

“Holiness, Apostolicity, and the Methodical Movement toward Full Communion”

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Whatever kind of future global Methodism will have under the providence of God, holiness and apostolicity are two concepts that can provide valuable theological and missional resources to help shape that future. Those concepts are important for Methodism’s internal dynamics and also for ecumenical relationships. Fittingly, they are mentioned in the call for papers for our Ecumenical Studies working group as we will consider questions such as these: “[H]ow do we assess the latest reports (of AMICUM and the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission) with their emphasis on the recovery of apostolicity and the centrality of holiness in terms of their contribution to bringing full communion closer? Does Methodism matter any longer in the ecumenical world we inhabit or is it again to be rediscovered as a movement for renewal within wider church unions?” In what follows I respond to those questions by analyzing the themes of holiness and apostolicity and exploring their significance in the movement toward full communion as described in recent ecumenical reports, chiefly *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory* (report of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church, 2016) and *Into All the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches* (report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission [AMICUM], 2014).¹ An examination of the vital themes of holiness and apostolicity as they are discussed in recent ecumenical reports involving Methodists shows that substantial progress has been made, and such progress is part of a larger

¹ *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*, Report of the Joint Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council (Lake Junaluska, N.C.: World Methodist Council, 2016); *Into All the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches*, Report to the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Methodist Council by the Anglican-International Commission for Unity in Mission (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2014)

movement toward full communion and ultimately the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers.

I also argue here that Methodism has an indispensable role to play in that larger movement, which I characterize as methodical in a twofold sense, both diachronically and symbolically. First of all, as these and previous reports demonstrate, greater unity can be realized through a strategic method or process for addressing critical ecclesiological issues and questions with ecumenical partners over time. Secondly, my description of the movement toward full communion as methodical is also a symbolic reference to Methodism and its distinctive gifts to offer, including a particular emphasis on sanctification and a deeply missional impulse bearing a mark of apostolicity (in the sense of being sent by God), aimed at promoting renewal in church and society. The ongoing journey toward full communion can rightly be described as methodical insofar as it needs both a method and Methodism. That these reports point to a well-established record of both is a promising sign, indicating potential for greater growth in the reception and application of the gifts of holiness and apostolicity for the sake of Christ's mission in the world today.

Holiness

The Call to Holiness is the tenth report in a series produced by the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church in an ecumenical dialogue that began in 1967. The results of this dialogue have come in the form of a report, issued once every five years, addressing the chosen theme of that five-year session in conversation with previous reports and other relevant ecumenical and theological texts as appropriate. The international dialogue between Catholics and Methodists is notable for its

steady growth in convergence between two world communions with more in common than has often been supposed. The convergence outlined in *The Call to Holiness*, or the Houston report (2016), is the result not just of bilateral conversations since the Durban report (2011), but of nearly fifty years of dialogue between Catholics and Methodists at a global level.

The conclusion to the Durban report identified a new topic for examination: “It is the whole question of the experience of salvation and the response of the believer to the gift of God’s grace. Catholics and Methodists have different emphases in the way they speak about this, which seem to underpin a number of other matters upon which they often diverge.”²

Accordingly, the 2016 report focuses on grace and holiness. *The Call to Holiness* reflects the theological clarity that has become a hallmark of the work of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission. It also attends to practical implications, including illustrations from the lives of exemplary figures from the Catholic and Methodist traditions.

In the 1986 report on ecclesiology, *Towards a Statement on the Church*, the final goal of the dialogue was clearly formulated: “full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life.”³ In view of that goal, subsequent reports have covered the Apostolic Tradition (1991), revelation and faith (1996), teaching authority (2001), a further reflection on the church (2006) that includes specific principles and proposals for developing relations between Catholics and Methodists, and then sustained attention to the sacraments (2011). The goal of dialogue between Catholics and Methodists remains the same as articulated in the appropriately ambitious language of the Nairobi report.

² *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments*, Report of the Joint Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council (Lake Junaluska, N.C.: World Methodist Council, 2011), §197.

³ *Towards a Statement on the Church*, Report of the Joint Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council (Lake Junaluska, N.C.: World Methodist Council, 1986), §20.

The Call to Holiness continues the methodical movement toward full communion in the way it builds on the prior work done in this dialogue. Theological foundations include the trinitarian mission in salvation history as described in *Towards an Agreed Statement on the Holy Spirit* (Honolulu, 1981), the *Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (2006/1999) concerning God's grace in relation to works of mercy and piety, and Christian participation in the saving mystery of Christ's death and resurrection as emphasized in *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* (Durban, 2011).⁴

The Houston report presents a fruitful account of what Catholics and Methodists can affirm together about theological anthropology and the nature and effect of divine grace and holiness in relation to human life. It adeptly probes how the mystery of being human lies in the gift of creation by God and recreation in Christ for being in communion with God, while noting historically divisive issues of merit related to good works and Christian assurance of salvation. The report also examines particular aspects of holy living based on a shared understanding of grace and holiness concerning both the saints below (covering such topics as sacraments, witnessing to the gospel, devotional practices, service in the world, and areas for continuing dialogue) and the saints above (with attention to the communion of saints, death, the hope of the resurrection, divine judgment, prayer for the departed, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the Lord's return). Even with certain continuing divergences between Catholics and Methodists, overall the amount of common ground regarding grace and holiness identified in the Houston report is extensive.

⁴ Houston §6.

The Call to Holiness articulates a shared vision of holiness between Catholics and Methodists that has several noteworthy theological emphases. In particular, the account of holiness presented there is trinitarian, grace-infused, personal and communal, and transformative.

Trinitarian

The Houston report locates Christian teaching about holiness directly within the doctrine of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose saving purposes for humanity are evident from the beginning. “The human being has been created to exist in relationship with God, to be addressed by God and to hear and receive God’s word, and so to live in communion with him. Holiness is another name for this communion.”⁵ In a line from the Seoul report that is also quoted in *The Call to Holiness*, “The Father’s overflowing love created humanity for communion with himself, and that same creative love gathers together the followers of his Son into the visible community of the Church.”⁶ Human beings are created for relationship with God, relationship with others, and relationship with creation. “In the Christian vision, this social dimension is essentially grounded in the Trinity of Divine persons, revealed in Christ. God is not a solitary being, but rather a perfect communion of Persons, who exist eternally in relationship with one another. By analogy, human beings, created in the *imago Dei*, also find their identity in relation to God, one another, and the world.”⁷ We are created in God’s image in order to share in the communion of God’s own life, and truly to live in harmony with God, one another, and creation.

God gave human beings the ability freely to accept the gift of original harmony and holiness. Although our tragic rebellion resulted in estrangement from God, God’s love remained steadfast. The good and saving purposes of the Holy Trinity will prevail. “God’s love for his

⁵ Ibid. §17.

⁶ Seoul §54, quoted in Houston §14.

⁷ Houston §19.

fallen creatures is made concrete in salvation history....The incarnation of the eternal Word and the sending of the Spirit overcome the human estrangement from God, creation, and self, suffered in the fall.”⁸ God’s work of redemption, when completed in the new creation, will actually improve upon original harmony as John Wesley affirms: “Hence will arise an unmixed state of holiness and happiness far superior to that which Adam enjoyed in paradise.”⁹ As we look ahead to the new creation, even now we receive a foretaste of what is to come through reconciled, life-giving communion with the triune God.

In Jesus Christ, we are restored to fellowship with God, renewed in true holiness, and called to grow to the stature of Christ. “Growing to the stature of Christ involves sharing in his divine sonship, that is to say, in the unique relation that Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, has with his Father. This relationship is possible only through the gift of the Holy Spirit in whom all have access to the Father through Christ (Eph 2.18).”¹⁰ Holiness “consists in living into one’s baptismal identity. The holy ones are those who lead lives of constant repentance and conversion in gratitude for God’s bounteous gifts and mercies.”¹¹ Claimed by the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, holy people live lives set apart for God, lives of communion with the triune God. “The journey of the Christian is a journey into the heart of the Trinity, into the perfect love which is the beginning and end of holiness.”¹² One striking feature of the Houston report is its vigorous articulation of the distinctly trinitarian basis of holiness as rooted in God and in Christian participation in God by grace.

⁸ Ibid. §33.

⁹ “The New Creation,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:510, §18, quoted in Houston §33.

¹⁰ Houston §37.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. §136.

Grace-infused

Another outstanding element of this report is its emphasis on grace in relation to holiness. From beginning to end, human salvation is possible only by God's grace—only because “a loving and merciful God undertakes the work of re-creating humankind through the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹³ Holiness is thoroughly infused by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. The Houston report considers grace under three related aspects of God's work of salvation and the call to holiness: the grace that enables, the grace that justifies, and the grace that sanctifies.

As affirmed in the *Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (2006/1999), Catholics and Methodists “confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation.”¹⁴ We cannot obtain salvation by our own effort or by turning ourselves to God to seek deliverance. We are saved solely by God's mercy. “In all aspects of God's work of salvation, the initiative, the agency, and the consummation are the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings Christ to us and leads us to faith in him (Honolulu 15).”¹⁵ The grace of God makes possible a free human response to God's initiative in salvation. That response is grace-empowered and uncoerced, and it involves repentance.

Through the saving work of Christ, repentant sinners are forgiven and restored in relationship to God as a gift of God's grace that justifies. The doctrine of justification was one of the major controversies of the Reformation, but thanks to the ecumenical breakthrough in 1999 between Catholics and Lutherans, and the subsequent Methodist affiliation in 2006, today

¹³ Ibid. §43.

¹⁴ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* §19, quoted in Houston §53.

¹⁵ Houston §53.

Catholics and Methodists together confess: “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”¹⁶ We are justified by faith, which is not a human achievement but rather “God’s gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers.”¹⁷ Good works do not contribute to justification, but they are its inevitable consequence. Catholics and Methodists affirm that in this life turning from the faith remains an ever-present possibility, yet even then God’s grace enables us to repent anew and receive the grace that justifies.¹⁸

Closely related to justification is sanctification or God’s work in us, making us holy as God is holy. Through the grace that sanctifies, the Christian is conformed to the image of Christ and is drawn into deepening participation in the life of God. Sanctifying grace involves “a commitment to holy living in every sphere of human life (cf. Rom 12.1).”¹⁹ “Catholics and Methodists confess together that good works of mercy and piety are the fruit of justification and an obligation of holy living (JDDJ §37).”²⁰ Holiness contributes to growth in grace and shows itself by the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Catholics and Methodists agree that “‘sanctification is a process that leads to perfect love’ (Honolulu §18) as Christians grow in grace and devote themselves to the love of God and neighbour.”²¹ Catholics and Methodists affirm in their respective ways that by God’s grace perfection in love is possible in this life. While Catholic teaching recognizes that the Lord calls all the faithful to perfect holiness, emphasis

¹⁶ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* §15, quoted in Houston §59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* §16, quoted in Houston §59.

¹⁸ Houston §63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* §65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.* §73.

tends to be placed on the difficulty of conquering sin due to temptation and self-deception. Methodist teaching, while acknowledging the influence of sin, typically stresses the power of grace to overcome sin and its effects.²²

The grace that enables, the grace that justifies, and the grace that sanctifies are aspects of God's call to holiness. *The Call to Holiness* plainly states that Methodists and Catholics believe this calling is for all people, not just some, and it encompasses the entirety of human life. In these ways, holiness is all about grace—God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace that is available for all people through Jesus Christ.

Personal and Communal

The personal and communal dimensions of holiness go together, as the Houston report demonstrates. Holiness is deeply personal because it involves nothing less than personal communion with God. Such communion is also inherently communal and has critical implications for how we relate to others. The call to holy living is meant to order and direct all our relationships, and ultimately all of society, in light of God's love.

The Houston report explores shared practices of holy living such as Bible reading and study in small groups as well as on a personal basis, and both personal and corporate prayer. Personal spiritual disciplines also have a communal orientation because they promote the love of God and love of neighbor in which humanity flourishes. As the commission members observe, "Only in the exercise of their social dimensions, and particularly in communion and interpersonal self-giving, can human beings truly be themselves....It is on the basis of this anthropological reality that John Wesley said: 'The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness'. Life in community is integral to the life of grace and

²² Ibid. §76.

holiness.”²³ The report identifies areas of common vision between Catholics and Methodists about the nature of such communal life, while acknowledging their distinctive emphases regarding topics like good works and merit.²⁴ Those emphases are found to be, on the whole, compatible, although one continuing difference concerns whether the merit resulting from good works of Christians might contribute to the sanctification of others. Catholic teaching affirms that through God’s saving work in Christ “the bonds of love between Christians make possible a ‘wonderful exchange’ whereby the ‘holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others.’”²⁵ From the Methodist perspective, “any idea that the reward of good works might somehow supplement Christ’s merit to the benefit of specific individuals undermines the sufficiency of his saving death and risks creating a mechanistic and transactional view of such works.”²⁶ As noted in *The Call to Holiness*, additional reflection on the significance of the bonds of love within the communion of saints could lead to greater convergence for Catholics and Methodists about the possibility of an “exchange” by which the holiness of one benefits others.²⁷ Hopefully in future reports that topic will receive the further attention it deserves.

Nevertheless, Catholics and Methodists already agree on the basic principle that holiness deepens our bond with God and thereby with others. Such an affirmation has important missiological implications. Holiness means that Christians are not only called out from the world but also sent into the world to share the love of God, especially among the poor, hurting, and

²³ John Wesley, Preface, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Straham, 1739), p. viii, quoted in Houston §19.

²⁴ The discussion of merit in the Houston report is similar in substance to the slightly more detailed accounts presented in Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric, *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 130, 133-34, 137, 172-76; and Kenneth M. Loyer, *God’s Love Through the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Thomas Aquinas and John Wesley* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 190-94, 244-51, 254-56.

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second edition (New York: Double Day, 2003), §§1476-77; *Indulgentiarum doctrina* §5, quoted in Houston §83.

²⁶ Houston §84.

²⁷ *Ibid.* §86.

suffering. “Catholics and Methodists stand together in their commitment to a vision of the Church as a community close to those in want; close particularly to those whose sin, weakness, and marginalisation leaves them in need of compassion, accompaniment, and the binding of wounds. Holiness is not primarily about success in being good, but rather about being open in all the brokenness and giftedness of human life to God’s transforming grace.”²⁸ That insight, reflective of an integrated, holistic view of holiness in both its personal and communal elements, leads to a final prominent theme in the Houston report.

Transformative

The divine call to holiness is transformative. That is a recurring theme throughout the Houston report, and aptly so. The introduction calls attention to the report’s subtitle, *From Glory to Glory*, which refers to the words of St. Paul about the transforming work of the Holy Spirit: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). Methodists and Catholics alike sing of this transformation as described in Charles Wesley’s hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” in particular the final stanza: “Changed from glory into glory, / Till in heaven we take our place, / Till we cast our crowns before thee, / Lost in wonder, love, and praise.”²⁹ At the completion of God’s new creation, our grace-enabled journey in holiness will reach its final consummation.

An eschatological orientation provides a theological context for exploring historically divisive issues about the nature of transformation in Christ. One such issue discussed in the report is the question of assurance. How, and in what sense, might it be possible to speak of an

²⁸ Ibid. §111.

²⁹ Wesley, *Works* 7:547; first published in Charles Wesley, *Hymns for Those that Seek and Those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* (London: Strahan, 1747), no. 9; quoted in Houston §13.

assurance of faith and salvation? The Houston report indicates that a greater understanding between Catholics and Methodists on this matter has now been achieved. Catholic concerns in the past were that Methodist teaching on assurance was “a presumptuous assertion based on subjective experience.”³⁰ Methodists considered Catholic questioning of such experience to amount to a rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit. Here the difference is found to be one of emphasis rather than a substantive disagreement: “The objective work of salvation and the subjective awareness of that salvation coalesce in dynamic personal experience.”³¹ The nature of Christian assurance is grounded in the reliability of a relationship founded on God’s saving love and the gift of God’s grace, which must be responsibly received on an ongoing basis. Catholics and Methodists agree that the possibility of falling away from grace always remains in this life, and the assurance of faith and salvation does not equate to an assurance of final salvation.³² Even so, grace at work in human beings and communities brings about genuine transformation in this life, as illustrated so beautifully by the stories of the saints at the end of each chapter in the Houston report. That kind of transformation is a foretaste of God’s promised new creation.

In its reflections on holiness, the Houston report presents what from a Methodist perspective one might call an elegant version of the way of salvation with attention to the concomitant theme of unity. This account is intrinsically related to unity because “[t]he call to holiness is also a call to unity in the Church, the body of Christ.”³³ Areas for continuing dialogue remain, including certain devotional practices traditional in Catholic life such as “bodily gestures, the use and veneration of images, the blessing of inanimate objects, and specific

³⁰ Houston §90.

³¹ Ibid. See also the related discussions on assurance in *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection*, 167-172 and *God’s Love Through the Spirit*, 186-89, 244-45, 251-55.

³² Houston §92.

³³ Ibid. §5.

devotions regarding Mary, the saints, the veneration of relics, and adoration of the Eucharist.”³⁴ Regarding such practices, Methodists are concerned not in any way to obscure the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ or to compromise the gospel by superstition. Yet considering what Catholics and Methodists can say together about the holiness to which God calls us all, the report has the potential to contribute in significant ways to bringing full communion closer. For that potential to be fully realized, reception is key. Questions for discussion are included along with a concluding creedal summary of agreements and convergences express in the document in order to aid in reception. The final chapter in particular shows that substantial progress has already been achieved throughout the past fifty years of dialogue between Methodists and Catholics, as well as how this report deepens and extends that journey. At the same time, “each step towards greater communion in faith should translate into fruitful engagement in terms of common prayer, joint witness and mission, a renewed commitment to reconciliation, and a deepening relationship in the Lord.”³⁵ The call of Christ, which is indeed a call to holiness in all its resplendent beauty, leads Catholics and Methodists on.

Apostolicity

Apostolicity is another ecumenically crucial topic. It is the subject of the 2014 report by the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission entitled *Into All the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches*. This is the report of a second round of dialogue between Methodists and Anglicans. The first round began in 1992 and then led to the 1996 document *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*. In the same year the World Methodist Council endorsed the recommendations of *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*. At the Lambeth

³⁴ Ibid. §123.

³⁵ Ibid. §12.

Conference of 1998, the bishops considering the report concluded that the process of reception among the Anglican churches had not been adequate. Instead of formulating a resolution to approve the recommendations, they agreed to the establishment of a joint working group with the World Methodist Council for the furthering of Anglican-Methodist relations. The second round of dialogue between Methodists and Anglicans began in 2009, and AMICUM was formed and given the following mandate by the World Methodist Council and the Anglican Consultative Council:

To monitor dialogues and relationships between Anglican and Methodist churches worldwide,

- listening to the challenges and opportunities offered in the variety of contexts
- gathering information and insights
- reviewing and evaluating agreements and theological statements, and
- sharing the best practices learned.

To resource developing Anglican-Methodist relationships around the world, in particular by:

- engaging in theological reflection on the nature of the unity we seek;
- clarifying questions to be addressed.

To propose ways towards the full visible unity of Anglicans and Methodists, by

- suggesting guidelines and protocols; and
- offering models for the reconciliation of churches and ministries.³⁶

That mandate set the terms for the work that has led up to the writing of *Into All the World*.

The title comes from the apostolic commission in Mark 16:15, where the risen Jesus sends his followers “into all the world” to “preach the gospel to all creation.” Guided by that vision, the report reflects on what it means for these two global communions that Jesus calls and commissions us still today for this apostolic mission that sends us into all the world for the sake of the gospel.

³⁶ *Into All the World* §7.

Into All the World consists of three parts. Parts two and three contain practical materials including regional studies and suggestions for strengthening Methodist-Anglican relations on the local level. I will focus on part one since that represents “the core theological work of the Commission.”³⁷ Central to that work is first of all agreement on the shape of unity in mission. The Commission describes their understanding of the purpose that God has for Methodists and Anglicans around the world in this way: “We believe that God’s gracious purpose embraces our unity in Christ and our mission within the mission of God. We are persuaded that, with all our fellow Christians, we are called by the Holy Spirit to know and love God the Holy Trinity and to worship, serve and glorify God in this world and in the world to come.”³⁸ With this articulation of mission set in the context of the *missio Dei*, they conclude: “We believe as a Commission, therefore, that the will of God for us all, as Methodists and Anglicans, is to *work and pray for such unity as will be for the glory of God, the wellbeing of God’s Church, and the effectiveness of God’s mission in the world.*”³⁹ More concisely, the goal is identified as “*visible unity in a common mission.*”⁴⁰ The title of the Commission, “Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission,” reflects the shared commitment of churches from these two world communions to both unity and mission, and to unity understood in the context of mission.⁴¹

The connection between mission and unity is a deeply biblical theme, echoed in other foundational ecumenical documents. With emphasis on the Gospel of John, *Into All the World* explores that theme and describes the unity for which Jesus prays in John 17 as having these three characteristics: mystical, visible, and missional. The question then becomes, “how is

³⁷ Ibid., p. xi.

³⁸ Ibid. §25.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. §26.

⁴¹ Ibid. §27.

Christ’s prayer for unity – a unity that is mystical, visible and missional – being prayed in and through us as Methodists and Anglicans and in and through our two churches; and how is Christ’s prayer for unity being *answered* in us as Anglicans and Methodists and in our two churches?”⁴² In *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*, the first Anglican-Methodist International Commission consistently spoke of unity in incremental terms, with the phrase “fuller communion.”⁴³ This description of the goal of the dialogue suggests that a process would be necessary, and that while Methodist and Anglican churches already enjoy a measure of communion with each other—“through a common baptism and the shared baptismal faith; through their common origins and shared hymnody (especially the hymns of Charles Wesley)—there is more to be received.”⁴⁴ *Into All the World* builds on that idea of a process in order to articulate the goal in clearer and more definitive terms: “the relationship that we are working for between our churches must involve full visible communion between Methodist and Anglican churches throughout the world.”⁴⁵ The unity we seek is nothing less than full visible unity rooted in the call and mission of God.

As numerous ecumenical dialogues have affirmed, such unity consists of four essential components:

- a. a common confession of the apostolic faith, grounded in scripture and set forth in the historic creeds;
- b. a common baptism and single eucharist;
- c. a common, interchangeable ministry of word and sacrament; and
- d. a common ministry of oversight.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid. §36.

⁴³ Ibid. §37.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. §39.

⁴⁶ Ibid. §47.

These elements provide a framework for the full visible unity that meets the criteria set forth by the 1920 Lambeth Conference and the major statements of World Council of Churches Assemblies. Their concrete form could vary from one situation to another, but these four elements are essential to full visible unity. In light of previous work, whether concerning Anglican-Methodist relations specifically or that of other ecumenical dialogues and studies, the Commission then summarizes its purpose as follows: “To promote such growth in unity between Methodist and Anglican churches throughout the world as will lead to a new relationship of full visible communion between them, as a significant contribution to the full visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ, a unity according to God’s will and God’s time.”⁴⁷ Notable progress has taken place toward that goal, and that progress can help build momentum for achieving the remaining steps.

Into All the World states that at the formal level, both earlier dialogue between Anglicans and Methodists and many bilateral dialogues with other churches demonstrate that “there is sufficient agreement on core or central doctrines for us to agree that each faithfully bears a living witness to the apostolic faith.”⁴⁸ In fact, the report makes a remarkable claim: “We believe...that nothing further needs to be said in terms of our common apostolic faith.”⁴⁹ While a sufficient degree of agreement has already been achieved between Anglicans and Methodists regarding core doctrines, symbols, and declarations of Christian faith, additional work remains. A further sign of continued faithfulness down the ages is represented in the authorization of ministers entrusted with the task of teaching and guarding the apostolic faith. The issue centers on the transmission of the apostolic faith through a mutually acceptable apostolic ministry.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid. §49.

⁴⁸ Ibid. §57.

⁴⁹ Ibid. §64.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

On the subject of apostolic ministry, questions arise concerning the threefold ministry and the historic episcopate. Methodists and Anglicans share a basic commitment to the threefold order of ministry, *episkopos-presbyteros-diakonos*, although that commitment finds a different expression in each communion. The World Council of Churches Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013) offers this summary of the discussion:

Almost all Christian communities today have a formal structure of ministry. Frequently this structure is diversified and reflects, more or less explicitly, the threefold pattern of *episkopos-presbyteros-diakonos*. Churches remain divided, however, as to whether or not the ‘historic episcopate’ (meaning bishops ordained in the apostolic succession back to the earliest generations of the Church) or the apostolic succession of ordained ministry more generally, is something intended by Christ for his community. Some believe that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon is a sign of continuing faithfulness to the gospel and is vital to the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole. In contrast, others do not view faithfulness to the gospel as closely bound to succession in ministry, and some are wary of the historic episcopate because they see it as vulnerable to abuse and thus potentially harmful to the wellbeing of the community. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, for its part, only affirmed that it ‘may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means of achieving it.’⁵¹

The document then challenges the churches to ask if they can achieve consensus on whether or not the threefold ministry is part of God’s will for the Church in its realization of the unity which God wills.⁵² “Anglicans and Methodists, and other churches, have interpreted the ‘threefold’ pattern in different ways, while agreeing that it represents ministries of word, sacrament, ministerial order and service which are necessary in the church of Jesus Christ.”⁵³ The large majority of Methodist churches around the world now have a ministry of bishop without claiming to belong to the historic episcopate.

⁵¹ *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), §47, quoted in *Into All the World* §68.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Into All the World* §69.

The historic episcopate has been a point of difference between Methodists and Anglicans ever since Wesley's ordination of Whatcoat, Vasey, and Coke in 1784. *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* identifies the importance of intention while acknowledging failures for both Methodist and Anglican communions:

Whether a church claims an episcopal succession from apostolic times, or whether a church has formed a new pattern for itself out of its experience and particular need, its intention, we believe, has been to safeguard the faithful witness to the Gospel, of which Jesus Christ is the foundation and to which prophets and apostles bore the same witness in their day. We recognize in each other's churches, within the Anglican and Methodist families, that intention being faithfully carried out in the faith and life and work of each Church. At the same time we acknowledge that, in both families, we have fallen short of the apostolic charge laid upon the people of God.⁵⁴

Several times *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* mentions the possibility of Anglican and Methodist churches moving toward each other by recasting differences over the episcopate in light of shared commitment to the apostolic faith:

This growing convergence means, amongst other things, that old contrasts between episcopal churches, themselves with different understandings of episcopacy, and churches with non-episcopal polities, might be viewed in a broader perspective, namely, the perspective of common loyalty to the apostolic faith, and obedience to and trust in the faithfulness of God who does not leave the world without witnesses. As Anglicans and Methodists we in the Commission, like many in our communions, have come to view the histories of our respective communions, including our separation from one another, in this light, and therefore regard the time as right to move toward fuller communion in faith, mission and sacramental life with each other.⁵⁵

In that same report this aspirational statement is made: "We see the historic episcopate as one sign of the continuity, unity, and catholicity of the church. We look forward to entering into

⁵⁴ *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* §48, quoted in *Into All the World* §65.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* §63, quoted in *Into All the World* §67.

fuller communion with one another in faith, mission and sacramental life and to the historic episcopate becoming again, for all of us, one element in the way by which the ordained ministry is transmitted with due order.”⁵⁶ The Commission added this clarification:

We recognize that we have many gifts to share with each other within the apostolicity of the Church including the historic episcopate and corporate or conciliar episcopate. But we are quite clear, in the light of all our work, and the whole of this report, that this must be done in such a way as not to call into question the ordination or apostolicity of any of those who have been ordained as Methodist or Anglican ministers according to the due order of their churches.⁵⁷

Careful attempts have been made to point out differences between Anglicans and Methodists regarding the historic episcopate while showing respect for the ways that the ministries in each communion have been exercised in the past. The challenge becomes maintaining that balance of acknowledging differences and respecting the integrity of each tradition while moving ahead to bring full communion closer, for the sake of unity in the gospel.

In the section on *episcopate* and episcopacy in Anglicanism, *Into All the World* states that Anglicans consider the sign of the historic episcopate to be necessary for full visible communion. That section also describes the historic episcopate with a particular emphasis on ecclesial intention: “the expression *the historic episcopate* refers to the intention of Anglican and other churches that there should be visible historical continuity between the Church of today and the Church of the apostles—a visible historical continuity that is particularly embodied in the ministry of overseeing pastors from age to age—so that we may say that there is one Church and it is the same Church now as it was then.”⁵⁸ The report then adds that from an Anglican perspective the historic episcopate “does not require that there should be an empirically

⁵⁶ Ibid. §70, quoted in *Into All the World* §67.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *Into All the World* §87.

verifiable manual transmission of ordination, going back to the apostles, in every case. The emphasis is on the formal intention of a church not to make a new church or to ordain ministers merely for its own church, but to preserve the visible historical continuity of the Church from the beginning.”⁵⁹ This teaching is grounded in the belief that Jesus “instituted and intended that an ordered community—‘a body with certain tasks and structures’—should continue his mission until the end of the age (Mt 28.16ff).”⁶⁰ So for Anglican churches, the commitment to preserve both the form and the succession of ministry that they believe traces back to the time of the apostles derives from not just ecclesiology but also Christology.

While Anglicans affirm the place of the historic episcopate in their own churches and look for it in other churches in order to enter into full communion with them, they do not say that apostolic succession is necessary in order to be considered a church. *Into All the World* notes several times that Anglicans have, in ecumenical agreements, recognized as churches those that are not ordered in the historic episcopate.⁶¹ From an Anglican perspective, the historic episcopate is personal, “about persons who have been entrusted with the responsibility of *episcopate*, oversight”; historical, as being “one expression of the visible historical continuity of the Church today with the Church of the apostles”; and received from God as a gift of grace.⁶² The apostolic community is thus gathered and sent to take the gospel into all the world.⁶³

Methodist churches around the world have developed different approaches to the episcopacy. Wesley provided two “superintendents” (later called bishops) for the Methodist societies in the newly formed United States. They became the foundation of ongoing episcopal ordination and ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church and now in the United Methodist and

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. §§89, 92.

⁶² Ibid. §92.

⁶³ Ibid. §97.

Historic Black Churches in America. British Methodists maintained the corporate oversight of the Conference.

In recent times, the British Methodist Church has expressed a readiness to appointing bishops and to receiving the historic episcopate into their polity. In its response to the World Council of Churches' document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), the British Conference stated: "The Methodist Conference has ruled that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would not violate our doctrinal standards, and indeed has shown itself ready to embrace the threefold ministry to advance the cause of visible unity. Such an acceptance would see the historical episcopate as a valuable sign of apostolicity, but not as a necessary sign, nor as a guarantee."⁶⁴ The Conference said this about accepting the historic episcopate: "As far as the mutual recognition of ordained ministers is concerned, we have listened to the testimony of churches that are episcopally ordered, we have judged that the acceptance of episcopacy would be no contradiction of our doctrines, and we await the occasion when it would be appropriate 'to recover the sign of the episcopal succession'."⁶⁵ This positive assessment of the historic episcopate remains the official position of the Methodist Church of Great Britain.⁶⁶

For Methodists, the Conference has long had an important role in overseeing pastors. Methodist churches around the world "universally accept the continuity or succession of ministry whereby those who have been given presbyteral authority ordain those who succeed them. This takes place in all cases within the oversight of the Conference."⁶⁷ Methodist episcopacy is integrally related to the work of the Conference for the sake of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁶⁴ British Methodist response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, in *Statements and reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, Volume 2, 1984-2000 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2000), Part 2, 4.3.4, p. 426, quoted in *Into All the World* §98.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.3.2, p. 416, quoted in *Into All the World*, §99.

⁶⁶ *Into All the World* §100.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* §108.

Into All the World reaches significant conclusions about, in the language of the subtitle, *Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches*. Each tradition affirms that preserving and transmitting the apostolic faith depends on oversight (*episcopate*). Each can see in the other “the way that *episcopate* has functioned to help the church in its faithfulness,” with the recognition that local adaptation has historically been necessary for the oversight that churches have needed for this task.⁶⁸ The Commission makes this remarkable declaration about Anglican-Methodist relations: “We conclude, in light of everything that we have learned about each other, that there are no church-dividing differences between us in faith, in ordered ministry, in the succession of such ministries, and in the value of episcopacy.”⁶⁹ The report names the one remaining step in order for churches in these two traditions to show their unity in Christ through interchangeable ordained ministry, “namely for Methodists and Anglicans to come together under the sign of the historic episcopate, for that represents the larger history of transmission of which Methodist Churches are already a part.”⁷⁰ The formal separation of Anglicans and Methodists has diminished each tradition, and generations of memories must be healed and forgiven. A change of attitude is needed on both sides, “reaching deeply into us, nothing less than a true *metanoia*, a penitent change of direction, away from sinful suspicion and prejudice, towards the forgiving Christ.”⁷¹ As the Holy Spirit is working to heal the wounds of division, *Into All the World* represents substantial progress toward bringing full communion closer for Anglicans and Methodists. Will the one remaining obstacle to interchangeability of ordained ministry between Anglicans and Methodists finally be overcome? This report rightly calls for additional attention

⁶⁸ Ibid. §122.

⁶⁹ Ibid. §123.

⁷⁰ Ibid. §124.

⁷¹ Ibid. §127.

to be given to the historic episcopate as a feature of apostolicity and its significance for the healing and strengthening of Methodist-Anglican relations.

Recommendations

In conclusion, I will point to two recommendations related to the recent emphasis on apostolicity and holiness in these dialogues and their possible implications for the future of Methodism. *Into All the World* makes a strong case for exploring how the historic episcopate might be shared in the life of both church traditions for the sake of unity in the gospel. There is the potential for mutual benefit and enrichment through the sharing of this gift. On the Methodist side, the break in historical continuity with regard to ordination by bishops would be healed and restored. On the Anglican side, the missional impulse of historic Methodism would be received back into its mother church and could thus contribute to renewed vitality by prompting fresh consideration of our shared participation in the *missio Dei* for the salvation of the world. Furthermore, the establishment of Methodism as a participant in the historic episcopate could have positive implications for other dialogues involving Methodists, including ecumenical work with Catholics and Orthodox, who might then be able to see in Methodism the apostolic mark of episcopal ordination in historical continuity. Methodists have much to gain from such a development, but they also have gifts to offer Anglicans and other Christian traditions. The integration of Methodism into an ecumenically recognizable ministry of apostolic succession need not be thought of as simply making good on a deficit in Methodism or as a one-way transaction from a tradition in possession of a gift to one lacking it. There would be a genuine sharing of gifts, a mutual giving and receiving to the glory of God.

The second recommendation is for Methodists to devote the careful and comprehensive work necessary to re-receive our own heritage, specifically with regard to teaching about holiness. The doctrine of Christian perfection, historically Methodism's theological core, has become what one leading scholar calls "at best a dead letter and at worst a source of political delusion among contemporary Methodists."⁷² We need a sustained, wide-ranging project of retrieval to invigorate the Methodist movement today. The critical edition of Wesley's works holds considerable promise as a historical and theological resource, but as is the case with ecumenical reports, here the question of reception also looms large. One byproduct of Methodist involvement in ecumenical dialogues has been a deeper engagement with our own tradition, aiding in the recovery of distinctive Methodist beliefs and practices. Taking the solid theological work done in *The Call to Holiness* as an example, we should seriously consider how our ecumenical partners (in that case, Catholics) can help us become better Methodists. To the extent that ecumenical dialogues focus on core questions of identity and mission, they can be useful in clarifying the features of one's own tradition, and thus promoting the re-reception of that tradition, as well as learning more about another.

That kind of recovery effort takes on a particular urgency given the present state of Methodism, marked as it is, at least within a United Methodist context, by such theological confusion that has given rise to competing and contradictory visions of holiness. Yet holiness is not peripheral but in fact central to Methodism. It is the basic organizing principle, trajectory, and purpose of Methodism, even in its modern forms. What exactly does holiness entail for contemporary heirs of the Wesleyan heritage, especially amidst intense disagreements concerning human sexuality, divine revelation, and the nature of the Christian life? As some,

⁷² William J. Abraham, "Christian Perfection," in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 587.

lifting up the value of inclusion, seek to redefine Wesleyan understandings of key biblical terms like love, welcome, sin, transformation, and salvation, what is an appropriate theological and ecclesial response? Difficult questions now confront us about what it means to be faithful not just to our Wesleyan heritage, but supremely to God. Those questions demand precise theological reasoning—sloppy-thinking pragmatism is not enough—and the courage of our convictions.

Holiness and apostolicity are two critical topics facing Methodists today. They matter for ecumenical dialogue as well as for internal discussions about the nature of Methodist identity and mission—that is, discussions involving members of the global Methodist/Wesleyan family or particular denominations within that family. The ecumenical significance of the concepts of holiness and apostolicity is intrinsically bound up with their importance for Methodist self-understanding at a time when Methodist identity and mission within The United Methodist Church, for example, are in question. There is a pressing need for clear and consistent teaching about the importance of both holiness and apostolicity within Methodism at present and going forward. In addition to their ecumenical value, *The Call to Holiness* and *Into All the World* can assist in that regard as well.