

The Church *contra* Empire:
Dismantling the Denominational Diaspora; Rethinking
World(ly) Methodism and its Neocolonial Practices

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Since the 1960s, the United Methodist Church (UMC) has regularly advanced studies and proposals aimed at restructuring the denomination to be a “global” (now, “worldwide”) church. In spring 2007, the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table’s Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church (hereafter, “Task Group”) presented a report to the full Council: “Worldwide Ministry through the United Methodist Church.”¹ The report concludes with proposed legislation “as a first step toward living more fully into the world-wide nature that already exists in our church in a limited way.”² The legislation, in essence, sets the stage for transformation by proposing, first, constitutional changes that will allow future legislation to create equivalent structures within every geographical region, and second, ongoing study to conclude with a report presented to the 2012 General Conference.

Most notably, the report calls for living “differently in the world” and offering “the world a better version of unity and interdependence.”³ In this proposal, there exists an opening, a possibility for change, a moment in which the church can begin to resist Empire or to use its processes for the flourishing of human life and the whole of creation. But this moment also presents the possibility that nothing will change and the neocolonial and exilic practices of United Methodism will continue under the influence of Empire and U.S. ideological commitments. Nonetheless, what seems evident is a growing recognition that the U.S. cannot continue to dominate a church that is embodied in diverse ways throughout the world (or, at least, it cannot *appear* that the U.S. is the center or dominant segment of the church).

Can the UMC begin to resist Empire or, to follow the logic of Hardt and Negri, can it use the processes of Empire to further the reign of God on earth and the mission of the Church without succumbing to its logic and dehumanizing consequences? I suggest that this is the crucial task now facing the UMC. But the history of the church’s approach to being a world

¹ Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church, Council of Bishops and The Connectional Table, “Worldwide Ministry through the United Methodist Church,” an interim report (Spring 2007). I am grateful to Bishop Scott Jones for sharing with me a copy of this report and the changes made by the Council.

² “Worldwide Ministry through the UMC,” p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

church is less than ideal and requires critical reflection, if there is a genuine desire to develop structures of interdependency and interrelationship during an age of Empire.⁴

A Brief Background: The Impetus to Structural Change

The commission known as COSMOS (Commission on the Structure of Methodism Overseas, 1948-1972) was established by the Methodist Church and continued within the UMC to provide the theological and practical conversation that would enable indigenous churches to opt for “affiliated autonomous” status or to remain as “central” conferences tied to the structural authority of the U.S.-dominated General Conference and its *Book of Discipline*.⁵ For the churches in many nations, the desire to elect their own bishops was a driving force, as was the sense that the churches needed to reflect indigenous features rather than the culture, concerns, and ideologies of the U.S. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a time of awakening for nations long subject to colonialism and imperial desires. Latin American liberation theology emerged with its powerful claim that the church needs to take seriously the poor and the concern for the “human dimension.” Yet, it was also a time of political upheaval and an ongoing Cold War in which the U.S. sought to delimit the spread of communism, at times through covert actions supporting brutal dictatorial regimes around the world. Political circumstances, combined with the new theological consciousness made the idea of autonomy urgent and necessary.

It was not yet a time when economic forces propelled change – at least within the First World – even though Third World nations had already begun to speak of the problems associated with global economic dynamics and conditions. Indeed, in the COSMOS files are assessments from church leaders and theologians from Latin American and Asia related to economic dependency and the need for change. Mortimer Arias, bishop of the Bolivian Methodist Church in 1970, wrote a “Manifesto to the Nation” that was published in the Bolivian press and included in the work of COSMOS. He argued clearly and forcefully that,

At the bottom of this situation [of dehumanization] are international oppressive structures, such as imperialism and the war-like and economic interests of the great powers. Like the rest of the Third World, we are obliged to sell our new materials cheaply and to buy manufactured goods which represent ten, twenty, and even thirty

⁴ I agree with those scholars who argue that imperialism and the nation-state are not yet things of the past, though the ascendancy of Empire cannot be denied or ignored. See, for instance, Atilio Boron, *Imperio Imperialismo: Una Lectura Crítica de Michael Hardt y Antonio Negri* (Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2002).

⁵ The bulk of the commission’s work was done between 1962 and 1970.

times the average . . . which is paid to the Bolivian worker. Foreign investors are willing to exploit our riches⁶

This is the situation that José Míguez Bonino – who participated in the COSMOS conversations – identified in 1975 when he wrote that “*Latin America has discovered the basic fact of its dependence.*”⁷ While pointing to the fact that “Bolivian and Argentine pronouncements of the Methodist church . . . expressly reject the capitalist system, and urge the Methodist people to participate actively in the shaping of a new and more human society,” he also demonstrated that the church’s pronouncements seldom become enacted.⁸

Conversely, while the U.S. church and commission members recognized the financial and economic concerns, they often viewed the situation quite differently. For example, Max Warren reported in 1962 on a consultation held in Buenos Aires and noted that Latin America sees the Board of Missions as a “gold mine” without understanding the “real facts.” He then states that the Board and missionaries must interpret financial realities to the churches in Latin America.⁹ A similar sentiment is expressed in a 1965 COSMOS report which, in the final three sentences of a 24-page document finally addresses economic concerns: “in any change in structure, the Board of Missions faces real problems in the use of money. This raises the question of stewardship. If a new world structure is to emerge, how do we deal with the question of stewardship?”¹⁰ This brief reference indicates both that the economic question was little considered on the part of the U.S. church and, when it was, it generally conveyed a sense of paternalism. Latin America may have awakened to its economic dependency, but the U.S. had not yet become aware of its contribution to creating and sustaining dehumanizing economic conditions.

Due to the volatile context of the 1960s, the U.S. church essentially required all national churches established by its missionary efforts to choose autonomy or central conference status. Even so, the meaning and implications of “affiliated autonomous” status versus a “central conference” relationship were only vaguely delineated as the process unfolded. There is evidence

⁶ Bishop Mortimer Arias, “Manifesto to the Nation,” COSMOS, Latin America I: Bolivia 1968-1970, UMC Archives (Madison, New Jersey), p. 3.

⁷ Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 15.

⁸ *Doing Theology*, p. 57.

⁹ Max Warren, “Some Reflections of the Consultation Promoted by the Board of Mission of the Methodist Church of the USA held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 24-March 5, 1962.” Latin America I: Latin American Central Conference 1962-1969, COSMOS, UMC Archives.

¹⁰ “The Methodist Church (USA) – A Change in Structure Required,” author unknown, c. 1965, COSMOS, UMC Archives.

that not all of the national churches opting for affiliated autonomous status desired a complete separation from the UMC; indeed, some expressed a clear desire, based upon theological grounds, to remain in relationship. But given limited economic and personnel resources, as well as a desire to have some control over how resources are used, the central conferences have proven to be the church's priority (especially in Africa). In this situation, a twofold sense of "exile" has emerged.¹¹ The central conferences, whose churches are entangled with the U.S. in various ways, experience a sense of exile from their own cultures and perspectives. Although this problem has decreased with the end of Methodist "missions" in which churches often used English in worship and were led by U.S. bishops; nonetheless, there remains a perception that the U.S. controls the UMC and, therefore, the central conferences. In other words, a neocolonial dimension continues to pervade the UMC as it remains U.S.-dominated.¹² The second form of exile is experienced by affiliated autonomous churches that have been marginalized, to a large extent, by their choice for autonomy.¹³ Conversations with these churches have been initiated in recent months, as the UMC recognizes a need to reestablish and deepen relationships, given that connectionalism (in one form or another) has been a basic Methodist principle since Wesley's day.¹⁴

Thus, an awareness that the church needs to change has existed since the 1960s and the COSMOS commission. The call for new structures arises on a regular basis. Yet, when we consider the church's processes over the past thirty or forty years we find that, despite years of study, the U.S. church has lacked a critical consciousness of the forces at work. Yes, the U.S. was aware of the sociopolitical dynamics during the dismantling of colonial relationships and the rise of the revolutionary spirit in the southern hemisphere. Yes, the U.S. church was aware of the volatile sociopolitical situation internal to the U.S. (i.e., the Civil Rights Movement, opposition to the Vietnam War, etc.). But the COSMOS deliberations never questioned the church's practices in light of the U.S. role in other nations, its politics of intervention, or its economic policies. We might suggest that the work of restructuring the UMC under COSMOS was a

¹¹ I have discussed this phenomenon at length in an earlier paper, "Recovering *Los Desaparecidos*," *A Living Tradition*, ed. by Mary Elizabeth Moore (Kingswood, forthcoming). A revised version will appear in *Cuadernos de Teología* published by Instituto Universitario ISEDET (Buenos Aires).

¹² Note that British Methodism, with its direct experience of colonialism, opted for a different relationship than the central conference form. It preferred to assist national churches to become autonomous and self-sufficient.

¹³ For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see my paper on Methodism in Argentina cited above.

¹⁴ I am not suggesting that the autonomous churches wish to come "home," but rather, that the UMC is beginning to recognize the problematic nature of this structure.

reaction to shifting worldly conditions, to political and social forces that could not be ignored, but it was not a critical theological and sociopolitical reflection on the church's role or mission in the world. As a result, today's conditions of exile and neocolonialism within the UMC came into existence.

In sum, the processes that created the current structures of the UMC (U.S.-dominated, central conferences, and affiliated autonomous churches) lacked a critical consciousness. As we move toward another round of structural change, this awareness becomes a key to substantive transformation. Drawing upon Hardt and Negri's methodological framework, we can argue that addressing the rise of Empire requires two steps. The first involves a "critical and deconstructive" moment in which the church develops a widespread consciousness of the processes at work and the ways in which the church is implicated in them. Developing a critical consciousness serves as the precursor to the second step, a "constructive and ethico-political" moment that seeks to direct the church "toward the constitution of an effective social, political alternative" to today's connectional system.¹⁵ We might suggest that instead of simply reacting to the context that seems to demand changes in the church, we must first ask the critical questions that have remained "tangential" in the past. Lacking this critical consciousness and self-critique, structural changes are as likely to contribute to and play into the dehumanizing processes of Empire as they are to model a new form of interrelationship and interdependency.

Given this history and the lack of critical consciousness in the past, we are forced to ask if the latest round of study and restructuring is a reaction to the inescapable forces of globalization and the emergence of Empire. As the geopolitical world changes; the church must change. In other words, as with the revolutionary, anti-colonial forces in the 1960s and 1970s, the church is experiencing the discomfort of an increasingly deterritorialized world in which there are no national boundaries or centers of power and the U.S. is unsettled like every other nation. United (States) Methodism senses a need – in part, quite genuine and enlightened – to reduce its status as dominant power and to participate in the world in a more reciprocal and mutual manner. The danger here, of course, is that without first developing a critical consciousness, the structures can be reconstituted to provide the *appearance* of responding to

¹⁵ I draw here on Hardt and Negri's argument that the rise of Empire enables the processes of production to be challenged and reconstituted toward liberative ends. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 47.

globalization and its forces, while actually sidestepping the most difficult issues. In other words, the church can treat the symptoms without treating the root causes of this dis-ease.

Lacking a prior critical and deconstructive moment, structural changes are not likely to produce genuine transformation and could possibly foster relationships that contribute to the dehumanizing processes of Empire. Without a critical theological and ideological consciousness on the part of the U.S. segment of the church, it is unlikely that structures can be developed to provide for a church that bears witness in and to the world of a different way of living in relationship and interdependence. Our first step, then, in re-creating the church, so as to steer Empire's processes in the service of humanity and the reign of God on earth, is to engender widespread reflection on the church's theological and ecclesial commitments, as well as the ways in which these commitments reflect or challenge national and transnational commitments.

The UMC *contra* Empire

The fundamental question to which we must turn our attention is: How can the church proceed *contra* Empire's dehumanizing processes? Or, to frame it differently, how can the church proceed in a way that uses the processes of Empire without succumbing to its logic? In order to stand against Empire and to provide a distinct vision of interdependency, interrelationship, and human flourishing, the UMC must reflect upon the contemporary condition in light of the gospel message and its Wesleyan theological heritage.

As we have seen, COSMOS was not entirely successful, at least in part due to unexamined assumptions, processes, and ideologies. Although the commission's work ultimately led to structural changes in the UMC, the unforeseen consequences have been those of neocolonialism and exile. The Third World participants in the COSMOS process had developed a critical theological consciousness; the U.S. participants lagged behind, quite possibly because the U.S. desired to continue its dominance of the church and its resources. Clearly, at that time, the U.S. was still ascendant, still striving to become the sole superpower in the world. Interestingly, in a confidential statement from Jon Regier of the British Methodist Church to Bishop Raines of the COSMOS commission, Regier commented frankly on the commission's notion of restructuring to be an "international" Methodist Church. Not only did he contend that an international church was possible only if it had "a central headquarters that is not in the United States," but he issued a prophetic warning: "I want to add here a comment that may seem

hard, but which as a friend you must allow me the right to make. Politically and militarily the United States is today in a mood of expansionism.”¹⁶ There exists no record of the proposal originally sent to Regier or the subsequent response, if any, by Bishop Raines and the COSMOS commission. Nonetheless, Regier’s comments were honest and bold. In light of the current policies of the U.S. in the world, one has to ask whether the “mood of expansionism” or the imperial desires have yet reached their apex. In other words, there remains a prophetic role for the church to stand against U.S. imperial desires, not only in the issuance of resolutions and episcopal pastoral letters, but also in tangible structural and economic expressions.

We recognize that often the UMC or, more specifically, the U.S. component of the UMC, continues to be entangled in U.S. political and economic ideologies and desires, which do not always coincide with the imperatives of the gospel and the Wesleyan theological heritage. Anecdotally, I am reminded of the large Texas congregation that, each Sunday, processes with the U.S. flag and sings a verse of “America,” even on the Sunday when the guest preacher was Leslie Griffiths. Thus, the first necessary step in developing a critical consciousness is to recognize the informal and ideological ways in which the church is entangled with the U.S. Another means of expressing this point is to suggest that we must clearly grasp that the so-called “American Way of Life” requires critique. Capitalism and consumerism are not practices of the gospel. Whereas once the “American Way of Life” was part and parcel of the missionary enterprise (and remains embodied in certain organizations or vehicles of the church), this message can no longer be sustained within an awakened and re-conceptualized church. Thus, we can see that the task of becoming conscious of national imperialistic and neocolonial tendencies is necessary on the part of the U.S. church.

Returning to the Task Group’s report, Wesley’s oft-cited claim, “I look upon the whole world as my parish,” is offered as rationale for the “limitlessness” of the church’s mission. It is not uncommon to hear United Methodists parrot Wesley’s claim, as a way of providing an imperative or rationale for being a “global” church. Aside from the fact that Wesley’s statement to the Bishop of Bristol had nothing to do with being a global or world church, but everything to do with his “irregular” ecclesiastical practices; we should not forget that it also was uttered at a

¹⁶ Jon I. Regier, “Confidential Statement – Personal Reactions to the proposal for an International Methodist Church expressed in a letter written at the request of Bishop Raines” (November 5, 1965), *British Methodism Overseas Conferences 1962-1971*, COSMOS, UMC Archives, pp. 1, 5. Note, however, Regier fails to include economic expansionism.

time when Britain was an empire in pursuit of economic and political advantage. It is likely that Wesley, himself, would proceed with caution when applying the logic of “the world is my parish” to the contemporary context. The world is not the parish of the UMC, although it may establish local churches and undertake mission projects throughout the world. In any case, we can begin to see how the logic of U.S. imperialism can creep subtly into the church’s reflection.

Another case in point is the Task Group’s emphasis on considering the connectional system or the church’s polity as a crucial factor in understanding the “catholicity” of the UMC.¹⁷ Of course, “the” connectional system has never existed, since various forms of connectionalism have been created from the time of Wesley and the MEC down to the present. And one critical component of the connectional system is apportionments, which allow for the transfer of funds from local churches to the larger church to carry out its “worldwide” mission. At the heart of the connectional system, then, are questions related to economics and the global economy. Yet, the Task Group report only gives a brief nod to the fact that “financial resources are ‘centered’ in the United States” and asks the question, “Will the church in the United States address the matter of ‘privilege’ that accrues to it via money and membership?”¹⁸ In other words, the Bishops stop short of asking the hard questions about the global economy, the U.S. role in transnational economic organizations, the growing economic disparities within the U.S. and between the U.S. and other nations, and the emphasis the UMC places on financial matters (including profitability, investments, etc.). Until serious reflection is done on the church’s implication in global economic matters, new structures are not likely to embody and model interdependency and interrelationship. Thus, we can see that the UMC will need to develop a deep comprehension of the new global, transnational economic forces and the relationships and conditions they produce, as well as an understanding of national and local forms of economic relationship and dependency.

The Church and the Question of Economics

I have argued that the first moment in any restructuring of the UMC is that of developing a critical consciousness related to the ways in which the church is implicated in U.S. policies, practices, and ideologies. I have further suggested that two forms of consciousness must be cultivated: 1) related to the neocolonial and imperialistic ideologies and practices of the U.S. and

¹⁷ “Worldwide Mission through the UMC,” p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

the U.S. church, and 2) concerning economic policies and practices on the global and transnational levels, as well as the national and local, including within the church itself. To conclude this paper, a few questions and comments related to this task of developing a critical consciousness are in order.

1. The UMC has shied away from difficult discussions related to the control and distribution of money within the church, including within the U.S. segment of the church. It is easier to speak in abstract terms about poverty or global economic policies and disparities, than to engage in rigorous self-critique. Yet, to counter Empire's dehumanizing tendencies and to model different relational possibilities, the church must demonstrate that within its own institutional and organizational elements, honest and painful conversations take place, followed by transformative financial and economic practices that reflect and further its theological commitments.

I pastor a small, struggling bilingual congregation in the Latino/a barrio on Fort Worth's south side. The Rio Grande Conference, to which it belongs, is a small, struggling conference, which is not based (entirely) upon geography but (primarily) on language. The conference's financial situation is perilous; meanwhile, geographical conferences are urged to develop the National Hispanic Plan locally (and apart from the RGC), since the Latino/a population represents a huge source of potential members. Many of these potential members are poor or lower middle class and, thus, their churches are often unable to be self-sustaining (at least in the first or second generation). Two geographically-based churches have closed in this barrio over the past two years, partly due to an apparent reluctance to transition demographically and partly due to that conference's sense that these churches would not be profitable or self-sustaining. Economic issues are inseparable from class and race issues in today's UMC. The U.S. church has yet to address fully the inequities and economics of class and race issues internal to United (States) Methodism. Reflecting upon more local and regional issues related to economics and other marginalizing factors can generate reflection on global issues that is more insightful, especially if the practices of the U.S. church are redeveloped to rectify disparities within the U.S. To serve the present age, United (States) Methodism must begin to wrestle with the problem of economic injustice within the U.S. component of the church, and not only in relation to the "world."

2. Perhaps the proposed study process should be chaired and guided by United Methodists who are not U.S. citizens and should be constituted in a way that the U.S. cannot dominate the conversation numerically or structurally. The COSMOS commission was led and guided by U.S. members. The Task Group of the Council of Bishops included non-US members, but was chaired by a U.S. bishop. The Council of Bishops and the General Conference are dominated by the U.S. The General Secretaries of the church's General Boards and Commissions are from the U.S. The power in the church continues to be U.S. based. Theologically, we must ask if numerical strength (both in financial and membership terms) should be the basis of power within the body of Christ and the inbreaking reign of God on earth. Moreover, the proposed changes also raise questions because they come at a time when the U.S. membership is declining and membership in the Two-Thirds World, especially Africa, is growing dramatically. Could the impetus to structural change entail a subtle move to protect U.S. interests by establishing regional decision making authority for the U.S. region and thereby protecting United (States) Methodism from the provisions of a General Conference dominated by members in other regions? In any case, the U.S. church must not dominate the conversation.

As we have seen, the reflections of Third World participants in the COSMOS proceedings were often deeply perceptive, but were not taken to heart (or even carefully weighed) by those representing the U.S. In this renewed opportunity for transformation, the U.S. church needs to listen to the insights from the world's citizens with whom it desires a renewed and reconciled form of relationship. To serve the present age, United (States) Methodism has to learn from those who have already reflected upon these issues and developed a critical understanding (this means, as well, that the work done during COSMOS should be read and considered as background to a new process).

3. The new study group would be wise to recruit an economist or two to reflect upon the financial and economic dimensions of the UMC and to consider alternative arrangements to the present system. In the past, the UMC has drawn upon the expertise of sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, physicians, and various other disciplinary experts. I am not suggesting reports be requested from accountants and financial planners. Rather, background papers on the global economic system, as well as considerations of how the U.S. church is implicated in these economic processes could prove insightful.

In fact, perhaps the UMC could develop a markedly new form of economic life or a modified socialized economy for its new structures. Radical as that might sound to some members of the U.S. church, the Bible knows nothing about capitalism and the accumulation of property. Instead, we see evidence in the early church of a redistribution of wealth from the haves to the have-nots and a concern for sharing in common (1 Cor 16; Acts 4:32-35). We read that we are not to store up treasures on earth (Matt 6:19), that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God (Matt 19:24), that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions (Luke 12:15). The scriptures are clear that those who have wealth must not serve the money above God and neighbor. In fact, one might argue that the basis for the system of apportionments lies in this biblical mandate. The gospel thus calls the church to reconsider the economic relationship of the U.S. and other First World segments of the UMC to the rest of the world, not only the structural arrangements. Perhaps renewal of the church in the U.S. is tied to a deep commitment to economic reform. To serve the present age, the UMC is compelled to develop and model economic relationships that differ from the worldly systems that exist today. This imperative includes relinquishing the need to control church-wide funds under the auspices of various forms of paternalistic logic.

4. John Wesley's concern for economic conditions and the poor has been well documented (several members of this working group have produced important publications on the topic). His sermon "On the Use of Money" is quite simple and practical in its logic of earn, save, and give all you can. Moreover, at a time when the poor were harshly treated and social welfare provisions were quite limited, "Wesley conspicuously adopted a different viewpoint, seeing the poor as industrious and a source of spiritual renewal . . ."¹⁹ Clearly, the Wesleyan theological heritage contains clear guidance on economic matters, on things such as the distribution of wealth and the accumulation of property. Can the U.S. church, in good conscience, sidestep Wesley's guidance on economic concerns, given that the sermons are doctrinal standards and the provisions of the General Rules are clearly expressed within the *Book of Discipline*? How can the U.S. church model Wesley's personal approach to wealth in light of the inescapable economic realities of our day? In any case, any ongoing study related to restructuring the church should take into consideration Wesley's teachings on money, the poor,

¹⁹ Jeremy Black, *Eighteenth Century Britain 1688-1783* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 105.

and human rights. To serve the present age, the UMC is called to be responsible to its heritage of concern for the poor and the sharing of wealth, consistent with the biblical witnesses. In a very real sense, today's United Methodists, like all Christians, are the children of the poor, and we should not forget from where we have come.

In conclusion, there exists an opening within the UMC, a moment when substantial transformation is possible. Under the leadership of the Council of Bishops, the possibility of countering Empire's dehumanizing processes exists. But unless the church, particularly in the U.S., develops a critical consciousness of these processes related to Empire and of the church's biblical and Wesleyan mandate to model a different form of human economic life together, it will continue to represent a version of *worldly* Methodism. In other words, while a sociopolitical awareness has developed over past decades, the next challenge for the UMC is to address the pervasive problem of economic injustice existing within the church and the world.