contingent on a majority vote of current church members. The 1939 *Discipline* of the newly formed Methodist Church reflects an attempt to merge the membership practices of the three uniting church traditions, but the MECS appears to have carried the day in regard to the question of pastoral authority and fitness for membership:

Chapter I: Church Membership — Section I: Admission into the Church.

¶131. All persons seeking to be saved from their sins and desiring to live the Christian life are eligible for membership in the Methodist Church.

¶132. It shall be the duty of the Pastor to instruct, or to appoint suitable leaders to instruct, all persons offering themselves for Church membership in the principles of the Christian life, in the baptismal and membership vows, and in the rules and regulations of the Methodist Church.

¶133. When the Pastor is satisfied as to the genuineness of their faith, their acceptance of the baptismal and membership vows, and their knowledge of and willingness to keep the rules and regulations of the Methodist Church, he shall present the candidates to the congregation; and after the candidates who have been baptized and the members of the Church have entered into solemn covenant with one another as provided in the Ritual, he shall receive them into Church membership according to the prescribed form.

¶134. If any candidates for Church membership are unable to appear before the congregation, for reasons satisfactory to the Pastor, he may receive them elsewhere according to the prescribed form, subject to the approval of the Official Board. This approval shall be secured in advance except in cases of emergency.⁴¹

The inclination of the MEC for church membership to be open yet also contain a concern for the holiness of the church is reflected in the preamble (¶131) and the insistence on proper instruction (¶132). However, while the MEC had placed the primary emphasis for determining readiness or fitness for membership on lay bodies (first the Leader’s Meeting, later the Official Board or Board of Stewards), with the concurrence or agreement of the pastor, the MC decided, conforming to the practice of the MECS, that fitness for membership will be determined by the pastor (¶133); there is no mention here for any role for local church lay leadership in regard to church membership. The role of the Official Board in relationship to church membership is reduced to such a degree that its only function is to approve a private membership ceremony if requested by the pastor (¶134). One other significant decision is that the new church will have a category preparatory or probationary membership, in addition to full membership, as was the practice of the MEC in 1936. The practices and principles of the MPC in relation to church

⁴¹ MC *Discipline* 1939, ¶¶131–34, p. 53–54.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

membership and pastoral authority seem to have had little impact on the development of the 1939 MC *Discipline*. The MPC practice of a congregational vote to determine full membership in the church clearly does not continue, and the lay-driven practice for approving church membership of the MEC is in direct contrast with the primary role of the pastor in determining fitness for membership which emerges in 1939.

On the other hand, the statement about the responsibility of the pastor “To receive, try and expel members according to the form of the Discipline,” dating from 1792, which the MEC had abandoned in 1892 but which the MECS had retained until 1938, is not to be found in the 1939 MC *Discipline*. The only echo of that old language are the mandates “To instruct candidates for membership in the doctrines, rules, and regulations of the Church; to receive persons into membership; to receive and dismiss members by Certificate” and “To administer all the provisions of the Discipline in his Pastoral Charge.”⁴² Finally, it is worth noting that the section on “class meetings,” which had survived (though in diminished form) in the MEC *Discipline* until 1936, finally disappears, and with it goes the final vestigial link in the *Discipline* to the structure and language of the Methodist societies of Wesley’s day.

A significant change related to church membership appeared in the MC *Discipline* of 1964. Almost certainly in response to the development of the Civil Rights Movement in America, the MC in 1964 explicitly articulated a stirring vision of itself “a part of the Church Universal” and consequently as an inclusive church open to all: “Therefore all persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, or economic condition shall be eligible to attend its worship services, to participate in its programs, and, when they take the appropriate vows, to be admitted into its

⁴² MC *Discipline* 1939, ¶223.8–9.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

membership in any local church in the connection.”⁴³ Never before had any branch of American Methodism taken such a clear and unambiguous policy position on ethnic and racial inclusiveness. The difficulty, of course, was not so much with policy but with practice: the Central Jurisdiction had written the reality of racial segregation into the very structure of The Methodist Church at its creation in 1939, and that reality proved stubbornly resistant to change.

The MC also revised its language about admission to church membership in 1964 to accord with the principle of inclusiveness it had stated for the first time:

All persons seeking to be saved from their sins and sincerely desiring to be Christian in faith and practice are proper candidates for membership in The Methodist Church. When such persons offer themselves for membership, it shall be the duty of the pastor, or of proper persons appointed by him, to instruct them in the meaning of the Christian faith and the history, organization and teaching of the Methodist Church; to explain to them the baptismal and membership vows (§1713–14); and to lead them to commit themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. *When they shall have given proof of the genuineness of their faith in Christ and of their desire to assume the obligations and become faithful members of The Methodist Church*, after the completion of a reasonable period of training and after the rite of Baptism has been administered to those who have not been previously baptized, he shall bring them before the congregation, administer the vows (§1714) and receive them into fellowship of the Church, and duly enroll them as members.⁴⁴

It is striking to note that the earlier language about “when the pastor is satisfied as to the genuineness of their faith” is here replaced by a much less specific construction: “when they shall have given proof of the genuineness of their faith.” To whom is this “proof of the genuineness of their faith” to be given, and how? What seems to be implied here, although it is not specifically stated, is that it is up to the pastor to determine whether and when candidates for membership have given adequate “proof of the genuineness of their faith” and of the sincerity of their desire to assume the obligations of church membership. Precisely how and on what basis

⁴³ MC *Discipline* 1964, ¶106, p. 49.

⁴⁴ MC *Discipline* 1964, ¶107, p. 51–52, emphasis added.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

the pastor is expected to make that determination is not spelled out here in unambiguous terms, leading one to question what relationship between church membership and pastoral authority is intended.

The United Methodist Church, 1968–2004

The Methodist Church (1939) merged in 1968 with the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC, 1946) to form The United Methodist Church (UMC). The sweeping statement of inclusiveness from the 1964 MC *Discipline* was not only carried over into the first *Discipline* of the UMC (in Section II: Church Membership), it was also embodied in the first division of the Constitution of the new Church:

Article IV. Inclusiveness of the Church — The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. Therefore all persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, and, when they take the appropriate vows, be admitted into its membership in any local church in the connection. In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, or economic condition.⁴⁵

The 1968 UMC *Discipline* also carried over the paragraph about church membership cited above from the 1964 MC *Discipline*, but with some very interesting changes:

All persons seeking to be saved from their sins and sincerely desiring to be Christian in faith and practice are proper candidates for full membership in The Methodist Church. When such persons offer themselves for membership, it shall be the duty of the pastor, or of proper persons appointed by him, to instruct them in the meaning of the Christian faith and the history, organization and teaching of the Methodist Church, using materials approved by the United Methodist Church to explain to them the baptismal and membership vows; and to lead them to commit themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. *When they shall have confessed their faith in Christ and have made known their desire to assume the obligations and become faithful members of the United*

⁴⁵ UMC *Discipline* 1968, ¶4 (Constitution, Division One, Article IV), p. 17; cf. ¶107, p. 68–69.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

Methodist Church, after the completion of a reasonable period of training, and after the Sacrament of Baptism has been administered to those who have not been previously baptized, he shall bring them before the congregation, administer the vows and receive them into fellowship of the Church, and duly enroll them as members.⁴⁶

What is striking here is that the 1964 requirement that candidates for membership must have given adequate “proof” of the genuineness of their faith and of the sincerity of their desire to assume the obligations of church membership—presumably to the pastor—is here in 1968 replaced by a construction which seems to place the primary decision-making responsibility on the candidates themselves. Once candidates have “confessed their faith in Christ and have made known their desire” to become members of the UMC, then the pastor is to bring them before the congregation, administer the vows of membership, receive them into the Church, and enroll them as members. There is no clear statement here about the pastor’s authority or responsibility for determining whether or not the confession of faith made by candidates is “genuine,” nor of whether their desire to become church members is serious and sincere. That sort of pastoral responsibility may perhaps be inferred from the language of this paragraph about the pastor’s role in instruction and training candidates for membership and “leading” them to a commitment to Jesus Christ, but it is not specifically stated.⁴⁷

If the relationship between church membership and pastoral authority appears to be less than completely clear in the 1968 UMC *Discipline*, then it is even less clear in the 2004 UMC *Discipline*. The most important paragraph of the 2004 *Discipline* relating to membership in the UMC is ¶4, which is entitled “Inclusiveness of the Church”:

⁴⁶ UMC *Discipline* 1968, ¶115.1, p. 70–71; emphasis added.

⁴⁷ I have a suspicion that this change may be due to the impact of the traditions of the EUBC at the 1968 union with the MC, but further research on the EUBC and its predecessor bodies is needed to determine the accuracy of that suspicion.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection. In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition.⁴⁸

There is no specification in this paragraph of the precise terms or conditions under which a person either may or must take the indicated vows. The force of this paragraph, as indicated by its title, is inclusiveness and permission: “*All persons . . . shall be eligible . . . upon baptism . . . [and] upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith . . . [to become] professing members. . . .*” There is no indication here of any condition required prior to the taking of membership vows other than baptism. This paragraph of the Constitution means that any and all baptized persons are welcome to become—that they *may* become—members of The United Methodist Church, if and when *they* decide that *they* are willing and able to take the requisite vows of membership. There is no indication anywhere in the 2004 UMC *Discipline* that the eligibility of any person to take the vows of membership is in any way contingent on the determination of his or her “readiness” to do so by the pastor in charge.

Paragraph 214 of the 2004 UMC *Discipline* begins Section V of Part V, Chapter One, “The Local Church,” and is entitled “Church Membership”:

The United Methodist Church is a part of the holy catholic (universal) church, as we confess in the Apostles’ Creed. In the church, Jesus Christ is proclaimed and professed as Lord and Savior. All people may attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments and become members in any local church in the

⁴⁸ UMC *Discipline* 2004, ¶4 (Article IV of the Constitution, Division One), p. 22. As the notes in the *Discipline* indicate, this paragraph has been amended on several occasions since it was first adopted as part of the Constitution of the UMC in 1968.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

connection (§4). In the case of persons whose disabilities prevent them from reciting the vows, their legal guardian[s], themselves members in full covenant relationship with God and the Church, the community of faith, may recite the appropriate vows on their behalf.⁴⁹

In accordance with §4, to which it specifically refers, §214 is unambiguously permissive in nature and inclusive in scope. It says plainly that *all* people *may* attend the worship services of The United Methodist Church, *may* participate in its programs, *may* receive the sacraments, and *may* become members in any local church in the connection. Paragraph 214 does *not* say that they (meaning “all people”) *shall* or *must* do any or all of this— indeed, the imperative language of *shall* or *must* would be entirely inappropriate in such a context. But §214 also does *not* say that they (meaning “all people”) *may* do all of this—that is, that they have permission to do all of this—only after having satisfied the pastor in charge of their “readiness” to do so.

Paragraph 215 of the 2004 UMC *Discipline*, entitled “Definition of Membership,” states that “The membership of a local United Methodist church *shall* include those who have been baptized and those who have professed their faith” (note that the imperative “shall” is used here, in contrast to the permissive “may” that is used in §214). Paragraph 215 then goes on to distinguish between the “baptized membership” and the “professing membership” of the local church. The “professing membership” of the local church is defined as including “all baptized people who have come into membership by profession of faith through appropriate services of the baptismal covenant in the ritual or by transfer from other churches.”⁵⁰ This definition does *not* include a qualifying provision saying “but only after having satisfied the pastor in charge of their ‘readiness’ to do so.”

⁴⁹ UMC *Discipline* 2004, §214, pp. 134–35.

⁵⁰ UMC *Discipline* 2004, §215, p. 135.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

Paragraph 216 begins a subsection of the 2004 UMC *Discipline* headed “The Meaning of Membership.” The first section of ¶216 reads as follows:

Christ constitutes the church as his body by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27). The church draws new people into itself as it seeks to remain faithful to its commission to proclaim and exemplify the gospel. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation and incorporation into the body of Christ. After baptism, the church provides the nurture that makes possible a comprehensive and lifelong process of growing in grace. Becoming a professing member requires the answer of faith of the baptized person made visible in a service of profession of Christian faith and confirmation using the vows of the Baptismal Covenant.”⁵¹

Christ is the primary actor here, calling to people through the Holy Spirit, inviting them to become members of the community that constitutes his body in the world. The requirement for responding to that call by becoming a professing member is “the answer of faith of the baptized person made visible” through a public service. The clear assumption of this language is that if and when persons decide that *they* are prepared to make *their* faith visible to the congregation through *their* public affirmation of the requisite vows, *they may do so*. There is no stipulation here that they must previously have satisfied the pastor in charge of their “readiness” to do so.

Paragraph 217 of the 2004 UMC *Discipline* specifies the vows that anyone desiring to become a professing member of The United Methodist Church must publicly affirm. The paragraph begins with a statement about what is happening when people take the step of becoming professing members of the Church:

When persons unite as professing members with a local United Methodist church, they profess their faith in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ his only Son; and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, they make known their desire to live their daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. They covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep the vows which are a part of the order of confirmation and reception into the Church. . . .⁵²

⁵¹ UMC *Discipline* 2004, ¶216, p. 135.

⁵² UMC *Discipline* 2004, ¶217, pp. 136–37.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

The seven specific vows which immediately follow detail the commitments that such persons are making before God and in the presence of the congregation of the local church of which they are becoming a part. But the language of the introductory statement leading up to the vows clearly focuses on the persons who are making those vows: *they* profess their faith, *they* make known their desire to live as disciples, *they* enter into covenant to keep the vows that they are making. And with whom do they enter into covenant? “They covenant together with God and with the members of the local church.” The pastor acts as an agent in the making of this covenant, but is not a party to it. The covenant is made by the individual with God and the church, under the conditions specified by the church. Nothing in the language of ¶217 suggests that a person entering into this covenant relationship with God and the church must previously have satisfied the pastor in charge of his or her “readiness” to do so.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of his article on “Membership in Methodist Churches” in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, Nolan B. Harmon asserts that “The duty, power and privilege of receiving members according to the *Discipline* of The United Methodist Church is in the hands of the pastor of each charge and of him only. This has been the case since the beginning of American Methodism.”⁵³ It is without doubt true that throughout the history of American Methodism, pastors have had “the duty, power and privilege of receiving members according to the *Discipline*” of the church in whose service they labored. But as this paper has suggested, what the Disciplines of the churches of American Methodism have actually had to say about the nature of church membership in relation to pastoral authority is a considerably more complicated

⁵³ Nolan B. Harmon, “Membership in Methodist Churches,” in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, p. 1547.

Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in American Methodism”

story than one might have suspected. The general trajectory seems relatively clear: from church as a counter-cultural community of relatively small groups with a high degree of mutual accountability, to church as a self-selected fellowship of individuals, to church as a large and increasingly global bureaucratic organization.⁵⁴ In the course of this historical development, the role of the pastor has undergone significant change, as has the nature of pastoral authority, and provisions relating to church membership have been repeatedly reconsidered and revised. However, given the historical development briefly traced here, it is very difficult to understand how and on what basis the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church could have arrived at its recent judgment that “the pastor in charge of a United Methodist church or charge is *solely* responsible for making the determination of a person’s readiness to receive the vows of membership.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ I am adapting these terms from Randy Maddox’s valuable essay, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” in *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, ed. Timothy Macquiban (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 131–60.

⁵⁵ I want to publicly acknowledge the valuable assistance that I received from my talented and hard-working research assistant, Daniel Ogle, a 3rd-year student at Candler School of Theology, as I was preparing this paper. Thanks, Daniel, for all you did to make this paper possible.