

COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY AND A MINISTRY OF SERVICE

Sondra Higgins Matthaei

Abstract

*And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!*¹

With these words, John Wesley offers a vision of God's intention for the healing of all creation, a vision of a new creation through communion with the Three-One God. As Albert Outler wrote, "The aged Wesley returned again and again to his vision of cosmic redemption: the restoration of all creation, including the entire human family, as the final, full benefit of God's unbounded love."² The thesis of this paper is that Wesley's vision of communion with the Three-One God is a lens through which we can formulate proposals about ecclesiology and discipleship. Of particular interest are the implications for discipleship as a ministry of service, especially the question of how a ministry to which all Christians is called, might be understood in reference to the orders of ministry in The United Methodist Church.

The Trinity: "Ground of Our Communion"

Wesley's vision of the new creation is not only about human redemption, but also about cosmic redemption. What Wesley describes in his sermon on "The New Creation" is the end of all those things that are life destroying and a new beginning for a life-giving relationship with God, the Source of Life. In Runyon's words, Wesley "sees the 'great salvation,' though it begins in the life of the individual, as cosmic in scope, as nothing less than *a new* creation transforming all dimensions of human existence, both personal and social."³ And, for Wesley, the flourishing of all creation comes only through communion with the Trinity.

*One with God, the source of bliss,
Ground of our communion this;
Life of all that live below,
Let thine emanations flow!*⁴

These words by Charles Wesley are only one example from *Making Disciples* in which I demonstrated that the language of communion is found throughout the Wesley brothers' writing.⁵ John Wesley's understanding is that the three Persons of the Trinity live in communion, and humans are invited into that communion through God's grace. According to John Zizioulas, the communion of the

¹ John Wesley, Sermon #64 "The New Creation" (1785), *Works*, vol. 2, "Sermons II: 34-70," ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 510.

² Albert C. Outler, comments on "The New Creation," *Works*, vol. 2, 500.

³ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 5.

⁴ Charles Wesley, Hymn #501, Part I: "The Communion of Saints" (1740), from "For the Society, Praying," *Works*, vol. 7: "A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists," ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge with the assistance of James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) 690 (emphasis added).

⁵ Sondra Higgins Matthaei, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).

Three Persons in One is characterized by “fundamental interdependence.”⁶ This intimate relationship among the Three Persons of the Trinity means that God in Godself is communion. But communion of the Trinity does not rule out the distinctiveness of each Person. Maddox argued that Wesley’s “characteristic way of distinguishing the ‘Persons’ of the Trinity was in terms of their most defining work: creation/providence, redemption, and sanctification.”⁷ Wesley’s eschatological vision is that all of creation will be restored to full communion with God through the distinctive work of the Three Persons. In other words, the Three-One God seeks communion with humanity and calls humans to live in communion with each other and the rest of creation.

John Wesley believed that all of creation is under God’s care and grace: “all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of [God’s] hand, who by [God’s] intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.”⁸ By virtue of being part of God’s creation, we are already in communion with the Trinity. But God’s creatures have been separated from God through sin. Humans have used their God-given freedom to turn away from communion with God and all of creation. In order for humanity to return to full communion with God, the restoration of the image of God is needed. In Runyon’s words, “The renewal of creation and the creatures through the renewal in humanity of the *image of God* is what Wesley identifies as the heart of Christianity.”⁹ And Runyon cited Wesley, “Ye know that the great end of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God.”¹⁰ Runyon goes on to argue that Wesley understood the image of God as “a relationship called forth by divine grace.”¹¹

We are invited into this relationship by grace through the work of the Three-One God. Through God’s initiative, the image of God is restored and we are joined in full communion with the Trinity. This means that the image of God is dynamic, rather than static. Runyon wrote that the image of God “resides not so much in the creature as in the way the creature lives out his or her relation to the Creator, using whatever gifts and capacities have been received to be in communion with its sources and to reflect that source in the world.”¹² Understanding the image of God as relationship means that it is possible to grow in communion with God and all of creation through God’s grace. In *Making Disciples*, I argued that it is true to Wesley’s vision of the Way of Salvation to characterize this process as “invitation to communion,” “deepening communion,” and “full communion with God,” a growing relationship that is a gift of God’s grace through the communion of the Trinity.

Wesley’s understanding of the Trinity is compatible with discussion of the communion of the Trinity prevalent in theological discourse in recent years. Jürgen Moltmann expressed the vision of communion and the restoration of relationship with the Creator as finding a “home in God.”¹³

⁶ John S. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 212.

⁷ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 140.

⁸ John Wesley, Sermon #23, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” Part III (1725ff), *Works*, vol. 1, “Sermons I: 1- 33,” ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 517. Note: John Wesley’s language will be changed to be more inclusive if it does not alter his meaning. As Randy Maddox observed, John Wesley remained a “man of his time,” but he did demonstrate a beginning awareness of exclusive language when he changed “Christian men” to “Christian” in an edited work. Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 259.

⁹ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 8.

¹⁰ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 8.

¹¹ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 13.

¹² Runyon, *The New Creation*, 14.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology” in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 117.

*All creatures will 'enter into God,' we orthodox theologians say,
to find life-space and their home in God.¹⁴*

Moltmann proposed that the Trinity can best be understood in terms of *perichoresis* and *hidrysis*. “In the doctrine of the Trinity, *perichoresis* is used to capture the mutual indwelling of the equal divine persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Here also the Greek word *hidrysis* occurs, which emphasizes mutuality without mixing or separating. The divine persons embrace one another in love and exist in one another.”¹⁵ Moltmann’s view is influenced by his reflection on a “theology of space” that emphasizes the ways in which the persons of the Trinity “exist beside each other and together” compared to a more common “theology of time” that emphasizes successive relationships.¹⁶ Moltmann distinguished his view from that of Barth and Rahner by saying that the unity of the Trinity grows out of the interdependent perichoretic relationship among the Three Persons rather than preceding the relationship of the three Persons.¹⁷ It is through this unity of the Trinity that God’s grace invites humanity into relationship and overcomes our separation from God. Moltmann wrote, “If sin is the separation of the creatures from the eternal source of their life, then salvation lies in their inclusion into the community of eternal life.”¹⁸ It is the “grace of Christ,” “the love of God,” and “the community of the Spirit” that bring us what Moltmann calls “liberation for the ‘true life.’”¹⁹ And we find new life in this communion with God. In Moltmann’s words, “We live in the Trinity; our lives are Trinitarian lives.”²⁰

Leonardo Boff has also used the perichoretic relationship of the three Persons of the Trinity to formulate his proposals about the communion of the Trinity as a “mystery of inclusion.”²¹

*This entire universe, these stars above our head, these forests, these birds,
these insects, these rivers, and these stones,
everything, everything, is going to be preserved, transfigured,
and made temple of the Blessed Trinity.
And we will live in a grand house, as a single family,
Minerals, vegetables, animals, and humans with the*

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.²²

Boff’s interpretation of this mystery is that it is impossible to understand one Person of the Trinity without the others because of the “reciprocal interpenetration” of the Three Persons as they dwell in each other in love forever.²³ This relationship results in a communion of the Three Persons. As Boff wrote, “in the beginning is the communion of the three Unique Ones. Community is the deepest and most foundational reality that exists.”²⁴ Boff identified the Father’s work as “building the reign, giving life, being merciful, and showing his Providence.”²⁵ The work of the Son is “eternal communication” with the

¹⁴ Moltmann, “Perichoresis, 117-118.

¹⁵ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 114.

¹⁶ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 112.

¹⁷ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 117.

¹⁸ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 117.

¹⁹ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 120.

²⁰ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 120.

²¹ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1998), 15.

²² Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 110.

²³ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 15.

²⁴ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 4.

²⁵ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 68.

Father revealing the “mystery of communion” to us.²⁶ For Boff, the Holy Spirit is “the driving force of full liberation” because it is the power of the Holy Spirit that brings transformation to “reestablish right and justice.”²⁷ Boff indicated that the communion of the Trinity provides direction for life in light of the realities of our social and historical context. In Boff’s words, “We likewise observe in social processes today an immense desire for participation, democratization, and change, aiming at forging a more egalitarian, participatory, pluralistic, and family-spirited society.”²⁸ For Boff, believing that “there is only God-communion-union” means that all of creation is related, and “we never simply live, we always *live together*.”²⁹

The Church: Communion in Community

For John Wesley, Jürgen Moltmann, and Leonardo Boff, the understanding of the communion of the Trinity is the heart of our Christian life. God overcomes human sinfulness through breaking down barriers and restoring the image of God so that we might be liberated to live in communion with the Trinity and all of creation. God as communion not only invites humanity into new relationship, but also provides a pattern for our life together. If we are to be God’s communion in the world, then our lives must reflect God’s intention for life-giving relationships with each other, with creation, and with ourselves. These views carry clear implications for communion ecclesiology, understanding the church in communion with the Trinity.

First, **the church is called to mirror the communion of the Trinity**. Ted Runyon wrote that the church is “to live as the image of God in the world.”³⁰ Runyon argued that humans “are called not only to mirror God in their own lives but to *reflect* the grace which they received into the world, and thus to mediate the life of God to the rest of creation.”³¹ This means that the church is more than a reflection of God’s grace. The church anticipates full communion with God and lives in communion to nurture and sustain its members’ growth in holiness. The church through God’s grace lives in God’s intention for the flourishing of all creation, thereby becoming an agent of the coming reign of God.

Communion with the Trinity also impacts the way Moltmann and Boff understand the nature of the church. Moltmann’s image that “the divine persons are ‘habitable’ for one another, giving one another open life-space for their mutual indwelling” provides a helpful model for the life of the church.³² In this model, “each person is indwelling and room-giving at the same time.”³³ Not only do humans live in a particular time with each other, but they share their space with all of creation and so must give “open life-space” for the flourishing of others. Moltmann’s discussion points to the impact of human communion on the rest of creation. All is God-given and all is in relationship to each other. For Boff, creation “is stamped with the marks of the Trinity.”³⁴ Communion in the Trinity liberates us from sin. The transformative action of the Holy Spirit calls the church to reflect the inclusion of the Trinity in its communion. The church must work for justice in the world because all of creation is God’s and therefore related. Boff’s interpretation connects with Wesley’s vision of a new creation in which everything that is life-destroying is overcome.

Wesley was explicit in his belief that the life of the church should follow the pattern of communion of the Trinity. His emphasis on the formation of small groups following the metaphor of

²⁶ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 78.

²⁷ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 86.

²⁸ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, xiii.

²⁹ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, xvi.

³⁰ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 13.

³¹ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 13.

³² Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 113.

³³ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 113.

³⁴ Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 104.

“Christian family”³⁵ cultivated life in intimate relationship with one another and nurtured each person’s faith and discipleship. A hymn from Charles Wesley presents not only a clear picture of growing communion with the Three-One God (highlighted in bold) in relationship to the church, but also points to the nature of the church (highlighted in italics).

1 How good and pleasant ‘tis to see
When brethren cordially agree,
And *kindly think and speak the same!*
A family of faith and love,
Combined to *seek the things above*
And spread the common
Saviour’s fame!
The God of Grace, who all invites
Who in our *unity* delight
Vouchsafes our intercourse to bless,
Revives us with refreshing showers,
And keeps our minds in perfect peace.

2 *Jesu, thou precious corner-stone,*
Preserve inseparably one
Whom thou dost by the Spirit join;
Still let us in thy Spirit live,
And to thy Church the pattern give
Of *unanimity divine.*
Still let us to each other cleave
And from thy plenitude *receive*
Constant supplies of hallowing grace;
Till to a perfect man we rise,
O’ertake our kindred in the skies,
And find prepared our heavenly place.³⁶

The picture of the church that emerges here is that of a family of faith and love grounded in Jesus Christ and mirroring the communion and unity of the Trinity. A text from Ephesians 4:1-6 provided a description for Christian community in John Wesley’s sermon, “Of the Church:”

I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.³⁷

Just as the Persons of the Trinity are “one in essence, in knowledge, in will, and in their testimony,”³⁸ so the church is to be one. Wesley’s emphasis on unity also derives from his use of the Beatitudes as a guide for the Way of Salvation. The Sermon on the Mount points to a telos of peacemaking. “Happy *are* the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9)³⁹ For Wesley, **peacemakers** love God and neighbor and “utterly detest and abhor all strife and debate. . . forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”⁴⁰ Unity is a sign of love, and God has commanded us to love one another.

Second, in order to grow in communion with God, **the church is to follow what Wesley calls “the Way of Salvation.”** Commenting on Matthew 4:17 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” Wesley wrote, “That phrase is not only used with regard to individuals in whom it is to be established, but

³⁵ In *Making Disciples*, I discussed the importance of Wesley’s image of the “Christian family” as a metaphor for teaching relationships. “The image is consistent with Wesley’s understanding of salvation – adoption of God’s children and full communion with God. Therefore, we come to know ourselves as persons and Christians only through close relationships with God and others,” 102.

³⁶ Charles Wesley, Hymn #477 (1767), from “For the Society, giving Thanks,” *Works*, vol. 7, 662 (emphasis added).

³⁷ John Wesley, Sermon #74, “Of the Church,” *Works*, vol. 3: *Sermons III*, Ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 54-55.

³⁸ John Wesley, Comments on 1 John 5:8, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958), 917- 918.

³⁹ John Wesley, Comments on Matt. 5:9, *NT Notes*, 29.

⁴⁰ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 517,518.

also with regard to the Christian Church, the whole body of believers.”⁴¹ The means that God’s prevenient grace is at work in the church, as well as in individuals, calling the church to repent of her sin and be transformed for a new life in Christ. In other words, the church community grows in holiness as its members grow in holiness through God’s invitation to communion – repentance and pardon; deepening communion – growth in love of God and neighbor; and full communion – adoption as children of God.⁴²

Finally, **the church is called to embody God’s invitation to communion in the world.** We are called by God to be what the Wesleys called “Transcripts of the Trinity”⁴³ – an embodiment or living representation of this communion in our relationship with others through holiness of heart and life, our Christian vocation. Holiness of heart means loving God with our whole being and focuses on a deepening relationship with God through acts of piety. Holiness of life means there is outward evidence of a growing relationship with God as expressed through love of neighbor. We grow in holiness through the work of the Spirit. This deepening communion with the Three-One God through God’s grace leads to holiness that more fully embodies God’s love for creation. Wesley concludes his sermon, “Of the Church,” with this charge:

O let your light shine before [all people]! Show them your faith by your works. Let them see by the whole tenor of your conversation that your hope is all laid up above! Let all your words and actions evidence the spirit whereby you are animated! Above all things, let your love abound. Let it extend to every child of [humanity]; let it overflow to every child of God. By this let all ... know whose disciples ye are, because you love one another.⁴⁴

Growing in communion in the Trinity leads to growth in love of God and neighbor, and evidence of our love for God is found in the way we serve our neighbor. In “Of the Church,” Wesley defined the church as “a congregation or body of people united together in the service of God.”⁴⁵ We are called to serve God, and it is only through God’s power that we are able to love all of creation by serving others. Through our words and actions as children of God, we invite others into communion with the church and the Trinity. Through our communion in the Trinity, we are able to love the world more fully.

Communion in the Trinity and a Ministry of Service

We have established that Wesley believed that the Three Persons of the Trinity are in communion with each other while each Person has a defining work in the new creation, and this is the pattern for our life together. Focusing on the communion of the Trinity and the shared work of grace of the Three Persons leads to an ecclesiology that reflects the unity of this relationship and the use of God-given gifts on behalf of the flourishing of creation. All of God’s creation is included in this communion, yet sin has caused separation between humans, the rest of creation, and God who provides a way of salvation. The church as a community has also been separated from God’s communion by sin, but the body of Christ is invited to deeper relationship with the Three-One God through the abundance of God’s grace. If we claim these theological premises, then how would we define a ministry of service and the unity of ministry in Jesus Christ?

In this section, I begin to address some issues related to a ministry of service in the contemporary church, particularly the meaning of service and its relationship to the unity of ministry in Jesus Christ. These issues are under discussion in the ecumenical church, but questions surrounding the establishment of a permanent diaconate in The United Methodist Church and the practice of ordaining deacons and

⁴¹ John Wesley, Comments on Matt. 4:17, *NT Notes*, 27.

⁴² Matthaei, *Making Disciples*, 67.

⁴³ Charles Wesley, Hymn #7 (1742), from “Exhorting, and beseeching to return to God,” *Works*, vol. 7, 88.

⁴⁴ John Wesley, “Of the Church,” *Works*, vol. 3, 57.

⁴⁵ John Wesley, “Of the Church,” *Works*, vol. 3, 46.

elders to “service” provide the context of this discussion. I begin with a discussion of the New Testament understanding of service by two contemporary scholars before moving to Wesley’s ideas about service.

The Meaning of Service

From its beginning, **the ministry of service has been associated with the whole people of God.** Today the word “*diakonia*” is usually translated as “service” or “ministry,”⁴⁶ and clergy are ordained to “Service” in The United Methodist Church. How we might understand the meaning of service in relationship to ordination is a topic of discussion in the ecumenical church. Eduard Schweizer, in his study on New Testament conceptions of ministry, noted that “there were four Greek terms that could be used for “(official) ministry” including “*telos*,” “*time*,” “*arche*,” and “*leitourgia*,” and these terms signified an “office” defined by leadership, particular tasks, and voluntary service.⁴⁷ What is remarkable, according to Schweizer, is that the New Testament writers “utilized a comparatively rare Greek word...*diakonia*” rather than choosing any of the common terms for official ministry.⁴⁸ Schweizer accounts for the choice of this term by the New Testament writers in this way:

This spontaneous usage in all the different layers of [New Testament] literature shows what an impression the challenge of Jesus’ way of life and teaching made on all his followers. The total (eschatological) newness of **a service without institutional hierarchies or resort to force was so striking that it became impossible to speak of the honor of the exemplary model of an “official” ministry apart from that of any other person in the church.** Wherever somebody was serving Christ, it was exactly what a slave would do for his lord, i.e., a simple, worldly service, not a domination of others.⁴⁹

With Jesus as a model, service is defined in the early Christian church as a ministry of all Christians, and the ministry of service is not defined by office.

In another word study, H.W. Beyer wrote that *diakonia* is a secular word whose fundamental meaning of “service” is associated with “‘waiting at table,’ or in a rather wider sense ‘provision for bodily sustenance’ (Lk. 10:40).”⁵⁰ A further dimension of a ministry of service is added to our understanding by Beyer’s discussion of the “general uses” of *diakonos* as “the waiter at a meal” (Jn. 2:5, 9)” and “the servant of a master (Mt. 22:13).”⁵¹ A ministry of *diakonia* means that a Christian “is a servant of Christ, Jn. 12:26,” and as one who serves Christ, a Christian also serves others, “Mk. 9:35; 10:43; Mt. 20:26; 23:11.”⁵² The New Testament writers were clear that **a ministry of service is based in love and takes different forms.** To the image of waiting table, we could also add images of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah and the model of Jesus in the New Testament.

Through these images, we begin to grasp the meaning of the word, *diakonia*, as service in a broad sense. Beyer wrote, “A decisive point for understanding the concept is that early Christianity learned to regard and describe as *diakonia* all significant activity for the edification of the community.”⁵³ Ephesians 4 names some of the gifts for service:

⁴⁶ John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

⁴⁷ R. Eduard Schweizer, “Ministry in the Early Church” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. iv, 835.

⁴⁸ Schweizer, “Ministry in the Early Church,” 835.

⁴⁹ Schweizer, “Ministry in the Early Church,” 835. (emphasis added)

⁵⁰ H.W. Beyer, “Diakonia” in Gerhard Kittel, Ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1964), vol. 2, 87.

⁵¹ Beyer, “Diakonia,” 88.

⁵² Beyer, “Diakonia,” 88.

⁵³ Beyer, “Diakonia,” 87.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13 NRSV)

In other words, **we love Christ by serving others in a variety of ways using the abilities that God has given us.** And through God's work in us, others will come to know Jesus Christ.

Early in the life of the Christian church, the work of service came to be connected to the ministry of the diaconate. Beyer's interpretation of *diakonia* followed the work of Wilhem Brandt and concluded that as Christians, we are "responsible for the service committed to [us] as a gift of grace."⁵⁴ And this ministry of service rooted in the image of "waiting table" provided the biblical and theological foundation for the emerging ministry of the diaconate. Beyer wrote,

In accordance with the saving and example of Jesus, early Christianity made this the symbol of all loving care for others. Here is the root of the living connexion between ethical reflection on service in the community and the actual diaconate. Again, the persistent sense of waiting at table is reflected in the fact that the Christian office had its origin in the common meal at the heart of the life of the community, namely, the Lord's Supper. Only in this way can we understand the later history of the diaconate, which has always consisted in assistance at divine service as well as in the external service of the community.⁵⁵

In this passage, Beyer clearly linked assisting in the liturgical celebration of the Lord's Supper and care for others, highlighting **the interrelationship of worship and work in a ministry of service.** For the diaconate, service to the community becomes an act of worship in itself as it embodies the communion of the Lord's Supper. In this view, the diaconate becomes God's communion for others.

While all of the pieces of Beyer's argument seem to fall neatly into place, a more recent study by John Collins challenged us to think more deeply about equating ministry with the service expected of all Christians.⁵⁶ He is concerned with the shift from emphasis on "ministry" to "service" in ordained ministry because it "is a profound change in perceptions not only of the ordained ministry called diaconate but of ordained ministry itself."⁵⁷ Collins allowed that the argument by Brandt and Beyer is plausible in their use of the Greek words in light of the context of the New Testament Christians. But Collins believed that the argument is "inadequate" because these authors did not take into consideration the texts in which Jesus refers to himself as coming "not to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22: 25-27).⁵⁸ Consequently, contemporary reliance on the interpretation of Brandt and Beyer limits our understanding of *diakonia* and the nature of ministry.

Restored to the language of theology and church life, "diakonia" is understood as enabling Christians to view the church from a perspective that relates it closely with the Jesus whom early tradition recognized as the man who "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38), the "man for others" in the modern phrase, and enabling both ordained and lay Christians to view themselves as co-workers in a servant church.⁵⁹

Collins's position about the nature and ministry of the church is already coming into focus in this quotation. He is concerned about how language shapes thought and practice, particularly in equating

⁵⁴ Beyer, "Diakonia," 87.

⁵⁵ Beyer, "Diakonia," 92.

⁵⁶ John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ Collins, *Diakonia*, 3.

⁵⁸ Collins, *Diakonia*, 254.

⁵⁹ Collins, *Diakonia*, 13.

ministry with service only. He wants to maintain the traditional understanding of ministry that “word and sacrament” are “exercised though the office of ordained ministers.”⁶⁰ In reflecting on the Second Vatican Council, Collins argued that an emphasis on ministry as “something within the reach of all church members and is a responsibility of all church members... makes it impossible to state in terms of ministry what is office and what is not.”⁶¹

Collins makes two contributions to defining a ministry of service for the church and its relationship to orders of ministry. First, Collins argued that **service is more than beneficence**. While “care, concern, and love” for neighbor are expected of all Christians, **service is only one dimension of ordained ministry**.⁶² In fact, Collins appears to agree with a statement by L.J. Cameli that “service awareness...is not ‘a given’ with ordination like the ministerial role at the Eucharist but is a spiritual condition to be cultivated so that ‘the subjective experience and impact of service’ will infuse all ministry, especially that of the ordained priest.”⁶³ The idea of **service as a spiritual condition** holds insight for our consideration of service and ordained ministry.

A second contribution from Collins’s work is that Jesus is not only a model for servant ministry, but **Jesus is the Word from which our mandate to serve comes**. In a discussion of Mark 10:45, Collins noted that in talking about himself as savior in Mark, Jesus’ language moves from “the idea of serving to the idea of saving,” thereby “moving from ethics to theology,” while Luke uses the Greek in its common meaning of “serving at table.”⁶⁴ Collins accounted for this difference due to different contexts. The passage in Luke is in his account of the last supper, while the passage in Mark appears before Jesus goes to Jerusalem. So Collins asked “is it possible that Mark has changed the context so that he could turn an original small body of ethical teaching into a proposition about Jesus as saviour and use it at the climatic point in his gospel where Jesus is about to go up to Jerusalem?”⁶⁵ While we may never know the answer to this question, Collins’s discussion of the critical interrelationship between saving and serving (theology and practice) is an important insight for our own thinking about a ministry of service.

Wesley and Service

John Wesley does not explicitly use the language of “ministry of service.” However, his assumption of the interrelationship between theology and practice is clear as he makes numerous proposals about serving God by loving one’s neighbor. It comes as no surprise that John Wesley is very explicit that service is oriented toward God. We serve God in the communion of the Trinity and it is God’s grace that gives us the power to do so.

In the ninth sermon on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:24-34), Wesley proclaimed that **serving God involves four things: believing in God, loving God, imitating God, and obeying God**.⁶⁶ First Wesley proclaimed that **believing in God** “is the only true foundation of serving [God].... And thus to believe in God implies to *trust* in [God] as our strength, without whom we can do nothing.”⁶⁷ This statement reflects Wesley’s continuing theme that God is the center of our lives. God gives us everything that we need, including life itself. Everything we do must be focused on God and God’s will for us. Second, gratitude and devotion to God is what Wesley means by **loving God**. In Wesley’s words, “It is to desire God alone for [God’s] own sake, and nothing else but with reference to [God]; to rejoice in God; to delight in the Lord; not only to seek, but find happiness in [God]...to have such a possession of God as

⁶⁰ Collins, *Diakonia*, 16.

⁶¹ Collins, *Diakonia*, 16.

⁶² Collins, *Diakonia*, 254.

⁶³ Collins, *Diakonia*, 19.

⁶⁴ Collins, *Diakonia*, 47.

⁶⁵ Collins, *Diakonia*, 47.

⁶⁶ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 634-636.

⁶⁷ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 634-635.

makes us always happy.”⁶⁸ When we keep our eyes on God and trust in God, we will want nothing else. This is what Wesley calls “holiness or heart,” loving God with our whole being. Charles Yrigoyen Jr. wrote that holiness of heart “consists of constant reliance on God’s grace and using the gifts God gives to become what God intends us to be.”⁶⁹ When we rely on God, peace and happiness will be ours. Third, in serving God, we are also “to resemble or **imitate [God]**.”⁷⁰ Wesley argues that the best way to worship God is through imitation. “Now God is love; therefore they who resemble [God] in the spirit of their minds are transformed into the same image.”⁷¹ To be transformed in God’s image is to be “merciful,” loving, “kind, benevolent, compassionate, and tender-hearted.”⁷² Finally, to serve God is to **obey God**, “glorifying [God] with our bodies as well as with our spirits.”⁷³

Serving God by believing in God, loving God, imitating God, and obeying God becomes evident in love of neighbor or social holiness. This ministry of serving God is not something we do ourselves. It is the Spirit within that beckons us to respond to God’s love by serving others. We demonstrate our love for God through our love for our neighbor. And Wesley leaves no doubt about the identity of our neighbor.

Let love visit you as a transient guest, but be the constant temper of your soul. See that your heart be filled at all times, and on all occasions, with real, undissembled benevolence; not to those only that love you, but to every soul. . . . Be not straightened or limited in your affection, but let it embrace every child of [humanity]. Every one that is born of a woman has a claim to your good-will.⁷⁴

We could not find a more explicit direction about who our neighbor is. Furthermore, we are to be in solidarity with our neighbor because we are all equal in God’s sight. Manfred Marquardt wrote, “But love for one’s neighbor was characterized not only by selflessness, but also by its absolute refusal to judge the person to whom it is given. Out of the relationship with God defined by love grew unlimited love for all humanity, even in the face of a neighbor harboring hatred. . . . Every person deserved love because he or she was loved by God.”⁷⁵ This is the theology at the heart of Wesley’s understanding of service. Every Christian is called to love her or his neighbor because that person is loved by God. This response to God’s grace at work in our lives contributes to the flourishing of creation.

John Wesley was very explicit about the shape of serving in the early Methodist community beginning with the rules of the United Societies. Following the rules provided “evidence of [a person’s] desire of salvation.”⁷⁶ Wesley provided explicit examples of behavior to avoid in following the first rule – “do no harm.”⁷⁷ And then Wesley turned to the second rule: “By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all [persons].”⁷⁸ Serving others through doing good is to be done “by all possible diligence

⁶⁸ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 635.

⁶⁹ Charles Yrigoyen Jr., *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 37.

⁷⁰ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 635.

⁷¹ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 636.

⁷² John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 636.

⁷³ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, vol. 1, 636.

⁷⁴ Cited by Manfred Marquardt in *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, trans. John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 108.

⁷⁵ Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics*, 107.

⁷⁶ John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies” (1743), *Works*, vol. 9: “The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design,” ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 70.

⁷⁷ John Wesley, “General Rules,” *Works*, vol. 9, 71.

⁷⁸ John Wesley, “General Rules,” *Works*, vol. 9, 72.

and frugality” and with patience.⁷⁹ Wesley goes on to note the ways of doing good beginning first with care for physical needs and then turning to the spiritual needs of the soul. In his sermon, “On Visiting the Sick,” Wesley gave instructions for caring for those who are ill in body or spirit: “But it may not be amiss usually to begin with inquiring into their outward condition.”⁸⁰ Once physical needs for food and clothing are met, the visitor “may proceed to inquire concerning their souls.”⁸¹ **Serving God through loving our neighbor means caring for the whole person.**

Serving in Communion with God

Given this discussion of communion ecclesiology and the concern for the unity of ministry in Jesus Christ, what insights can we draw for understanding a ministry of service in communion with the Trinity?

A ministry of service in the communion of the Trinity never loses sight of God’s initiative of grace. There could be no larger challenge to many contemporary Christians in the U.S. culture than to think and live with constant reference to God. With technological achievement and economic success has come inflated confidence in what humans can accomplish on their own. However, recent failures in the moral climate of this culture have led many to seek deeper meaning in life. Our self-reliance and self-confidence have separated us from communion with God. Communion ecclesiology emphasizes that we are part of God’s communion and called to return to full communion with God. From John Wesley’s frequent admonitions to the early Methodists that they should keep their eye on God, we might conclude that self-centeredness is a fact of the human condition, and the challenge to focus on God’s will for our lives is shared across time. To help Methodists center their lives on God, Wesley encouraged them to participate in the means of grace that enrich our relationship with God, nurture our return to God, and give us guidance for a ministry of service. The 2000 *Book of Discipline* states that our mission is service. “The mission of all Christians consists of service for the mission of God in the world.”⁸² A ministry of service participates in God’s intention for the flourishing of all creation through communion in the Trinity.

A ministry of service in the communion of the Trinity is a ministry of love. To participate in God’s communion means loving all that God has created. Love of God is the motivation and power for loving neighbor. Wesley portrayed this relationship as a “Christian family” following the pattern of the Trinity. This is a relationship characterized by love, intimacy, and interdependence expressed in personal and social holiness, loving God and loving neighbor. Today, The United Methodist Church has defined Christian discipleship as “privilege and obligation. The privilege is a relationship with God that is deeply spiritual. The obligation is to respond to God’s call to holy living in the world.”⁸³ While a relationship with God is certainly a privilege and obliges us to respond to God’s call, these terms seem utterly devoid of the passion for loving God and loving neighbor that John Wesley so often voiced. The emphasis here is much more on human agency and duty than on what God does for us and in us through love, although the *Discipline* does note that spiritual growth “is always a work of grace.”⁸⁴ In other words, this definition does not contribute to our sense of communion with God and all of creation through God’s work of love in the communion of the Trinity. In communion ecclesiology, discipleship is a work of love in response to God’s love for creation. We were created as part of the communion of the Trinity and, in spite of our sin; we are never separated from the love of God. But we must choose to participate in God’s communion

⁷⁹ John Wesley, “General Rules,” *Works*, vol. 9, 72.

⁸⁰ John Wesley, Sermon #98, “On Visiting the Sick” (1786), *Works*, vol. 3, 390.

⁸¹ John Wesley, “On Visiting the Sick,” *Works*, vol. 3, 391.

⁸² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000), ¶ 131, 90.

⁸³ *Book of Discipline*, ¶133, 91.

⁸⁴ *Book of Discipline*, ¶134, 91.

through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Randy Maddox used the term “responsible grace” to convey Wesley’s “abiding concern to preserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God’s grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God’s grace *will* not save.”⁸⁵ In other words, we do not have to respond to God’s love at all. We choose to serve because of God’s love for us.

A ministry of service in the communion of the Trinity is always tied to the Word. As John Collins has argued, a ministry of service is always tied to the Word. The Word as proclaimed and lived by Jesus Christ becomes our mandate, source, and guide. We are able to know of God’s intention for the flourishing of all creation in communion with the Trinity through witness in word and deed by Jesus Christ. Social holiness or “works of mercy” such as visiting prisoners, caring for the sick, feeding the poor, and teaching orphans must always be tied to personal holiness or “works of piety” such as corporate worship, private and public prayer, studying Scripture, and participating in the sacrament of Holy Communion. This means that those who serve must tend to their relationship with God by participating in these means of grace. God draws us every closer through the means of grace and transforms us in love for service in the world. Worship and work are forever linked. By partaking in Holy Communion, we share in the communion of the Trinity and are sent out as God’s communion for others. In the communion of the Trinity, worship becomes our work and work becomes our worship.

A ministry of service in the communion of the Trinity is shaped by God-given gifts. If we take Moltmann’s idea seriously that “each person is indwelling and room-giving at the same time” in the communion of the Trinity, as well as Wesley’s emphasis on the unity of the Trinity partnered with the distinctive work of each Person, then we recognize that there are different forms and gifts for service in the communion of the church. All Christians are called to Word and Service. In the communion of the church, there is not a higher Word or Service, nor a lesser word or service. Gifts of deacons and elders for Word and Service are no more and no less than the gifts of Word and Service in the whole people of God. All gifts for Word and Service are God’s gifts of grace. Questions begin to arise when the church attempts to identify the different gifts for Word and Service in the communion of the church. There are those who have proposed that the gifts for Word and Service of deacons are somehow less than the gifts for Word and Service of elders, so where does that leave the considerable gifts for Word and Service of the laity? The *Book of Discipline* offers a view of a unity of ministry and mission appropriate to communion ecclesiology.

Within The United Methodist Church, there are those called to servant leadership, *lay and ordained*. Such callings are evidenced by special gifts, evidence of God’s grace, and promise of usefulness. God’s call to servant leadership is inward as it comes to the individual and outward through the discernment and validation of the Church. The privilege of servant leadership in the Church is the call to share in the preparation of congregations and the whole Church for the mission of God in the world. The obligation of servant leadership is the forming of Christian disciples in the covenant community of the congregation.⁸⁶

In this expression of servant, all gifts can be seen as equal in God’s sight, but we respond to God’s love for us by using our gifts in different ways. A ministry of service by laity, deacons, and elders is one ministry in Jesus Christ, but each has a role to play rooted in the ministry of all Christians. The *Book of Discipline* provides a description of the ministry of service of all Christians.

All members of Christ’s universal church are called to share in the ministry which is committed to the whole church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, each member of The United Methodist Church is to be a servant of Christ on mission in the local and worldwide community. This Servanthood is performed in family life, daily work, recreation and social activities, responsible citizenship, the

⁸⁵ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 19.

⁸⁶ *Book of Discipline*, 2000, ¶ 136, 92. (emphasis added)

stewardship of property and accumulated resources, the issues of corporate life, and all attitudes toward other persons.⁸⁷

A ministry of service in communion with God permeates all of life. We are called to use our God-given gifts to love God's creation in word and deed.

A basic Wesleyan understanding is that persons grow in their relationship with God and in their understanding of Christian discipleship through the perfecting work of the Holy Spirit, beginning with the practice of a holy life and a ministry of service. In *Making Disciples*, I proposed that growing in communion with God and creation involves a formative process of "gaining, clarifying, and extending Christian belief and practice."⁸⁸ Formation for holiness of heart and life is a partnership between God's grace with the instruction and nurture of the church. In beginning stages of faith, instruction in Word and Service was central as the early Methodists were taught Christian belief and practice. More mature faith was characterized by activities that clarified and extended Christian belief and practice. The result was an increasing embodiment of Christian belief and practice, Word and service, in both words and actions. The power of the proclaimed Word was evident in the acts of lives transformed for service through holy living in communion with God.

The church participates in this transformation by providing instruction and nurture for formation of holiness of heart and life. Given the importance of the communion of the Trinity as a pattern for the life of the church, it comes as no surprise that the Wesleys believed that teaching relationships are critical in this formation.⁸⁹ And this commitment begins to provide insight for how we might think about gifts for ordination to Word and Service. Two premises underlie these proposals:

First, the Word of God is the Word of God. There are no lesser or higher forms of the Word, – Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. The Word is to be proclaimed, and the proclamation is a gift of the Spirit. The forms of proclamation may vary, but each form serves God's intention that all may hear God's word of grace for the healing of creation. And proclamation is most effective when it is heard through relationship and participation in the communion of the church. In fact, Tom Albin's extensive research of historical accounts of religious experience of early Methodists led him to conclude that the role of lay leadership and the support of the community were the most significant influences on transformative religious experience.⁹⁰

Second, the ordained are called to "servant leadership," to serve God and to serve the whole people of God.⁹¹ What an ordained minister accomplishes is done only through God's grace. In the communion of the Trinity, authority and power are to be used for healing the whole creation, not for creating further divisions in the communion of God's people. Each order has particular gifts for Word and Service, worship and work, and following John Collins's admonition, the two must never be separated. One strength of the United Methodist definition of the orders of ministry is the interrelationship of Word and Service.

Ordained ministers are called by God to a lifetime of servant leadership in specialized ministries among the people of God. Ordained ministers are called to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world and the promise of God for creation. Within these specialized ministries, deacons are called to ministries of Word and Service, and elders are called to ministries of Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order. Through these distinctive functions ordained

⁸⁷ *Book of Discipline*, 2000, ¶ 219, 131-132.

⁸⁸ Matthaei, *Making Disciples*, 96. This process is discussed more fully in Chapter 4, "What to Teach?" 75-98.

⁸⁹ Matthaei, *Making Disciples*, 200. This premise is developed more fully in Chapter 5, "Who Shall Teach?" 99-122.

⁹⁰ Thomas R. Albin, "An Empirical Study of Early Methodist Spirituality," in *Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood, 1985), 277.

⁹¹ *Book of Discipline*, 2000, ¶ 136, 92.

ministers devote themselves wholly to the work of the Church and to the upbuilding of the ministry of all Christians.⁹²

This statement reflects that God-given gifts for ministry are used in different ways by those who have been ordained to a lifetime of ministry among the people of God for the mission of God.

In the communion of the Trinity, witness to the Word of God's grace is proclaimed through the distinctive work of each of the Persons of the Trinity – creation/providence, redemption, and sanctification. In the same way, the Word of God's grace and the promise of salvation is proclaimed through the distinctive work of deacons in the communion of the church. The church recognizes the God-given gifts of deacons and authorizes them to teach and proclaim the Word,⁹³ embody the Word in service at the table and in the world, and lead others to embody the Word in a ministry of service.

Deacons fulfill servant ministry in the world and lead the Church in relating the gathered life of Christians to their ministries in the world, interrelating worship in the gathered community with service to God in the world. . . . It is the deacons, in both person and function, whose distinctive ministry is to embody, articulate, and lead the whole people of God in its servant ministry.⁹⁴

The Word of God's grace and the promise of salvation are also proclaimed through the distinctive work of elders in the communion of the church. The church recognizes the God-given gifts of elders and authorizes them

to preach and teach the Word of God, to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to order the life of the Church for mission and ministry. The servant leadership of the elder is expressed by leading the people of God in worship and prayer, by leading persons to faith in Jesus Christ, by exercising pastoral supervision in the congregation, and by leading the Church in obedience to mission in the world.⁹⁵

In the unity of ministry in Jesus Christ, deacons and elders are ordained to Word and Service using their distinctive God-given gifts to prepare the people of God for using their gifts in a ministry of service in the world.

Finally, a ministry of service is a spiritual gift. John Collins endorsement of Cameli's idea that service is not a given with ordination, but a spiritual condition that must be cultivated provides significant insight for our consideration. A ministry of service is an attitude and way of being that reflects our deepening relationship with God. In ordination, the church recognizes a person's spiritual commitment to service and authorizes leadership to lead others to serve, but increase in service comes with growing in communion with the Three-One God. Ordained ministers need to nurture their own spiritual lives and participate in the means of grace, so that they too continue to grow in communion with the Trinity. In this spiritual journey, we are called to repent of our sin as God offers us a Way of Salvation to draw us back into full communion with the Three-One God. Growing in communion with the Trinity through the work of the Spirit leads to greater clarity, passion, courage, and dedication to participate in God's work of healing creation. In this ministry, it is not human power or authority that matters. What matters is loving God and neighbor with all our heart and mind and strength, and using our God-given gifts in a ministry of service that embodies the communion of the Trinity in carrying out God's mission in the world. Every contribution no matter the size or shape should be celebrated as a work of grace in communion with the Trinity and participation in God's intention for the healing of all creation.

⁹² *Book of Discipline*, 2000, ¶ 137, 92.

⁹³ *Book of Discipline*, 2000, ¶ 319, 200.

⁹⁴ *Book of Discipline*, 2000, ¶ 319, 200.

⁹⁵ *Book of Discipline*, 2000, ¶ 323, 209.