

**The Application of Wesley's Approach for Methodism in the  
United States**

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The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church proclaims that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This proclamation came after much soul searching and consideration of various alternatives for announcing and ushering people into God’s kingdom and experiencing the gift of salvation. It amplifies and corrects the stated mission in The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004 that asserts that the Church’s mission “is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> The addition of the phrase, for the transformation of the world, is an essential expansion and correction in overcoming the efforts by some to measure the Church’s effectiveness in terms of how many people become members of the Church. “The Rationale for Our Mission”, ¶121 of *The Book of Discipline*, gives a broader perspective on the meaning of disciple making, but the rationale is often, if not usually, missed by those seeking to understand the Church’s mission from the Church’s official documents.<sup>2</sup> The disciplinary statement fails to convey an answer to the questions as to whether justifying and sanctifying grace changes people’s lives, whether Jesus is Lord and Savior, and whether individuals and communities live under the reign of God.

John Wesley’s articulation of the mission of the Church was “to reform the nation, particularly the church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>3</sup> The mission was very clear and affirmed Wesley’s intention was never to establish a new church. The statement of mission made sense in a setting and time when one could assume a Christendom understanding of society. Reforming the nation focused on

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2004*, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶120, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, *The Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, (London: John Mason, 1962), p. 447.

transforming “almost” (nominal) Christians into “true” Christians. This movement would not only reform the church it would reform the nation. Christian holiness was the vehicle propelling this mission of bringing salvation to the nation.

Expanding the United Methodist understanding of the mission of the Church in the United States was essential in order to communicate clearly Jesus’ coming into the world accomplished more than the salvation of multiple individuals. The incarnation culminated God’s intention, as revealed in scripture, to redeem the entire creation. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains”.<sup>4</sup> The coming of Jesus ushered in a new age—an age where the entire creation is restored to the way God fashioned before the “Fall”. Jesus consistently announced the kingdom of God was at hand. He described both what the kingdom was like and what it meant to live in this kingdom.

Holiness was Wesley’s way of describing the lifestyle and inner transformation of those living in God’s kingdom. “By holiness (Wesley meant)...not fasting....or bodily austerities, but the mind that was in Christ, a renewal of soul in the image of God.”<sup>5</sup> Holiness demands loving God and neighbor with all of ones being. Holiness is moving toward perfection in love in this life and anticipating fulfillment of this perfected life.

The statement by the Council of Bishops of the Church’s mission continues to demand refinement and articulation to the entire denomination. One obvious area for discussion and clarification is the claim that we “make” disciples of Jesus Christ. This is an arrogant and theologically indefensible statement. Never can a single person or a

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:22 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., vol.19, *Journals and Diaries II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 39.

community of faith “make” a disciple of Jesus Christ. The “making” of disciples is the work of the Holy Spirit. Only the power of God, manifested by the Holy Spirit, transforms a heart, brings assurance of salvation, and enables one to love God with all of one’s being, as one loves the neighbor as self. Salvation extends far beyond human achievement. Salvation, the making of disciples of Jesus Christ, is the work of the triune God. It would be far more accurate for The Council of Bishops and *The Book of Discipline* to acknowledge that we “develop” disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. However, the term “develop” fails to communicate the essential role the Church must play in announcing, inviting, guiding, initiating, and forming individuals as they enter into the Church and begin to live under the reign of God.

The expansion of *The Book of Discipline*’s mission statement by the Council of Bishops by adding “for the transformation of the world” also clarifies that evangelism and social action are, in reality, the one gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Albert Outler’s lecture before the North Texas Conference insisted correctly we must “never ask of personal and social holiness which is prior: neither is authentic without the other.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, many pastors, bishops, and scholars continue to attempt a division of this gift of a transformed life lived under the reign of God. Jesus is not only Savior he is Lord. Those who become disciples of Jesus Christ live under his reign. We suffer from a view of humanity and the Church devoid of a sense of living under the reign of God—personally and collectively. Blaine Taylor noted that, “Wesley would have joined the Moravians, if

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<sup>6</sup> William J. Abraham, ed., *Evangelism: Essays by Albert Cook Outler* (Anderson, IN: Bristol House, 1998), p. 46.

he could have accepted the spiritual blessings of God without the lifestyle of servanthood. He (Wesley) agreed with them that works were worthless to attain salvation, but insisted that they were necessary results of the grace that made salvation possible.”<sup>7</sup> Holiness is not a convenient addition for those who have experienced salvation in Jesus Christ. Holiness of life, lived under the reign of God, is an absolute necessity. Holy living demands social action. Inviting individuals into a community of faith and initiating them into living under the reign of God, and then omitting the expectation they will perform deeds that transform the world is inadequate at the very least. Living under the reign of God is mandatory for those who follow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Significant confusion exists in many quarters about the role of evangelism and the mission of the Church. Wesley never saw himself as an evangelist. He never saw his actions and activities as evangelistic. He saw himself focused on fulfilling the mission of reforming the nation, especially the Church, and spreading scriptural holiness. Most books on evangelism, especially those written before 1980, saw a limited, but essential (usually a primary) role, the evangelist played in fulfilling the mission of the Church. Some evangelists went so far as to define evangelism as the mission of the Church. Most of them quickly delineated evangelism from the roles of pastoral care, Christian education, stewardship, and missions. They subordinated the other ministerial roles to evangelism and demanded their performance for effectively fulfilling the mission of the Church. They saw evangelism as the proclamation or witness to Jesus Christ that led to conversion. Many of these evangelists considered their work as complete when

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<sup>7</sup> Blaine Taylor, *Blueprint for Church Renewal* (Champaign, IL: Crouse Printing, 1984), p. 13f.

individuals made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. The forming of converts in the likeness of Jesus Christ, understanding the Christian faith, and caring for the minds, bodies, and souls of others, belonged to other disciplines and not those of the evangelist. Outler, rooted and grounded in John Wesley, saw evangelism from a different perspective, “... (E)vangeliism is the mainspring of every dimension and activity of the Christian church. Any other view of the matter looks away from evangelical Christianity to nominal Christianity and presages the lapse from a Gospel ministry to an institutional ministry. Evangelism is either evangelism in depth, breadth, and height or else it is a branch of denominational public relations, institutional promotion, or pious gimmickry.”<sup>8</sup>

William Abraham notes that evangelism as understood as Church Growth can quickly degenerate into institutional maintenance and survival.<sup>9</sup> Pastors and congregations can “baptize” many tactics and activities utilized in community or civic organizations and claim these are Church Growth practices. Such tactics and activities fail to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, have no expectation of a transformed life, and cannot comprehend living under the reign of God.<sup>10</sup> Most church workers, including pastors and evangelists, utilizing Church Growth tactics fail to comprehend an understanding of grafting individuals into the body of Christ, and even less of initiating them to live under the reign of God. The separation of evangelism from the mission of the Church of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world must never occur.

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<sup>8</sup> Abraham, ed., *Evangelism: Essays*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: WB Eerdmans, 1989), p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> My unpublished doctoral project at Princeton Theological Seminary, *Designing and Leading a Visitation Evangelism Training Process*, 1983, p. 6.

William Abraham confirms a strong connection between evangelism and the mission of the church when he writes, “... (O)ne of the goals of evangelism is to establish agents of the kingdom who are irrevocably committed to doing the work of the kingdom.”<sup>11</sup>

He further amplifies this in his definition of evangelism. “Evangelism is best construed as that set of actions which are governed by the intention to initiate people into the Kingdom of God.”<sup>12</sup> One must not separate evangelism from fulfilling the mission of the Church. The two are organically related.

The Council of Bishops exercised great wisdom in focusing upon the mission of the Church rather than upon evangelism. Most definitions and practices of evangelism are so truncated that they inhibit rather than assist the Church in fulfilling Christ’s mission. By focusing on the mission of the Church, the Council avoided some of the battles over a consistent definition of evangelism and enabled the utilization of many different evangelistic approaches in the “making of disciples for the transformation of the world.”

One area where the Council can reap rich rewards is to examine the various approaches John Wesley utilized in fulfilling his understanding of the mission of the Church and adapt those approaches for appropriate utilization in the United States in the twenty-first century. The remainder of the paper will concentrate on this goal.

The work of John Wesley as a field preacher is well known and documented. Wesley exercised extreme reluctance to leave the pulpits of the church and academy to

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<sup>11</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Art of Evangelism*, (Calver Shefflied: Cliff College Publishing, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

preach wherever the people would gather. He felt compelled to do so in order to communicate with common people. The populous refused to enter the doors of the Church. They felt no need to hear or respond to the gospel. Wesley believed that Jesus Christ came to this world to bring salvation to all people. If the people would not come to him, then he would go to the people. Therefore, he left the Church buildings and went to the people.

Wesley also believed salvation was God's gift for all people and not a select few. Jesus Christ came to redeem all people and all of creation. Reaching all people with the gospel was impossible as long as the church waited for the people to realize their need and to come to the Church. Wesley saw his only effective alternative, "as strange, almost a sin" as it was, to go to the people.<sup>13</sup>

The culture of the United States shares a great deal of commonality with eighteenth century England. A vast majority of the population of the United States never consider attending a worship service, hearing the gospel proclaimed, or believing that the Church has anything to offer that is worthy of their time and effort. A mindset of seeking and following Jesus Christ in their daily lives resides outside of their worldview. They view the Christian faith as a commodity people buy or consume for their own personal joy and benefit. As a commodity, they see the church's mission is to meet the spiritual needs of the consumers who may desire what the church has to offer.

The Church faces a tremendous challenge of finding ways to go to the masses and avoid presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ as a commodity for a consumer oriented society to either accept or reject. Some congregations agree to fulfill this mission. They

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<sup>13</sup> Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries*, 19:39.

adopt a seven days a week strategy to address the needs of those living in their communities. Activities and programs occur in these congregations almost twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. These congregations respond to a consumer oriented society where members quickly move to the newest “shopping center filled with the latest gadgets and gimmicks” to fill their spiritual void. These spiritual consumers see themselves as the center of the universe, and God is the cosmic, ultimate bellhop focused upon meeting their every need.

Most congregations fail to faithfully fulfill their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and effectively reach a major portion of the population focused on their own needs and desires. The goal of reaching a major portion of an American secular society eludes most congregations.

The Church’s efforts, thus far, to employ mass media, including computers and the WEB, fail miserably in accomplishing what Wesley achieved when he walked out of the Church buildings into the fields to meet and communicate with the people in eighteenth century England. In order to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”, the church must find ways to reconnect with the “plain people” in the United States. Wesley saw himself as proclaiming “a plain message to a plain people”. Wesley’s approach pushes us to move outside of our common assumptions about how to effectively invite, initiate, and equip individuals to live under the reign of God. This approach is extremely difficult for most United Methodists in the United States.

Part of the way forward for faithful congregations in discovering how to reach and address the “plain” person in the United States, may begin by focusing time and

energy on identifying with and ministering to the needs of the poor. Poor people in the United States represent a major portion of the population and will soon become the majority population group. John Wesley utilized field preaching to identify and meet the needs of this group in the eighteenth century. The United Methodist Church must expend the necessary time, energy and resources to discover how to communicate most effectively with the poor. We appear much more willing to relate to poor people in the southern hemisphere than with the poor people a few miles away in the center of our cities or in the rural areas of our States. Most congregations focus on the middle class or the upper middle class of white European Americans as those “worthy” of our time and effort.

Diogenes Allen captures the predicament of most United States churches, when he writes, “We remain captives within a mental framework that has actually been broken. We are like prisoners who could walk out of a prison because all that would enclose us have been burst open, but we remain inside because we are asleep.”<sup>14</sup>

Focusing on the poor will require us to move far beyond collecting food and clothing for the homeless, although such acts of charity must remain a priority, and begin to identify the forces that facilitate and hold individuals in bondage to poverty. It means designing programs and providing resources that enable individuals to overcome their poverty. It means empowering them to set and accomplish their own goals rather than adopting goals set by others who live outside of their cultural context. Perhaps most important of all, it means we begin to see the poor as people that God loves, even to the

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<sup>14</sup> Darrell L. Guder, Project Coordinator, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending Church in North America*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publisher, 1998), p. 17.

point of sending his own Son that they might enter the kingdom of God. Leaving the poor as objects of compassion and concern, rather than individuals awaiting full participation in the kingdom of God, will prevent the Church from fulfilling her mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The Church must demonstrate what it means to be invited, initiated, and equipped to live under the reign of God as it relates to the poor of our society. Darrell Guder captures this necessity when he wrote,

Churches must discover what it means to act faithfully on behalf of the reign of God within the public life of their society. Because we live in a plural world that no longer gives us privileged place and power, we have the choice to confine our business to the private realm of the self its leisure choices or to find new patterns for faithful public deeds. The calling to seek first the reign of God and God's justice mean orienting our public deeds away from imposing our moral will onto the social fabrics and toward giving tangible experiences of the reign of God that intrudes as an alternative to the public principles and loyalties.<sup>15</sup>

In order to apply Wesley's approach to the United States in the twenty-first century, we must learn to go to the people and live under the reign of God. The proclamation of the Gospel takes on a vitality and strength seldom seen in most United States communities.

The second aspect we must recapture from Wesley's approach was his unswerving commitment to form individuals who possessed the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. Wesley expected, almost demanded, that those desiring to "flee from the wrath to come" participate in the class meetings and societies. Wesley knew that an encounter with Jesus Christ, even an experience of justifying grace, was insufficient for a Christian lifestyle. He gave the General Rules as a means of forming those coming into Christ, as a guide toward the formation of their character.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 108f.

Most pastors in the United Methodist Church in the United States answered that they knew the General Rules and would practice them.<sup>16</sup> However, a quick review of clergy sessions where candidates for full membership in the Conference provide a brief summary of the General Rules reveal a remarkable lack of knowledge of these historic practices. If candidates do not know the General Rules, and their responses make such knowledge very debatable, then it is extremely questionable they practice these admonitions on a regular basis.

We must find multiple ways, not only for clergy but also for laity, to be in small covenantal groups where individuals are accountable for the regular practices of doing all the good they can, avoiding all evil, and attending to the ordinances of God. These appear so elementary for Christian formation and participation in the reign of God that such practices would clearly identify those incorporated into United Methodist Church. Sadly, this is not the case. Few congregations employ practices that foster accountability as a means of assisting individuals in their personal transformation and the transformation of the world. A recovery to the class meetings in some form, or at least learning to reap the benefits from a “modern” adaptation, appears essential for the Church in the United States to fulfill its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

David Lowes Watson made a valiant effort to adapt the Wesley’s Class Meetings to the situation in the United States through Covenant Discipleship Groups.<sup>17</sup> Some congregations formed Covenant Discipleship Groups and saw them disappear in the

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<sup>16</sup> The General Rules can be found in ¶103 *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, (Nashville: TN., 2004) p. 72ff.

<sup>17</sup> David Lowes Watson, *Accountable Discipleship*, (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984).

coming months and years for a variety of reasons. Watson failed to appreciate the strong emotional and spiritual ties formed within these groups. Watson assumed individuals would leave their initial group and reconstitute a new group that included new and additional people. This false assumption led to the demise of many groups. The pastors also failed to provide the vital nurture and care of the leaders of these groups to enable them to continue the life long practice of attending to the souls and spirits of those entrusted to their care. Watson's adaptation of the class meeting made a valiant and valuable contribution, but contained sufficient flaws to lead to the demise of most covenant discipleship groups in local congregations. Those that continue significantly improve the spiritual life of their congregations.

My personal experience over the past three years of participating with a group of clergy and laity in an Incubator<sup>18</sup> group has demonstrated not only the benefits of such covenant groups built upon an adaptation of the design of Wesley's Class Meetings, but also the viability of such groups. The primary purpose of Incubator groups is to develop "spiritual leaders", but the reality surfaced that our primary achievement was the formation of persons in their daily walk with Jesus Christ.

I began my participation in the Incubator group to model the importance I placed upon clergy persons being spiritual leaders. After the first year, I saw the necessity to continue the journey for those chosen and called to spiritual leadership. Spiritual formation and accountable discipleship are essential for effective leadership in the Church. We invited approximately one-half of the group to provide major leadership in

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<sup>18</sup> L3 provides a brief overview of the Incubator process carried out by Craig Robertson with Spiritual Leadership Inc. who facilitates the group in which I participate.

other arenas of the Northwest Texas Conference and replaced them with strong laypersons committed to spiritual formation and leadership. During the following two years, the participants learned a new style of leadership and the necessity of living in covenantal relationships with those seeking to fulfill the Church's mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world.

The most vital and distinctive aspect of Wesley's approach to fulfilling the mission given to him by Jesus Christ was the emphasis upon holiness and holy living. Wesley knew that a relationship with Jesus Christ created a new relationship with ones' neighbors and a new relationship with the triune God. Again, the General Rules pointed individuals to a community that lives under the reign of God. Wesley understood that if prevenient grace enabled one to recognize and respond to the love of God; and justifying grace placed one in the right relationship with God; then sanctifying grace enabled one to grow in love with God and neighbor. Those experiencing justifying grace and refusing to respond to God's sanctifying grace, lived outside of God's reign. Sanctifying grace transformed the Beatitudes from wonderful utopia goals, that none could reach, into a description of life lived in under the reign of God.

Wesley's emphasis on holiness challenges the foundational practices of most United Methodists in the United States. Presently, most congregations, and perhaps the denomination, demands or expects very little of those joining a United Methodist congregation. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a confession of Jesus Christ as Savior, an affirmation of the Jesus' Lordship, and a pledge to participate faithfully in the church's ministries through prayers, presence, gifts and service are

required for admission.<sup>19</sup> However, congregations seldom remove members, living within their geographic area, from membership because of the failure to uphold these commitments. A vast majority of United Methodist Churches in the United States are very low commitment and low expectation churches. Even mentioning members need to meet the standards Jesus outlined as to what it means to participate in the reign of God, bring cries of establishing standards created to destroy the United Methodist Church.

Holy living is *passé* in most congregations. They expect very little of those who follow Jesus Christ and they reap what they expect. This also explains the lack of passion to help other persons become faithful followers of Jesus Christ. If following Jesus does not produce a life that is significantly different from the atheist neighbor living next door, then why should one strive, much less exert substantial energy, to make a disciple of Jesus Christ? Wesley saw the lives of people transformed and changed. Most congregations enlist new members rather than initiating individuals into a relationship with Jesus Christ where they anticipate living under the reign of God. Holy living, or going on to perfection, remains beyond the scope of those “choosing” to join the United Methodist Church.

Most United Methodists consider the Social Principles as something only the most radical, left of center, political activist would read; and that most United Methodists should never consider as a claim upon their lives. Holiness, as an integral part of the mission of the Church for the transformation of the world, extends beyond the scope of personal salvation that remains the *real* mission of the church. Recovering this vital

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<sup>19</sup> “The Baptismal Covenant I”, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville, TN.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 33ff.

aspect of Wesley's approach would radically transform the United Methodist Church in the United States.

Wesley's approach of going to the people (especially reaching out to the poor) incorporating them into small groups for intentional faith development and Christian nurture, and sending them forth to live in the world under the reign of God, would enable the United Methodist Church to fulfill the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Wesley's approach is extremely informative and transformative for those truly seeking to fulfill Christ's mission in the twenty-first century in the United States of America.