

CONTEMPORARY METHODIST THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINAL CONSENSUS

SOME CONTEMPORARY WESLEYAN CONTRIBUTIONS FROM A US CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

I take it that our common task is, as Norman Young proposes, to "let each other know what we are discovering about Methodism's capacity to contribute to and learn from ecumenical discussion and shared social action in diverse parts of the world." As an outsider to the Wesleyan tradition, my remarks will be a word of appreciation from the context of US discussions on the world wide project "Toward the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today."¹ In the US ecumenical context the social ethical dimension of United Methodist commitments are, of course, more evident than the labors at faithfulness to the faith of the church through the ages and your commitments to firmly and accurately research doctrinal consensus with your ecumenical partners. Some of us have been given access to these rich resources within your church life, though the less diligent of your partners can remain focused on your missional gifts and experiential methodologies, neglecting the doctrinal and theological aspects of your heritage.

This is the bicentennial anniversary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and with this Church, the Black led churches in the US which are witnesses to the confessional power of the Gospel and the ethical failures of Christian confession. Without the blatant sin of racism, these churches would not have been called to take their confessional stand, but precisely because of their confessional witness their fellow Christians can be called back to confess the unity of the human community. Indeed, our praxis is as confessional as the verbal formulations we give to Gospel truth. Indeed, it

heritage,⁵ so deeply influenced by the presence of Albert Outler and other United Methodists, and the ongoing commitment to the Wesleyan quadrilateral. The concern for catholic unity in time and space seems more congenial to British and American Methodists in their responses to BEM.⁶ Be that as it may, ignorance of the ecumenical background and hopes of our churches is a common plight of all of our sadly divided communities.

Most US Methodists have not renewed Wesley's injunction to weekly communion, and therefore the Church still continues to lose some of the most faithful Wesleyans to his own Anglican Church. Nevertheless, United Methodists carry a unique witness to all of our churches' catholic calling. To be more personal and specific, I have to say that in the rural southern United States, from which I come, it is the United Methodist congregations, and especially the ministers, who keep the catholicity of the Church alive in many small communities. The accountability to a global community in Christ, to the Spirit working through time and space, to a seminary requirement giving seriousness to the Tradition and Scripture from which the Church is to preach and draw its sustenance, to a connectional system which makes the wider koinonia inescapable in a context where congregational reductionism and personal politics can dominate church life, and to the prophetic creedal documents and processes, ancient and modern, which vitalize the Christian life; all of these elements may be the only catholic Christian presence in a northern Mississippi or west Tennessee community. While a congregation may be served as part of a three point charge, by a minister who is also struggling with a midlife vocation crisis and a young family in a seminary context, the United Methodists carry this wider challenge to universality and tradition. Itineracy, superintendency and conference connection serve the catholic

be enriched, ecumenically, by United Methodist positive experience with women in ordained ministry, the Eucharist as a converting sacrament or the use of inclusive language in worship, there are some communities who claim 2,000 years and a much larger community experience today which is different.

I attribute the lack of interest in history and in a critical approach to Scripture much more to the ahistorical and anti-intellectual context of US culture, shared equally by Roman Catholics and Orthodox, as well as Protestants. Indeed, the most ethnic and least "Tradition" oriented communities in the US ecumenical community today are often the Orthodox and Catholic, a factor to which we are all called to be sensitive in seeking common confession and witness.

Finally, the demographic fact is that the churches catholic, particularly the United Methodists and Roman Catholics, are given by providence a unique role in ecumenical relationships across the face of the US. These are the two largest churches committed by their confessional standards to participation in the ecumenical movement. This means that in almost every community where there is local participation by these two churches they carry a unique leadership role in confessing the ecumenical commitment. Their connectional polity gives them delivery systems for programs of social action, social service, evangelism, spiritual nurture and common study that touches practically every county in every state in the country. If the bishops, superintendents and ecumenical officers of these two churches bring a common priority to a local ecumenical table it will inevitably move high on the agenda. While this can be a gift where relationships are good, it can be a burden, especially for those who find

ecumenical agencies doing, in their own way, what is being done by such ecumenical fellowships as the World Methodist Council or the Faith and Order Commission. The asymmetry between the WMC and its one major member leads us to hope that a common and consistent ecumenical strategy can emerge which focuses Wesleyan resources in the wider ecumenical arena. A consistency of confession and an inclusiveness in theological and cultural points of view are essential tensions to maintain as we approach one another. The bilateral and multilateral dialogues in which Methodists participate are productive of common understandings that can become the basis for common confession and eventual church union. The discussions of these other theological societies prepare the way for common understandings of the faith which can become bases for common confession.

To the outsider, the soteriological, spiritual, missionary, experiential and worship emphases of these three streams: Methodist, Holiness and Pentecostal are rooted in the Wesleyan vision. We do recognize full well that the ecumenical commitment of the United Methodist Church is weightier than its Wesleyan siblings, because of the size and resources of the Black Methodist Churches, and the historic alienation of Holiness and Pentecostals from their Methodist roots. We also acknowledge an affinity that can serve reconciliation if we are sensitive about it. I can only express my appreciation for the outreach of Methodist and Holiness scholars alike to enrich our understanding of the Wesleyan dimension of our US Christian heritage. Individual members of the Church of God (Anderson, IN), The Church of the Nazarene and the Wesleyan Church have been particularly instrumental over the decades in providing bridges which bring us closer to the day when we can confess a common Gospel celebrated in a common creed.

research. I do hope to contribute to these, as an outsider, by prayer and staff work, but I do not claim to be able to help in the formulations, analyses or even personal contacts.

Methodist and Wesleyan Contributions to the US Apostolic Faith Study

There is a way of suggesting that the Anglican Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, the centenary of which we celebrate this year¹³, sets the confessional parameters of the Faith and Order movement while the Wesleyan Quadrilateral sets the methodological parameters for that same movement. We move forward trying to identify, under the Scripture, how we can come to agreement on church order including an apostolic ministry and the historic episcopate within it, common confession and common sacramental life, as suggested by the Anglicans. We seek to reach that goal by careful Scriptural, historical and contextual scholarship, applying reason to the emerging experiences of new contexts as well as "the Tradition of the Gospel testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit," (Montreal, 1963) as suggested by Methodism.

"Toward the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today" is a title worded with the care of a convergence text reflecting the four elements of the Wesleyan quadrilateral. We recognize process, **toward**, and contemporaneity, **today**, as the experiential parameters of any vital reconciling theological enterprise. We use the dynamic noun for confession, **expression**, to make it clear that we are not trying to rewrite the creed, nor are we focusing on the text and authority of the creed so much as we are emphasizing its **common** expression¹⁴. In the World Council, contemporary confessions around the world

contexts¹⁸. Our study brought Holiness, Pentecostal and other voices into that dialogue, opened the question so as to touch the concerns of the Community of Women and Men in the Church¹⁹ study and internal concerns of United Methodists and others about the charismatic movement²⁰. The Pentecostal paper provided a unique bridge in pneumatological work, as did the Orthodox paper in our Pentecostal volume.

The work done in bilateral dialogues with the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, Indian and Ethiopian) in Europe were brought into contact with the wider Protestant and Anglican community here and studies produced to relate these Christological questions to contemporary Christian concerns in the US context²¹. A study guide, for the US context, is being produced on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, again with strong United Methodist sensitivity and input, under the skillful drafting hand of Roberta Bondi (UMC) and ecumenical colleagues.

A third level of work has moved in two directions, both out of the US context. The US churches have often developed an understanding of "apostolicity" or "lived fidelity" that might differ in content if not in intent, from the more classical formulations used by the Lutheran, Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christian majority in the world. Providing a witness to this linguistic, and possibly theological diversity is necessary before reconciliation can occur. A study is going on to formulate the diversity of criteria the churches use for determining what is essential, what is apostolic, in their understandings of the Christian faith. Likewise, the US context provides an ethos of church life, a spirituality, which is in some ways common across communion lines, yet somewhat different from fellow members

Finally, a consultation was done to stage the confessional heritage of the historic Black Churches, Methodist, Pentecostal and Baptist²⁴. These churches are firmly orthodox in their affirmations, though their formulations are carried in their ethical confession, hymnody and community fidelity²⁵. The traditional role of Methodists hymnody and methodologies for mining the apostolic content of non-creedal worship was particularly helpful²⁶. This study, with the careful work of Thomas Hoyt (CME) and leadership from Gayraud Wilmore (PC) and David Shannon (NBC) has become influential in both World Council and the larger National Council studies on the Apostolic Faith. The outcomes of these US studies on the Apostolic Faith is not clear, but the urgency of Christian confession in the modern world drives us in the quest for visible unity of the Church for the sake of the renewal of the whole human community.

In addition to these Wesleyan contributions to convergences in the common expression of the Apostolic Faith today, Church union work in the bilateral dialogues of the World Methodist Council²⁷ and the United Methodist Church²⁸ as well as the US Consultation on Church Union lay building blocks for the gradual convergence necessary for full visible unity.

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- 14 Thomas Best, ed., Faith and Renewal: Commission on Faith and Order, Stavanger, 1985 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986)pp.107-165.
- 15 Paulos Gregorios, William Lazareth and Nikos Nissiotis, eds., Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite? Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981).
- 16 C.S.Song, ed., Confessing Our Faith Around the World I, Faith and Order Paper No. 104, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), Hans-Georg Link, ed., Confessing Our Faith Around the World II, Faith and Order Paper No. 120, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), Hans-Georg Link, ed., Confessing Our Faith Around the World III: The Caribbean and Central America, Faith and Order Paper No. 123, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984), Hans-Georg Link, ed., Confessing Our Faith Around the World IV: South America, Faith and Order Paper No. 126, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986).
- 17 Donald J. Bruggink. "Lived Fidelity to Christ." Perspectives Vol.2:5. (May 1987):11-13.
- 18 Lukas Vischer, ed., Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, Faith and Order Paper No. 103 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981).
- 19 Gerald Sheppard, "The Nicean Creed, Filioque, and Pentecostal Movements in the United States," 171-186 in Theodore Stylianopoulos and Mark Heim, eds., Spirit of Truth: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Holy Spirit, (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1986).
- 20 Francine Cardman, "The Holy Spirit and the Apostolic Faith, A Roman Catholic Response," 59-80 in *ibid.*, cf. "The Community Study and Apostolic Faith: Lima Memorandum of the Working Group on the Community of Women and Men in the Church, 1982," in Link, Apostolic Faith Today, 228-230.
- 21 Roberta Bondi, "The Role of the Holy Spirit from a Methodist Perspective, 121-130, *ibid.*
- 22 Roberta Bondi, "The Meeting of Oriental Orthodoxy and United Methodism," 171-184, in Paul Fries and Tiran Nersoyan, Christ in East and West (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987),
- 23 S. Mark Heim. "Gender and Creed: Confessing a Common Faith." The Christian Century Vol. 102:13. (April 17, 1985):379-381.
- 24 Roberta Bondi, "Some Issues Relevant to a Modern Interpretation of the Language of the Nicene Creed, With Special Reference to 'Sexist' Language," 21-30 in "Gender and Language in the Creeds" Union Seminary Quarterly Review 40:3,(August, 1985).
- 25 Cornish Rogers. "The Gift of Blackness." The Christian Century Vol.102:20. (June 5-12, 1985):572-3.