

Toward a Wesleyan Theology of the Congregation

Bryan Stone

Boston University School of Theology

In Wesley's revision of the 39 Articles of Religion of the Church of England for American Methodists, he left unchanged the Article on the Church, which describes it as "a congregation of faithful men [sic], in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered . . ." ¹ Despite the language of "congregation," however, there is little in Wesley's ecclesiological reflections or praxis that applies directly to *congregations* as such. Likewise, Methodists after Wesley have given relatively little theological attention to what is arguably one of most important social, political, and economic structures through which Christians today find salvation, worship God, and participate in the church throughout the world: namely, the *congregation*. ²

This omission in Wesleyan ecclesiology is not difficult to explain. From the beginning, the Wesleyan movement worked alongside and outside of traditional congregational and parish structures and did not immediately take a congregational form. Ecclesiologically, the genius of the Wesleyan movement has always been the connection, circuit, conference, class meeting, society, and itinerancy – but not the congregation. The Wesleyan "connexion," it is important to recall, was originally a community of preachers with a commitment to a single cause and spiritual practice, ³ not a communion of local congregations. As Russell Richey notes, itinerancy and general superintendency express the missional principle actualized by Wesleyan connectionalism, and itinerant clergy (rather than the congregation) are those upon whom *connection* has first claim: "Ministers are sent, and they are sent where most needed. . . . the call is not to some locale but to mission, to the connection, to the world." ⁴ Even if we should want to go on to affirm with Richey that "the missional principle inherent in itinerancy belongs . . . to the whole people of God" so that "we are all sent, commissioned missionaries," ⁵ the fact of the matter is that there is little in Wesleyan ecclesiology to support that affirmation *at the level of the congregation*. In fact, a review of Wesleyan scholarship on the nature and mission of the church reveals rather quickly that ecclesiology has largely been carried out in terms of the conference and connection on the one hand or the society and class meeting on the other hand with little or no reference to that pervasive mediating institution, the congregation – and this despite the centrality and importance today of the congregation in actual Methodist/Wesleyan ecclesial

¹ See also John Wesley, Sermon 74, "Of the Church," §16, *Works* 3:51.

² Finding a definition of *congregation* that is both theologically interesting and sociologically helpful is harder than one might think. Two good sociological definitions are (a) that of James Hopewell: "a group that possesses a special name and recognized members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practiced worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story," *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); and (b) that of Mark Chaves: "a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering," *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-2.

³ Cf. Richard Heitzenrater, "Connectionalism and Itinerancy: Wesleyan Principles and Practice" in Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, eds. *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 23-38.

⁴ Russell E. Richey, "Introduction," in Richey, Campbell, and Lawrence, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

praxis. When, moreover, Wesleyan ecclesiologies *have* addressed the congregation, this has often been done in ways that denigrate its importance (especially with regard to the church's *mission*) in praise of connection and conference. It would not be too difficult to argue that Wesleyans lack a well developed *theology of the congregation*.

This is not a problem peculiar to Wesleyans, of course. The discipline of ecclesiology in general has tended to stay, as John Wimmer recently remarked, “always about a foot off the ground.” Yet as far removed as ecclesiologies tend to be from the concrete realities of congregational life, there is little that could be more important in serving our present age than critical theological reflection on the congregation, especially given our increasingly post-denominational Christian context in which the trend is for the congregation to serve as the pivotal and primary location for mission, evangelism, and public witness. Individual congregations are now much more likely to send out their own missionaries, to design their own evangelistic literature, to invent their own liturgies and patterns of worship, to develop their own social principles and forms of public engagement, and to create their own structures for ministerial training. Simply to announce that we are “not congregationalists” and instead to extol the virtues of “the connection” is inadequate. Surely something more comprehensive and robust may be said by Wesleyans about the congregation without acquiescing to a widely popular congregationalism. Can we identify anything theologically and missionally distinctive about the *Wesleyan* congregation?

The importance of the congregation has not in recent years been lost on scholars in other academic disciplines. In addition to an abundance of historical, ethnographic, and sociological research on congregations, one now also encounters a stimulating new generation of scholarship on ‘practices’, ‘performances’, and ‘place’, all of which have tremendous relevance for how we conceive of the congregation *as church*. But, again, while the field of congregational studies has grown rapidly in the past quarter century, theological reflection on the congregation (both inside and outside Wesleyan circles) has not kept pace. On the contrary, the impression these very congregational studies typically reinforce is that ecclesiologies tend to be rather far removed from the daily life and work of the congregation. The theological rationale for what a congregation is or does remains largely unarticulated by its membership. Its patterns of norms and values, as Penny Edgell Becker has shown, “operate at a taken for granted level” and are instead “organized around fairly broad and general ideas about what the core tasks of the local congregation should be.”⁶ For this reason, contextual, pragmatic, and strategic considerations often become by themselves the primary determiners of how the congregation goes about ‘serving the present age’. This is all the more critical when it comes to the practice of mission and evangelism. Indeed, one of the conclusions drawn by Becker in her research on United Methodist congregations is as follows:

While polity does not determine congregational culture, it does seem to be easier for members of congregations with a hierarchical or connectional polity to view outreach, taking stands on social and political issues or being a leader as *someone else's task* – a task of denominational leaders, ecumenical organizations, or religious professionals, perhaps, but not something that they seek out in their local congregations. Likewise,

⁶ Penny Edgell Becker, “Understanding Local Mission: Congregational Models and Public Religion in United Methodist Churches” in Richey, Campbell, and Lawrence, 281.

members of a congregational-polity congregation seem more able to use the local church as a forum to express their deeply held social, religious, and political values.⁷

If Becker is right, it may be worth considering whether Methodist congregations (as with other congregations belonging to denominations “with a hierarchical or connectional polity”) tend to be disadvantaged when it comes to mission and evangelism, finding it difficult to think of their own concrete social bodies as responsible for or capable of these practices. If that is so then we really have a double-edged problem. On the one hand, Methodist congregations (given their connectional polity) may tend to think of mission and evangelism as “*someone else’s task*” and they may also tend to operate largely in terms of contextual, pragmatic, and strategic rather than theological, missiological, or ecclesiological considerations. On the other hand, as Nicholas Healy has put it, “in general ecclesiology in our period has become highly systematic and theoretical, focused more upon discerning the right things to think about the church rather than orientated to the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church actually is.”⁸ Is there a way to bring Wesleyan ecclesiology and Wesleyan congregations into closer dialogue with one another?

The congregation is, of course, not the only structure through which Christians practice their faith or enact what it means to be church. As James Hopewell observes, “Common as they are in several religious traditions, congregations have never dominated the totality of the world’s local religious organizations. Human groups more frequently express their faith through corporate forms other than the congregation. Interwoven with familial, civic, devotional, and secular configurations that are structurally different from the local church [the denomination, diocese, chapel, monastery, family devotional, small group, pilgrimage, pageant, shrine, prayer circle, etc.], other religious groupings offer alternative patterns of collective reverence and incidentally suggest other ways by which Christianity might conceivably have spread among peoples. The congregation is not as inevitable as church members might assume.” Yet Hopewell goes on to acknowledge that in Christianity, “the congregation is the primary community by which the faith is expressed and perpetuated” and “the congregation is nevertheless the persistent and immediate form by which the church is manifested in almost every community.”⁹

To assign the congregation a more central place in Wesleyan ecclesiology need not mean that we abandon the principles of class or connection and their importance for mission, public social witness, and evangelism. Connectional structures have, for example, historically enabled women throughout much of Methodist history to move beyond parish and regional boundaries, often tightly controlled by men, in order to organize and give leadership to missionary, educational, and benevolent societies both at national and global levels.¹⁰ Here again, though, this is but another way of recognizing that congregational structures have not always been a friend to women’s leadership – or, for that matter, to that of the laity – and that more attention to a theology of the congregation is needed among Wesleyans.

To focus on the church as congregation, moreover, need not mean that we take an option for entrenchment, institutionalization, or ‘settledness’ in contrast to the dynamism that has always

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nicholas Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

⁹ Hopewell.

¹⁰ Cf. Sarah Sloan Kruitziger, “Wesley’s Legacy of Social Holiness: The Methodist Settlement Movement and American Social Reform,” in Richey, Campbell, and Lawrence, 137-75.

been at the heart of Wesleyan ecclesiology and mission, expressed in terms of movement, ‘event’,¹¹ and a patent disregard for ‘parish’ boundaries. To affirm the centrality of the local congregation in Wesleyan ecclesiology invites rather than settles the question of what the congregation should look like or how it is gathered, sent, ordered, and led. But to affirm the congregation is to affirm that the particular shape of its politics and economics before a watching world can serve as a visible and corporate embodiment of the gospel and a compelling, though subversive, offer of Christ to the world, however de-centered, non-traditional, or even non-‘churchy’ that congregation might end up looking.

Without abandoning the virtues of connectionalism, then, I want to suggest a few ideas about what it might mean, within a post-Christendom and increasingly post-denominational context, for the Wesleyan congregation to be something other than an effective instrument for “the delivery of religious goods and services,”¹² a branch outlet of what James McClendon described as a “kind of ecclesiastical McDonald’s Incorporated,”¹³ but instead a fully local and fully catholic table fellowship in and through which the world finds itself invited to experience the love of God and in which individuals are invited to be transformed into a distinctive form of “social holiness.” I should like to argue that the local congregation’s visible, embodied, and enacted witness to a Christ who is increasingly strange in our culture should be understood as more than merely *instrumental to* but to some extent *constitutive of* the church’s evangelistic offer. This is true because the salvation we have been offered in Christ is intrinsically a participation in his body – a body that is resurrected, eucharistic, and ecclesial. By practicing congregational witness in terms of a table fellowship – in other words, as fundamentally eucharistic – perhaps the congregation can receive from Wesleyans more attention alongside the connection, class, conference, and itinerancy as actualizing core Wesleyan missional commitments.

Congregational Practices and the Wesleyan Social Imagination

Tom Frank, in *The Soul of the Congregation*, invites us to move beyond the glut of literature devoted to congregational ‘growth’, ‘transformation’, and ‘progress’ along with its accompanying technologies, programmatic schemes, and step-by-step management plans, and instead to contemplate the ‘soul’ of a congregation – what he refers to as “the heritage of traditions and experiences, the wisdom of a collective life lived over generations, and the arts of expressing their faith” that makes congregations who they are.¹⁴ Though no two congregations have the same ‘soul’, strictly speaking, perhaps we may nonetheless speak of a shared ‘soul’ of Wesleyan congregations – a soul that is faithful to core Wesleyan commitments and expressed in shared stories, symbols, rituals, and practices. It is faithful, we might say, to a shared Wesleyan *social imagination*.

To speak of the ‘soul’ of a Wesleyan congregation or of a Wesleyan ‘social imagination’ does not mean that there is an ‘ideal’ Wesleyan church somewhere, an ‘invisible’ prototype by which to judge all Wesleyan congregations. A Wesleyan ‘social imagination’ is not an imaginary or disembodied set of ideas or theories that are subsequently *applied* in practice by

¹¹ Cf. Richey, 9-12.

¹² As members of the “Gospel and Our Culture Network” have put it. Cf. *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998).

¹³ James W. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine*, Volume 2, *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 364.

¹⁴ Thomas Edward Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation: An Invitation to Congregational Reflection* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 21-22.

congregations, but rather a cluster of common assumptions about the way things are, the way things ought to be, and the way things can be. A social imagination, as Charles Taylor describes it, is an “ensemble of imaginings that enable our practices by making sense of them.”¹⁵ It is embodied in a complex set of social habits, relations, and patterns that habituate us (often unconsciously) into ways of living and acting that come to be understood as not only possible but natural and right. Among the important features of a social imaginary when thinking about congregational life are its distinctive way of forming us into a ‘public’ and its way of providing a creative framework within which we construe space and time, our relation to others, our sense of common agency, and our relation to power.

But here again, a Wesleyan social imagination does not exist in the abstract; it is embodied and enacted in the *practices* of congregations and, of course, in *people*. Ecclesiologically speaking, what is of most concern here is not what Wesleyans believe about the nature and mission of the church as a *set of ideas*, but how Wesleyans *as a people* actually *practice* being the church at the level of congregation. Practices embody a people’s shared values and enact its foundational narratives; they are, therefore, not merely the application but also the generating source of a congregation’s theological norms. As Tom Frank has put it so well,

Practices sustain and carry forward traditions, bringing together the heritage of a local congregation with the heritage of larger denominational and confessional groups. Practices constitute or bring into being the congregation as it is. Through its practices, a congregation forms a life recognizably distinct from other organizations. It becomes known as a place in which certain practices are carried on, some of which are more widely shared, some unique to that particular congregation.”¹⁶

With all this in mind, then, the question that the remainder of this paper examines is whether there are features of a Wesleyan social imagination that we might identify as important for congregational life and practice as the Church goes about ‘serving the present age’.

In attempting to identify those features, I turn to David Carter who, in his fine study of the Church from a British Methodist perspective, *Love Bade Me Welcome*, highlights three main characteristics of Wesley’s ecclesiology: “It was primitivist, non-exclusivist, and connexional.”¹⁷ Without making any claim that the three of these are exhaustive of a Wesleyan social imagination, I would suggest that they at least offer us a helpful starting point for thinking about how that social imagination is enacted congregationally in practices related to mission and evangelism.

Wesleyan Primitivism

In the first place, a Wesleyan social imagination is *primitivist* – that is, it seeks “the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church,” as Wesley described Methodism in his 1777 Sermon “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel.” This “old religion,” says Wesley, is

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 165. More often than not, however, this ‘sense’ remains unconscious, involuntary, spontaneous, “internalized as second nature” and unarticulated, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown throughout much of his work. Cf. *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53-56.

¹⁶ Frank, 46-7.

¹⁷ David Carter, *Love Bade Me Welcome: A British Methodist Perspective on the Church* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002), 13.

no other than love: the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, as having first loved us, as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every [person] on earth, as our own soul. This love is the great medicine of life, the never-failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of [men and women]. Wherever this is, there are virtue and happiness, going hand in hand. There is humbleness of mind, gentleness, long-suffering, the whole image of God, and at the same time a peace that passeth all understanding, with joy unspeakable, and full of glory. This religion of love, and joy, and peace, has its seat in the inmost soul, but is ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing up, not only in all innocence—for love worketh no ill to [one's] neighbour—but likewise in every kind of beneficence, spreading virtue and happiness all around it.¹⁸

Wesley's distinctive primitivism often took the form of an appeal to Christian origins and a reverence for the patristic age, but it was also a repudiation of corruptions that he associated with the Constantinian "fall" of the church. Despite his protestations against Constantine, of course, Wesley himself did not entirely escape Constantinianism, as illustrated by his views on God and king and his unwavering allegiance to a State Church.¹⁹ But while Wesley's primitivism was not primarily directed against the Constantinian fusion of church and state, he was able to grasp the costs to Christian mission and evangelism entailed in the Constantinian arrangement, despite the fact that it often worked to the advantage of the growth and stability of the church. According to Wesley:

Persecution never did, never could give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest it ever received, the grand blow which was struck at the very root of that humble, gentle, patient love, which is the fulfilling of the Christian law, the whole essence of true religion, was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and power upon the Christians, more especially upon the clergy.²⁰

We do well to remember that Wesley's primitivism evolved over time, as he learned to adapt what was at first a rather rigid and static adoption of ancient liturgies and ecclesiastical practices of the sort the Holy Club experimented with at Oxford but which his parishioners in Georgia would later reject as something more like an ill-fitted straight-jacket. But while Wesley's primitivism would increasingly focus less on ancient ecclesiastical practices better suited to the cultural context of early Christianity and more on the kind of 'primitive' love mentioned in the 1777 sermon quoted above (a love to which he was especially drawn in the lives of the Moravians and linked with a simple justifying faith), he did not abandon his advocacy of 'primitivist' practices such as economic sharing in the form of a community of goods that gave visible and concrete expression to that love or to other practices such as prayer, fasting, and frequent attendance at the Lord's Supper.

¹⁸ Wesley, Sermon 112, "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel," §II.1, *Works* 3:585.

¹⁹ Cf. Peter Grassow, "John Wesley and Revolution: A South African Perspective" in Randy L. Maddox, ed. *Rethinking John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 183-196.

²⁰ Wesley, Sermon 61, "The Mystery of Iniquity," §27, *Works* 2:462-3.

Important also here is that, for Wesley, being a primitivist church meant being a missionary church that refused to observe parish boundaries and relativized ecclesiastical order in relation to what would contribute to or detract from the missionary task of the church.²¹ It is in this context that practices such as lay preaching, field preaching, itinerancy, class meetings, bands, watchnight and love feast services, or even the foundation of schools and a heightened role for women in ministry should be viewed as enacting a ‘primitivist’ social imagination. As Luke Keefer observes, “So confident was he that Methodism had revived significant aspects of the apostolic age that he wrote: ‘I can now say to all the world, “come and see how these Christians love one another!””²²

Perhaps it would be better to describe Wesley as a restorationist rather than a primitivist. Though he believed that we can learn from the pre-Constantinian era how to be post-Constantinian, Wesley did not think that the church could naively skip backwards in time to a pristine church, and he was troubled by what he took to be the self-righteous and separatistic attitudes of other primitivist movements in his time. Too much damage had been done, and centuries of Constantinian privilege had now saddled the church with unique problems in relation to offering Christ to the world that not even the first Christians faced. Indeed, while much of what Wesley says about Methodism is cast in primitivist language, he can also be read as claiming that God was doing something new and providential in the world with the Methodist movement.

In thinking about how Wesleyan congregations today might enact this qualified primitivism, two priorities surface: (a) the critical importance of a visible, albeit strange and counter-cultural, *form of life* that ‘schools’ or ‘socializes’ Christians in the path of discipleship and exemplifies and offers the love of God to a watching world and (b) the relativizing of all institutional form in the service of that socialization, exemplification, and offer. These two features can, of course, appear to be mutually contradictory at first. The first would seem to place a high priority on form and the second would seem to downplay it. But here we find one of the great ecclesiological syntheses available to a Wesleyan theology of the congregation (however much Wesley’s own historical example achieved that synthesis in non-congregational directions). The primitivist dimensions of a Wesleyan social imagination do not negate form and institution in the name of spirit or an intangible *communitas*, but instead require a dynamic understanding of the congregation that is organic and functional in relationship to its context and mission. In other words, as Howard Snyder puts it, Wesley’s concern “is not with life rather than form, but rather with life and with life-nurturing form, with how to enliven the forms.” So, for example, “To speak of community of goods in the church is to speak of the wedding of spirit and form, not simply of one or the other.”²³

Instituting this wedding of spirit and form congregationally, especially in the cultures of liberal modernity, takes great creativity, discipline, and courage. One of the aspects of congregations that makes them so “messy” is their traditional and virtually inescapable role as bearers of culture.²⁴ Congregations are comprised of persons who, for the most part, live in non-Christian societies and who bring with them many of the cultural assumptions and backgrounds

²¹ Luke L. Keefer, Jr., “John Wesley: Disciple of Early Christianity,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19:1 (1984), 26.

²² *Ibid.*, 27; *Letters* (Telford), II, 308.

²³ Howard Snyder, “Spirit and Form in Wesley’s Theology: A Response to Keefer’s ‘John Wesley: Disciple of Early Christianity,’” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19:1 (1984), 33-34.

²⁴ Cf. Frank, 19.

of those societies into their congregational life and activity. As bearers of culture, congregations are shaped not only by a set of common beliefs, behaviors, institutions, and aesthetic judgments but also political and economic assumptions about order, power, sharing, competition, progress, freedom, and responsibility. Many of these assumptions run directly counter to the gospel of Christ, especially in modern Western societies premised on capitalist modes of competition, choice, and exchange and modern liberal conceptions of the self and the social order. Thus, congregations find themselves in the rather difficult and often confusing position of being *de facto* bearers of culture but also of being called to bear corporate and embodied witness to a eucharistic economics and a baptismal politics that is nothing if not counter-cultural. That congregations frequently acquiesce to the role they are assigned in helping persons fit into the surrounding culture, functioning instead as “sanctuaries of preparation for entering the marketplace of competition,”²⁵ is one of the complicated realities to which a theology of the congregation must face up.

The pressure is enormous for congregations to evangelize and serve the world on the world’s own terms rather than on those of the commonwealth of God announced by Jesus of Nazareth. Wesleyan congregations are always tempted to look over their shoulders at more ‘successful’ congregations that justify their public witness in terms of consumer satisfaction and usefulness in a market of competing goods rather than the exemplification of a social holiness that is incredible by the standards of the Enlightenment; cost-ineffective according to the logic of the market; repulsive by the standards of an aesthetics formed by the capitalist discipline of desire; and often neither useful nor helpful to the wider social order by the chaplaincy standards of Christendom.

For Wesleyan congregations in a post-Constantinian era this may mean that the first and primary task of Christian evangelism will not be an intellectual defense of the Christian gospel or its translation into non-Christian categories or ‘useful’ programs designed to reach, attract, and ‘win’, but rather a public *exemplification* of the gospel in the form of an embodied witnesses to it in our own corporate life together. Whatever other congregations may decide to do, for Wesleyans “serving the present age” is not the same as meeting the “felt needs” of consumers in the context of a comfortable, safe, and friendly atmosphere. Wesleyan congregations today are called to be schools for acquiring the habits, virtues, rhythms, and relationships that sustain practices of radical simplicity, hospitality, solidarity, and economic sharing that could rightly be called ‘primitivist’. But then this means that the most appealing congregational exemplars for Wesleyans will not necessarily be suburban mega-churches who really know how to “pack ‘em in” but something more like “base communities” that find satisfaction in thinking ‘small’, who welcome the stranger (or those who have been made the ‘stranger’, whether by the world or the church), who privilege the poor through practices of compassion and justice, and who, through practices of mercy, sharing, and forgiveness, offer the wealthy a concrete route to convert to “the good news for the poor” as good news for them as well.

Wesleyan Non-Exclusivism

A second feature of a Wesleyan social imagination is its *non-exclusivism*, or perhaps better, its “generous inclusivity.”²⁶ Wesley was insistent throughout his life that the Church of England “in most points . . . exactly copies after the primitive”²⁷ and that he had no desire to separate

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁶ Carter, 14.

²⁷ Wesley, Sermon 13, “On Sin in Believers, §I.3, *Works* 1:317.

from it “till my soul separates from my body.”²⁸ Wesley could describe the Church of England as “so excellent a church; reformed after the true Scripture model; blessed with the purest doctrine, the most primitive liturgy, the most apostolical form of government”; and yet he considered building his hope on belonging to such a church, or upon his own “*orthodoxy* or right opinions” to be “building on the sand; or rather, on the froth of the sea!”²⁹ Because, for Wesley, true religion is a “religion of the heart,”³⁰ he could appreciate and learn from other churches and Christian traditions, always offering a frank assessment of what he took to be their deficiencies or superstitions, but opening his hand and heart in Christian love, cooperation, and unity regardless of whether their “opinions” or “modes of worship” agreed with his. Unity, for Wesley, was “essential to the Church’s mission,”³¹ and so he was unwilling to “un-church” (to use Carter’s term) either his own or other Christian communities who might not share, for example, episcopal succession or other forms of church discipline and order. In other words, a Wesleyan social imagination is characterized deeply by its “catholic spirit.”

This is but another way of stating that ‘holiness of heart’ – which is of course always a *bodily* and a *social* holiness for Wesley – is the primary criteria for whether and how Wesleyan congregations relate to other Christian communities today. The enactment of a non-exclusivist social imagination in Wesleyan congregations requires at the very least a high degree of tolerance for disagreement internally. As Wesley says, in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*,

Beware of schism, of making a rent in the Church of Christ. That inward disunion, the members ceasing to have a reciprocal love ‘one for another,’ (1 Cor. 12:25,) is the very root of all contention, and every outward separation. Beware of everything tending thereto. Beware of a dividing spirit; shun whatever has the least aspect that way. . . . Suffer not one thought of separating from your brethren, whether their opinions agree with yours or not. Do not dream that any [one] sins in not believing you, in not taking your word; or that this or that opinion is essential to the work, and both must stand or fall together. Beware of impatience of contradiction. Do not condemn or think hardly of those who cannot see just as you see, or who judge it their duty to contradict you, whether in a great thing or a small. I fear some of us have thought hardly of others, merely because they contradicted what we affirmed. All this tends to division; and, by everything of this kind, we are teaching them an evil lesson against ourselves.³²

But beyond an internal tolerance that repudiates schism, the enactment of a non-exclusivist social imagination in Wesleyan congregations requires practices of missional cooperation, whether those are shared food banks, shared office and building space, participation in inter-denominational community organizing, or other forms of ecumenical worship, conferencing, and conversation. For a Wesleyan congregation, such practices of cooperation are not merely a matter of utility – the best way to ‘get things done’, or to stretch a dollar. They are essential to what it means to be the church and they are intrinsic to our public witness in the world.

²⁸ Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Schism,” §17, *Works* 3:67.

²⁹ Wesley, Sermon 33, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 13, §III.1, *Works* 1:694.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §III.12, *Works* 1:698.

³¹ Colin Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 146.

³² Wesley, “Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *The Works of John Wesley* [Jackson] (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 11:433.

Among the most important of all Wesleyan practices that exemplify and enact this non-exclusivist social imagination is that of ‘holy conversation’, a practice that appears to be gaining renewed momentum in Wesleyan circles today. In ‘The Large Minutes’, Wesley identifies “Christian conference” as one five ‘instituted’ means of grace. As Richey notes, “The reference here was not specifically to the annual or to the quarterly Methodist meetings or conferences but rather to the mode of engagement, discipline, purpose, and structure that they shared with all serious Christian encounter and that characterized all the Methodist structures.”³³ Congregations will always have disagreements internally and with other congregations and Christians, even (or especially!) those of their own denomination or communion. But the response to this for the Wesleyan can never be mere debate followed by a tallying of votes. The practice of holy conversation or holy conferencing enacts a Wesleyan social imagination when it is a genuine time for listening, testimony, questions, discernment, and accountability, rather than a time for wearing down the opposition, giving church reports, or electing next year’s congregational leadership.

A Wesleyan non-exclusivism has, of course, even more relevance for mission and evangelism than its significance for building unity and learning to talk to one another with mutuality and interdependence (which themselves carry a powerful witness before a watching world). Though this is not the meaning of the term as Carter uses it, clearly Wesley’s “non-exclusivism” also took the form of finding ways to include in the life of the church those who had traditionally been marginalized by the church – the poor, the uneducated, the laity, women, and children. Congregations enacting a Wesleyan social imagination today likewise need to ask themselves, ‘to whom do we show preference?’, ‘who do we exclude?’, ‘if our structures, buildings, programs, finances, and worship were to demonstrate a *generous inclusivity*, how would they have to change?’

Wesleyan Connexionalism

If a Wesleyan social imagination is primitivist and non-exclusivist, it is, in the third place, ***connexional*** – indeed, this third feature is already entailed by the first two and overlaps with them in significant ways. For Wesley, the holiness of heart that reaches out in a generous inclusivity and is in its essence “no other than love” is only possible through a network of social relationships such as those designed to be sustained by his system of societies, classes, and bands. As Carter notes,

Though the origins of this concept were purely societal, and linked with Wesley’s understanding of his own, overall, presiding episcopate, there is no doubt that connexionalism was deeply linked to the missionary nature and organization of the societies and to their Arminian theological convictions and eschatological orientation. It has taken Methodism a couple of centuries since the death of the Wesleys to realize that connexionalism is not simply a Methodist ‘peculiar institution’, or even the ecclesiological consequence of a particular *typos* of Christian life, but is a valid ecclesiological principle in itself, directly relevant to the Church’s institutional expression of its interdependent nature.³⁴

Another word Wesley frequently uses for describing this aspect of social imagination is ***fellowship***, including covenant-making, fraternal admonition, confession, conversation,

³³ Richey, 3-4.

³⁴ Carter, 18.

encouragement, correction, forgiveness, and discipline. These practices correspond to what Wesley expressed in his 1748 letter to Vincent Perronet as vital to Christian growth and maturity:

Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone is Christian fellowship: But, alas! Where is it to be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please: Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connexion is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other's souls? What bearing of one another's burdens? . . . We introduce fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work.³⁵

The theological basis of Wesley's connexional social imagination is an "optimism of grace,"³⁶ a hope for and expectation of the perfectability of the human condition, though always through communal practices of mercy, holy friendship, and accountability. Wesley, in other words, believed that Christians should expect much more than mere forgiveness. And he believed that this expectation itself was critically related to the growth and transformation that we might experience. According to Wesley, even though Christian believers know that sin is still at work, they also know the promise of "entire renewal in the image of God," and so expect the fulfillment of that promise. It is this very expectation, in fact, that motivates the disciplined life. Wesley knew that the posture of hope and expectation in God's grace have an enormous impact on our spiritual growth. He knew that it is impossible to move forward in the holy life without expectation. Indeed, one of the reasons why Christians remain in the "wilderness state," is that they expect little more than darkness and are taught to expect little more.³⁷ Within a Wesleyan social imagination, our expectation for the holy life should be as great as we know God's love and power to be – in short, unbounded:

We expect to be 'made perfect in love', in that love which 'casts out' all painful 'fear', and all desire but that of glorifying him we love, and of loving and serving him more and more. We look for such an increase in the experimental knowledge and love of God our Saviour as will enable us always to 'walk in the light, as he is in the light'. We believe the whole 'mind' will be in us 'which was also in Christ Jesus'; that we shall love every man so as to be ready 'to lay down our life for his sake', so as by this love to be freed from anger and pride, and from every unkind affection. We expect to be 'cleansed' from all our idols, 'from all filthiness', whether 'of flesh or spirit'; to be 'saved from all our uncleannesses', inward or outward; to be 'purified as he is pure'.³⁸

At the very least, what this means for congregations is that connexionalism is far more than a delivery system for denominational programs, pastors, periodicals, and pensions. The enactment

³⁵ Wesley, *Works* 9: 259. As Heitzenrater notes, this quotation demonstrates that the "connection" Wesley was concerned with was not only that of preachers, 24.

³⁶ Cf. Gordon Rupp, *Principalities and Powers* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), 77ff. and also Williams, 54.

³⁷ Wesley, Sermon 46, "The Wilderness State," *Works*, 2:212

³⁸ Wesley, Sermon 42, "Satan's Devices," §3, *Works*, 2:140.

of a connexional social imagination entails a process of socialization into *a form of life* that requires the close-knit accountability and love of a small company of covenanted believers. It is true, moreover, that congregational life does not always provide the intimacy or accountability required for this socialization precisely because congregations are typically much more open spaces than Wesley's societies and classes, and rarely constitute the kind of covenanted community where believers have united together to be "cleansed from all their idols." Congregations are instead institutions for 'gathering' of both believer and seeker, old and young, mature Christian and nominal Christian, the serious follower of Christ and those who have to be there because their parents make them come. But this does not exempt the congregation from an important role in connexional formation.

Howard Snyder may well be right that "discipline and covenant commitment are most effectively and wholesomely expressed at the level of the *ecclesiola*, the small group. . . . It seems that only at this level can discipline operate in an organic and spiritually vital, rather than institutional and legalistic, way."³⁹ But it is also true that a fully connexional formation is impossible from only within such small groups and without the exposure to the full range of sacramental life that comes with the congregation and its role as a crossroads for a variety of spiritual questing. It is in the wider formation of a congregation that the word is proclaimed, education and socialization of the young and the old is carried out, the people of God are gathered from all walks of life, new seekers are welcomed and embraced, and the table of the Lord is made open. To paraphrase Colin Williams, Wesley wanted to have it both ways – a church that is marked by the actual holiness of its members as a voluntary and lived response to Christ (and in this way similar to the Free Church emphasis on a "gathered" church) and a church that is objectively holy in the sacraments (and in this way similar to the traditional or what Williams calls "multitudinous" view of the church inherited by Wesley in the Anglican State Church). These were united in Wesley's concept of the *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* – "small groups of believers living under the Word and seeking under the life of discipline to be a leaven of holiness within the 'great congregation' of the baptized,"⁴⁰ and increasingly today we find congregations who are finding creative ways of integrating small group fellowship and accountability with a wider and robust congregational life in ways that Wesley himself was never able to because of historical circumstances (in many cases, non-Wesleyan congregations are perfecting this Wesleyan rhythm more creatively than Wesleyan congregations). One could argue that this rhythm between class, congregation, and the wider connection is the very heart and soul of a Wesleyan ecclesiology.

The enactment of a truly connexional social imagination today will undoubtedly stretch the institutional shape of Wesleyan congregations as new forms of community, cooperation, and communication continue to emerge. In *Liquid Church*, Pete Ward goes so far as to argue that "we need to shift from seeing the church as a gathering of people meeting in one place at one time – that is, a congregation – to a notion of church as a series of relationships and communications. . . . Worship and meeting will still have a place, but worship and meeting will be decentered and reworked in ways that are designed to connect to the growing spiritual hunger in society rather than being a place for the committed to belong (i.e. some kind of religious

³⁹ Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity, 1980), 161.

⁴⁰ Williams, 149.

club).⁴¹ On one level, Ward may well be right. But there is no reason why congregations cannot be conceived today in such “decentered and reworked” directions. Indeed, Wesleyans already have a long history of experimenting with a connexional social imagination that can guide them.

Wesleyan Congregations as Eucharistic Congregations⁴²

By way of conclusion, I would suggest that all three of these features of a Wesleyan social imagination can be synthesized in the notion that a Wesleyan congregation must be *eucharistic* in its outreach to the world. Here, of course, I am attempting to connect up with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which remained throughout Wesley’s life one of the most important bonds between the Methodist movement and traditional congregational structures in England.

To argue that Wesleyan mission and evangelism should place central importance on eucharistic fellowship may at first come across as counter-intuitive – a mistaken emphasis on the centripetal when what is desperately needed is more centrifugal thinking and motion. Eucharistic practice marks the path of sanctification for believers and is associated with the inner life of the worshipping congregation, a vehicle for growth in grace – not a tool for evangelism. Indeed, there is some precedent for this in the practice of early Christians, for whom admittance to the Lord’s table was closed to new and non-Christians until a full and intense catechesis and ethical examination had taken place, so that celebration of the Eucharist was the climax of a long initiation process. Then too, throughout Christian history, the eucharist has proven to be more of a scandal to the uninitiated than a practice of hospitality and inclusion, more of an esoteric ritual that is easily misunderstood and hard to explain than a sign of invitation and welcome. One of the last things that congregations do today that are well known for their ability to reach the unchurched is to offer the Lord’s Supper in their outreach, instead preferring less ‘churchy’ forms of Christian life and worship.

But of course Wesley understood the Lord’s Supper to be not only a sanctifying but a converting ordinance, the only requirement for receiving it being not one’s spiritual fitness but one’s recognition of need and a desire to receive God’s grace. Here, however – and precisely in keeping with a primitivist social imagination – how we think of eucharistic practice must be go beyond sacramental rite to include the material conditions of a congregation’s shared life together and the way that life is offered to and shared with the world. To be a eucharistic congregation means more than merely celebrating the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis. It means taking on a eucharistic sense of mission that is, again, primitivist, non-exclusivist, and connexional.

To begin with, whatever else we might say about the Eucharist, it is essentially a shared meal. The early Christian practice of breaking bread together is presented throughout the New Testament as paradigmatic of social relations within the *ecclesia* and should be understood in the first place as the daily practice it was rather than as a commemorative ceremony or a mystical ritual symbolizing some other spiritual reality. The common meal, moreover, was not an innovation by the apostles but rather a continuation of the way they had been living with Jesus throughout his ministry. The sharing of bread, therefore, is not in the first place a ‘sign’ nor does it ‘stand for’ daily sustenance, hospitality, or community-formation; rather, as John Howard Yoder puts it, “bread *is* daily sustenance. Bread eaten together *is* economic sharing. Not merely

⁴¹ Ward, Pete. *Liquid Church: A bold vision of how to be God’s people in worship and mission—a flexible, fluid way of being church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 2.

⁴² Parts of this section are revised and adapted from Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007),

symbolically, but also in fact.”⁴³ No translation or interpretation is needed to make the Eucharist economically ‘relevant’, for it is the daily sharing of material resources within a community in which members no longer claim possessions to be their own. The breaking of bread around a common table creates a solidarity and a unity that may be organically extended to every area of life and that further reinforces the leveling of rank and status established in baptism.

One of the distinctive (and disruptive) features of Jesus’ life was the eating habits he practiced and cultivated in his disciples who had left the security of homes and jobs to form a new family in which Jesus functioned as something like the head of the household. But Jesus’ way of eating was also centrally an invitation, especially to the poor and excluded, to take a seat at a banquet prepared for them and now made ready with the dawning of a new age. There may be no more important link between ecclesiology and evangelism, therefore, than the table-fellowship that Christians believe both constitutes them as a distinctive people and at the same time stands as an invitation to the rest of the world. By conceiving of themselves as just such a table-fellowship, perhaps congregations today can better integrate what have essentially become bifurcated over time – the congregation’s posture before God in worship and formation and the congregation’s posture before the world in mission and evangelism.

In and through the way a congregation eats together, keeps time, celebrates, forgives debts, expresses thanks, shows hospitality, demonstrates compassion, lives simply, and shares its material resources, it bears witness to the fact that the gospel is, to put it simply, a gift. It cannot be commodified, bought, sold, bartered, or traded. Its value is not dependent upon its utility within a market of ‘helpful’ and ‘satisfying’ options. Rather, the gospel is life. And the desire to share that ‘life’ with others finds its wellspring in thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) for having received that life abundantly and gratuitously.

Even with this broadening of the meaning of ‘eucharistic’, the ritual reenactment of the common meal that is at the heart of Christian connexion becomes for Wesleyans no less important in interpreting, positioning and shaping all other meals so that it remains what Luther referred to as “the meal of meals.” Indeed, this liturgical positioning of a congregation’s corporate life and mission shapes evangelism by reinforcing the centrifugal extravagance and abundance of the life it has been given. In contrast to a modern economics in which value is determined by utility, the logic of Eucharist is the logic of donation and thanksgiving. A eucharistic evangelism removes the congregation’s practice of sharing its life with the world from the context of production, commodification, consumption, and accumulation. What a congregation has to give it never possessed, and so it cannot subject its gift to a calculus of utility and exchange. Its invitation and offer arises out of a charity that overflows into the world rather than out of a calculation of effectiveness or the likelihood of receptivity. This is again one of the reasons why the Eucharist is so central to the practice of evangelism, for the Lord’s table is a place of welcome and hospitality, an anticipation of the ‘heavenly banquet of the Lord’.

The gospel a congregation offers the world is always public because it is, to put it bluntly, a body. The gospel is not a set of beliefs or doctrines that first need to be de-coded and then re-encoded so as to be intelligible in this or that context. The gospel is Christ himself; and Christ has a body. But bodies are public precisely because they are present and local. This is why it is so important that the church, which is Christ’s body, be made holy in bodily ways through the worship, habits, and service it has been given by God; for as the body of Christ it is a public sign of God’s glory, not its own. Another way of saying this is that the salvation offered by God to

⁴³ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 20.

the world through the church is not a set of ideas it presents to the world to be judged as credible or incredible, and then ‘decided upon’. It is quite literally an *oikonomia* to be patiently ‘shared’ and into which persons are invited to be incorporated by the power of the Spirit. There is no greater barrier to evangelism, therefore, than congregational bodies that lack this *oikonomia* and in which are absent or distorted the marks of the body of Christ such as worship, interethnic inclusion, forgiveness, reconciliation and peacemaking, enemy-love, and suffering. Sanctification does not happen ‘first’ behind the closed doors of the congregation and prior to its bodily engagement with the world. Rather, a congregation’s eucharistic engagement with the world *is* its sanctification as a visible and public body that glorifies God.

What may have to change for Wesleyans, therefore, in thinking about the congregation in relationship to evangelism is a shift away from thinking of itself as merely a conserving agent, an aggregate of autonomous believers that has become the drop-off point or group terminus for individual Christian converts. Instead, the congregation is internal to and partly constitutive of the offer of good news itself. Whatever the strengths of a connectional ecclesiology or the usefulness of a small group or class apparatus, however much the local congregation needs the church universal and ever remains but an ‘anticipation’ of “the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God,”⁴⁴ it must never understand itself to be a fragmented ‘part’, ‘section’, or ‘subdivision’ of the ‘real’ church, or anything less than fully *church* for that matter. Each local, concrete assembly is united with Christ and gathered around his table in one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit. Eucharistically, the ‘local’ becomes a “‘concentration’ of the whole” because Christ is really and fully present there.

⁴⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 140.