

Can the Church be Ecumenical, Inclusive, Orthodox, Missional and Evangelistic? A Complex Question in a Complicated Season

Bishop Ken Carter
Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies
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I want to begin an extended conversation among four partners, each with a different purpose, and yet each in service to the larger church and an aspect of the gospel. The conversation partners are:

1. The work toward full communion of the United Methodist Church and The Episcopal Church (U.S.), as expressed in “A Gift to The World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness”, to be acted upon in those bodies in 2020 and 2021.
2. The “Mission, Vision and Scope” and the “Theological and Missional Frameworks” of the Final Report of the Commission on a Way Forward to the Special Session of the General Conference of the United Methodist in 2019.
3. The ecclesiological work of the UMC in progress, Wonder, Love and Praise, and
4. The working definition of the Fresh Expressions movement, which originated in Britain, chiefly within The Church of England and The Methodist Church.

Fundamental questions will be:

- What is the purpose of an ecumenical statement for a church that is experiencing significant conflict?
- What is the value of ecclesiological self-definition for a church whose influence in the world is increasingly diminishing?
- Can the process of creating new forms of the church in the culture teach us about ecumenism and inclusion?

- And apart from ecclesial outcomes, what are the core theological assertions in each of these documents and movements that can enrich and speak to the other?¹

I. **The Urgency of Communion and Connection: Why Now?**

Given the complexity of the United Methodist Church's life together in the present moment, one might begin by questioning the timeliness of work towards full communion between the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church. And yet, paradoxically, there is an urgency about this process. In reference to the title of the working document, "A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of the World", healing is always urgent. If you have been in an emergency room, or suffer from a chronic illness, healing is urgent. It remains true that we do not always see ecumenical work as an urgent task. In the gospels, Jesus tells a story about a knock at midnight (Luke 11), the title of Martin Luther King' Jr.'s well known sermon,² which itself was based on a sermon by the evangelist DT Niles, "Summons at Midnight," and connected to the memorable line, "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find the bread." This is urgency. In many communities the presence of Episcopal and United Methodist parishes is an essential part of the healing of the diseased and the feeding of the hungry. We are indeed the co-laborers, and many in local churches in these two traditions do the heavy lifting in their communities. I do not intend a pride or arrogance here. This was my experience across twenty-nine years of pastoral ministry. Here mission and ecumenism come together.

¹For purposes of simplicity, the proposal for Full Communion between the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church be designated as TECUMC; the final report of the Commission on a Way Forward as COWF; Wonder, Love and Praise as WLP; and the work of Fresh Expressions and Mission-Shaped Church as FX.

² Accessed at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/knock-midnight>.

In this instance the practice precedes the theory. This is ecumenism from the ground up. Here the professional clergy catch up with how the laity are at times leading us. At our best, there is an experience of unity among followers of Jesus as a by-product of joining Jesus in his mission.

Of course, we are not always at our best. Sometimes there is a lack of urgency. The lack of urgency is due to the normalization of our divisions. Writing fifty years ago, Albert Outler spoke of the “scandal of disunity” and its effect upon our witness to the world.³ In time, with some self-examination, we discover that the normalization of our divisions has more to do with our preferences and styles; in the words of Flannery O’Connor, it has more to do with the manners than the mystery, or we might say politics rather than purpose. But the normalization of our divisions can also be seen as an accommodation to divisions in the culture.⁴

And thus we may be prone to exaggerate our differences⁵. This was a luxury in a church culture, but we no longer live in a church culture; at least for most this is the lived reality. Humility teaches us of our need for each other. As does the scope and scale of human need around us. And so there becomes an urgency, which is grounded in what we believe about the gospel itself, which saves (heals) us; about the imperative of unity of the one Body, in a divided, even self-gerrymandered culture, with growing chasms of equity and justice; and about the clarity and capacity such a realization

³ That The World May Believe (New York: Joint Commission and Cultivation Board of Mission of the Methodist Church, 1966), p. 11.

⁴ “Living in divided churches, Christians have become accustomed to division. We easily regard division as normal. But easy acceptance of Christian division is, we believe, as great a threat to the integrity of our churches as division itself.” In One Body Through The Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 18.

⁵ The exaggeration of differences is a defining reality in what The Anatomy of Peace describes as having a “heart at war” (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2006). See COWF, p. 3.

grants to join the missionary Holy Spirit, who is always going ahead of us, in the world. If there is a fracture, in the church, in the world, co-laboring together in the ministry of healing is urgent.

II. When Communion and Connection are Contested

The work is urgent, but the work is also contested. The work itself is contested because the descriptors, “we”, “us”, and “our” are contested. We are each of us in a time of redefinition. For example, in the work of the Commission on a Way Forward there was a strong expressed need for space, or distance from one another. The words “we”, “us” and “our” appear in the proposal for full communion in an almost unexamined way. A Gift to the World notes that there are no “church dividing issues” between us (TECUMC, 59). There is a great deal of substance upon which we can agree, most of the time. I call it the great tradition, one that is broad and generous and spacious.⁶ The Jesus of the latter portion of Ephesians 2, who breaks down the dividing walls of our hostility; the Jesus of Colossians 1, in whom all things hold together. The Jesus before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess in Philippians 2. In the document these are present in the foundational principles (TECUMC, 116ff) and the affirmations (TECUMC, 185ff).

And yet this work is contested. The unity we *have* is contested and the unity we *seek* is contested. Within our own communions we are an outward and visible sign of “the fractured human community”. The divisions mirror those in a nation (the U.S.) of

⁶ Fleming Rutledge insists that “True Christian orthodoxy therefore cannot be narrow, pinched or defensive, but is always spacious, adventurous and unafraid.” “What is Generous Orthodoxy? A Statement of Purpose,” www.generousorthodoxy.org

red and blue states. And the divisions arise from divergent conceptions about the nature and purpose of the church. The document Evangelicals and Catholics Together speaks of a fundamental vocation of those expressions of the body of Christ—“we contend together”, in other words, we dissent and we form an alliance.⁷ Clearly we as United Methodists and Episcopalians do this work toward full communion with contesting voices internal to our ecclesial bodies; in both the US landscape and globally there is an alternative ecumenism among evangelicals and catholics. At the same time there is some overlap in those expressions of church within our fellowship.

In our ecumenical work we speak at times to a nation. But we (UMC) are not a state church.⁸ We are each of us (TEC and UMC) in a church that is at the margins of a culture that we seek to influence by our unity (“for the well being of all”, TECUMC,12). So how do we do this essential work in more modest, even provisional ways? A modest, provisional posture would also reflect our present reality, in relationships with evangelicals and catholics. How do we learn from these brothers and sisters and how do we remind them of our shared riches, as an alternative to the more common exaggeration of differences?

III. The Marks of the Church

⁷Evangelicals and Catholics Together at Twenty, edited by Timothy George and Thomas G. Guarino (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), pp. 13ff.

⁸ I am aware of the conversation among ecumenists and missiologists that churches identifying with one nation are more oriented to become ecumenical in their own geographical areas, and the critique that the nation state may not be the best model to help define and shape the church.

As we are critiqued at times from the more traditionalist side⁹, we will need to draw upon these riches which we share in common with them. And so how do we recover and claim the language of what it means to be *one, holy, catholic* and *apostolic* (TECUMC, 181)? To be one, or to seek unity, is often the stepchild of truth, although my perception is that this is more the case in reformed traditions. The truth of the gospel cannot be separated from Jesus' prayer for the disciples in John 17, or the common baptism that is named for us in Ephesians 4.

+The church is *one*. The unity of the church is grounded in the One God (Deuteronomy 6), affirmed by Jesus (Mark 12), and in the teachings of the apostles in Ephesians 4 (there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism). This unity is a gift of God (I Corinthians 12), and is never a human achievement, right or claim. The practical expression of unity is the love of God and neighbor—which is also the practical expression of holiness in Wesleyan terms. Our complacency with division indicates a lack of love, and is finally a barrier to the mission of the gospel in the midst of unbelief; “I pray,” we hear Jesus saying in John 17, “that they may be one, so that the world will believe that you have sent me.”¹⁰ This is mission and ecumenism in service of renewal and evangelism. Thus unity needs to be visible, even incarnate, even as the word becomes flesh and lives among us (John 1).

It is true that we are connected with each other in the one body. We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12). In the United

⁹ See, for example, Scott Kisker, “Overseers and the Overthrow of Methodism’s Conciliar Catholic Unity”. Accessed at <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8882/overseers-and-the-overthrow-of-methodisms-conciliar-catholic-unity>.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams connects the whole prayer of Jesus in John 17 with the marks of the church. See <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1675/one-holy-catholic-and-apostolic-church>

Methodist Church we have a term for this: the *connection*. It expresses our unity, our oneness. In the United Methodist Church we might identify the instruments of our unity as the itineracy of preachers, the superintendency, which includes bishops, and Christian conferencing, which “foster an ethos of mutual support and mutual accountability, of shared oversight...and of the strengthening of the laity”(WLP, 890, 897ff.).

We are one. But it goes far beyond being a Methodist. The one body of Christ includes all who profess the name of Jesus: Catholic to Pentecostal, house church to cathedral, urban to rural, conservative and liberal, if we must use those last binary words! There are not many churches; there is one church, because there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4).

+The church is *holy*. We could ask a question at this point. Is the church holy? I remember early in our ministry an evening in which my wife Pam and I had dinner with two women, sisters, who were the daughters of a minister and had grown up in a parsonage. It was an evening I will never forget----they rehearsed, through our four-hour conversation, one negative experience after another across a number of churches---judgmentalism, mistreatment, inhumanity.

We left wondering---what are we getting ourselves into? Of course, the church is a human institution, and most of us are some combination of saint and sinner. The church’s sins are often spread out before the public: clergy misconduct, financial scandal, racism, exclusion, unbelief. Some of our sins are more hidden---competition with other churches, or consumerism of religious experience, which is the dark side of attractional church, a dominant way of functioning in a market economy.

So what does it mean to say that the church is holy? The church as an ideal (or in its essence) is holy, and yet scripture confesses that “we have the treasure [of the gospel] in earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4). One dimension of this holiness is that the church is set apart for a particular purpose; this is variously defined as word and sacrament, the body of Christ, and as a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God. This holiness is both personal and social, evidenced by prayer and service, action and contemplation, communion and connection.

This requires an inner strength, a discipline. But this is a mark of the authentic church; the Apostle Paul returns to this, over and over again, in I Corinthians. In an immoral culture, he called the followers of Jesus to holiness, and in a deeply divided church and society he reminded those who had been baptized that they were one. There are of course abuses of this—in sacramental practices noted in I Corinthians 10-11, for example—and the letter moves toward an appeal to love as the great gift, the “excellent way” and the virtue worthy of our pursuit (12. 31; 13; 14.1).

We do recall that Methodism had its origins as a holiness movement within Anglicanism. The Methodists were deeply embedded in the larger church in their baptisms, a sign of holiness, and yet the pervasive presence of sin required a greater accountability that called for the mutual confession and forgiveness in the band and class meetings. Here I Corinthians 6 (“we are washed, we are sanctified) is linked with Romans 6 (“should we continue in our sin?”) and James 5 (“confess your sins to one another”).¹¹ Holiness is rooted in the nature of God, and who we are called to be as

¹¹ Here I am indebted to Geoffrey Wainwright, Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life (New York: Oxford, 1984), pp. 127-132.

persons created in the image of God. The renewal of this image, growth in holiness, occurs as we practice the means of grace.

+The church is *catholic*. I remember attending church as a teenager, and we would come to the place in the Apostles' Creed where we would say "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church", and there was always a slight hesitancy in that deep south congregation. In the hymnal there was an asterisk (*) beside the word catholic, with the explanation at the bottom of the page, "universal". And while we may not have understood, when we said those words what we meant by catholic church, they are deeply embedded in our tradition as Methodists.

One of John Wesley's most famous sermons was entitled "The Catholic Spirit". He said, in that sermon, *"if your heart is as my heart, and you love God and all humanity, I ask no more: give me your hand"*. This love, implied for Wesley, the following: treating each other as a brother or sister in Christ, praying for each other, provoking one another to love and good works, loving not only in words but in actions and in truth. And he said, in a very revealing and profound sentence: *"So far as in conscience you can (retaining still your own opinions and your own manner of worshipping God), join with me in the work of God, and let us go on hand in hand."*

The church is catholic, or universal, in that its core identity is found in the whole and not merely in the fragments of its local expression. This resonates with Paul's image of the body in I Corinthians 12 and his meditation on love in I Corinthians 13. To do the work of God is, in the language of the Preamble to A Gift to The World, *"is to bring our churches into closer partnership (koinonia) in the mission and witness to the love of God"* (TECUMC, 10.)

The church is also catholic in that it honors the local and the indigenous. We have learned at our peril that catholic or universal can be fused with notions of empire and dominance. In the understanding of the Commission on a Way Forward, this is articulated in the vision of a church

“that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible” (COWF, p .6).

This is the tension of of unity and catholicity. The One Church Plan, the plan affirmed by the Council of Bishops in their May, 2018 meeting, places a great value on *context* (COWF, pp. 11ff.). It recognizes that while we are a global church, we are not monolithic. It is very difficult to do ministry in exactly the same way in Monrovia, Liberia; Miami, Florida; Montgomery, Alabama; Washington, DC; Manila, Philippines; Los Angeles, California; and Berlin, Germany. These are sharply different missional contexts.

And so the One Church Plan allows for contextualization. It removes the 1972 language related to human sexuality (COWF, p. 11), but it allows local churches to continue practices based upon traditionalist values in their own wedding policies, clergy profiles, and covenants with bishops and boards of ordained ministry to determine whom they will ordain. It does not require votes in local churches that would divide members from one another. The One Church Plan honors conscience and religious liberty (COWF, p. 11), and yet it would provide a spiritual home, in many local United Methodist churches, for LGBTQ persons who are already living and serving among us.

A reductionistic critique of the One Church Plan asserts that it is a “local option,” and here this phrase is used in a negative way.¹² I would claim, in contrast, that vital missional churches understand and live into their contexts. The United Methodist Church already allows central conferences to adapt their *Books of Discipline* and allows clergy and local churches in the United States a remarkable spectrum of freedoms and “options”: from attending non-United Methodist missionaries and seminaries, to adapting baptismal, communion, and membership liturgies, to minimizing the “United Methodist” name and logo. In The Book of Discipline, we read,

*United Methodists throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission. Integrally holding connectional unity and local freedom, we seek to proclaim and embody the gospel in ways responsible to our specific cultural and social context while maintaining “a vital web of interactive relationships.”*¹³

Why do we allow for such profound contextualization? It does preserve our unity, but more deeply it helps us to be catholic, to be a universal church with a catholic spirit, having “connectional unity and local freedom”. And this is strongly related to the fourth mark of the church.

+Finally, the church is *apostolic*. The church is apostolic as its life is traced to the teachings of the apostles. A Gift to the World does take up the matter of the historic episcopate (TECUMC, 145ff), with the definition “succession in the apostolic faith—that is, to believe, preach and teach the faith that the apostles held” (TECUMC, 156-157). This differs from literal apostolic succession, with the Pope being the historical successor to Peter of the New Testament, although this would be the conviction of

¹² Note the common critiques of traditionalist renewal groups (Good News, Institute for Religion and Democracy, Wesleyan Covenant Association), but also from progressive groups as well, among them Love Prevails.

¹³ Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016. Paragraph 125.

Roman Catholics, and I honor this tradition. The church is a family tree whose roots go down deeply into the apostles' teaching about the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, and how this event has already changed the world. I think of words at the end of the second chapter of Acts: *"they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers."*

What was the apostles' teaching? Well, they did have a need to answer that question, and so brief summaries circulated, from generation to generation, first in creeds within the New Testament itself, later in the Nicene Creed and then the Apostles Creed. The tradition of the apostles certainly has, as its core, the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican expressions, and each stream has shaped the Wesleyan movement. This living tradition contains many of the resources that sustain our faith; at the same time, there is always a need for reformation and adaptation, for what Greg Jones has called *"traditioned innovation"* and what Walter Brueggemann has named as *"prophetic imagination"*.

And so we might then ask: What are the missional needs (274) that call for our adaptation? What might the work mean from the ground up? This is about the ministry of the laity (TECUMC, 222), and how a text like Matthew 18 teaches us to be reconciled in our communities, and with the historically black churches, noted helpfully in TECUMC, 88ff. In my own episcopal area I have benefitted from conversations with Episcopal Bishops about human trafficking, the vitality of the church and the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in our mission and witness. And I have worked alongside a colleague AME bishop in response to mass incarceration and racial profiling, and in

learning to lead after the murders at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston and the Pulse Shootings in Orlando.

The proposal for full communion between TEC and UMC—this already exists between the UMC and the AME— speaks of adaptation to the post-revolutionary America (US) and the implications of our racist legacy. What are the present missionary needs that require our adaptation? This is clearly at the heart of our conversations about human sexuality, which continue in each of our traditions, and elicit different perspectives within our denominations and beyond them.

The church is apostolic as it carries on the teaching of the apostles; but it has another meaning. To be an apostle is literally to be “sent” into the world. “As the Father has sent me”, Jesus says in John 20, “so I send you”. The mission of the United Methodist Church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (Book of Discipline, 120). We acknowledge in our thinking about mission that we are sent from “everywhere to everywhere”. The global nature of our churches—in some sense the fruit of the apostolic mission—is also at the heart of many of our internal divisions. “The healing of the nations”, from Revelation 22 and the preamble of A Gift to The World (TECUMC, 13), is some of the core work of the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church in the U.S. What can we learn from each other?

In the fractured human community that is the United Methodist Church, one expression of our body is seeking to define itself (in an over and against way) as the church that is *one, holy, catholic* and *apostolic*. And the inference is that another stream of this same church is not. Much of this has to do with how we define holiness, and how the pilgrimage to holiness remains our calling. Of relevance here as well is

how we value unity. And the calling to be both catholic and apostolic is in contrast to our temptations toward regionalism and exclusivism, even as we recognize that this is not the fullness of the church we are called to be.

IV. The Rediscovery of Holiness through Practices

To return to a critical question: Can the United Methodist Church help the larger body to rediscover its holiness? And can we live, each of us in relationship to each other and within our different traditions, with differing conceptions of holiness? An ecclesiology in progress, Wonder, Love and Praise, speaks of the saving love of God, that is for all (WLP, 158); of the grace of God that transforms or changes us (WLP, 168); and the saving love of God that forms community (WLP, 179).¹⁴

First the saving love of God that is for all. The word “all” is prominent in the writings of Charles Wesley, perhaps our greatest theologian of the Wesleyan tradition and of course a deeply Anglican source as well. But hear the words of the great writer of hymns and poetry:

“Jesus, thou art *all* compassion”;
“God hath bid *all* humankind”;
“truth and love let *all* men see”;
to me, to *all*, thy mercies move”;
“o may we *all* the loving mind that was in thee receive”.

I have often spoken or read these words, from the Book of Common Prayer:

***Lord Jesus Christ,
you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross
that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace:***

¹⁴ The UMC Committee on Faith and Order is in the process of revising Wonder, Love and Praise after receiving feedback from the annual conferences across the connection. It is anticipated that the organizing principles of the revision will be the marks of the church—One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

***So clothe us in your Spirit
that we, reaching forth our hands in love,
may bring those who do not know you
to the knowledge and love of you;
for the honor of your Name.¹⁵***

The grace of God through Jesus Christ is for all; at our best we can agree on this.

This grace also transforms us. I think of the *Collect for Purity*, a prayer with origins in 10th century Northern Europe, shaped by Thomas Cranmer and a prayer that John Wesley would have said as a common spiritual practice:

***Almighty God,
to you all hearts are opened, all desires known
and from you no secrets are hidden.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.¹⁶***

The cleansing of our hearts, the aspiration to perfect love—which for the Wesleys was no more and no less than the love of God and neighbor.¹⁷

So how might this aspiration to perfection or holiness unite and not divide us?

The Episcopal Church speaks of communion, the United Methodist Church more of connection. But embedded in each is the reality of social holiness, which is the conviction that i cannot be holy without you and you cannot be holy without me. I have been haunted, encouraged and convicted by these words from the Rule of Taizé:

“Never resign yourself to the scandal of the separation of Christians who so readily profess love for their neighbor and yet remain divided. Make the unity of the body of Christ your passionate concern.¹⁸

¹⁵ Book of Common Prayer

¹⁶ Found in both the Book of Common Prayer and the United Methodist Hymnal.

¹⁷ See John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation”, accessible online and in various collections of his sermons.

¹⁸ London: SPCK, 2012.

To rediscover our holiness is to know that it does not separate us from each other. Grace forms community. It draws us into a deeper love for each other, and by necessity, into a deeper love for God. And this leads to a more costly implication.

V. Our Common Need for Repentance and Convicted Humility

The call to repentance is in light of the absence of fully sharing this beautiful gospel, entrusted to our traditions, in the United States context. We have not always lived as if the gospel is for all. Here I am not talking about words printed on banners. I am talking about who hears the word of God preached, and who kneels at the altar to receive the grace. Repentance might lead to a humility, even a purgation. I think of the Fresh Expressions movement in the United Kingdom. Bishop Graham Cray told me in conversation that British Methodists were full partners with the Church of England from the very beginning in this movement. The presenting issue was the realization that the un-churched (nones) and de-churched (dones) were not likely to cross the threshold of the doors to many of the churches, and thus fresh expressions of church would need to be planted in the culture. But note: in the definition of a Fresh Expression, they would exhibit the marks of the church—One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic.¹⁹

Fresh Expressions, because they are an innovation of the tradition, require a humility, a looseness with many of our structures, practices and assumptions about everything from formation to leadership to sacraments to authority. When churches have held a kind of cultural power and even dominance, a posture of humility can be

¹⁹ See the definition of Stephen Croft in <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/897/02-2008>.

one that stretches us in disorienting ways. Fresh Expressions as a church planting strategy is very different than purchasing property in hopes of establishing a foothold in a growing community. The Episcopal Church's willingness to reimagine the historic episcopate in [A Gift to The World](#) is also an extraordinary act of humility and even purgation. Both reflect a maturity and an urgency in the gospel. To the degree that we can be flexible and adaptive, we can be truly apostolic and catholic. And we can be present in the margins where our traditional structures have a muted presence.

In the rediscovery of our missionary character, we are called to claim the historic faith, to share it with confidence, but to be more self-aware of our own humanity in what we claim and how we share. Note the extended statement on "Convicted Humility" in the Final Report of the Commission on a Way Forward:

We begin from the recognition that our members hold a wide range of positions regarding same sex relations and operate out of sincerely held beliefs. They are convinced of the moral views they espouse, and seek to be faithful to what they see as the truth God calls the church to uphold. It remains the case that their views on this matter are distinctly different, and in some cases cannot be reconciled. We pray the exaggeration of our differences will not divide us. We also recognize and affirm that as United Methodists we hold in common many more fundamental theological commitments, commitments which bind us together despite our real differences. These also have implications for how we understand and express our disagreements, and for what we do about them.

Therefore, we seek to advocate a stance we have called convicted humility. This is an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of corrections. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together. In that spirit, we wish to lift up the shared core commitments which define the Wesleyan movement, and ground our search for wisdom and holiness.

We remain persuaded that the fruitfulness of the church and its witness to a fractured world are enhanced by our willingness to remain in relationship with those who share

our fundamental commitments to scripture and our doctrinal standards, and yet whose views of faithfulness in this regard differ from our own. (COWF, pp. 7-8)²⁰

The following themes are crucial for evangelism and mission:

- Faithfulness to the truth as we understand it
- Views on same-sex relations that cannot be reconciled
- A commitment through prayer not to exaggerate the differences between us
- The greater importance of fundamental theological convictions about which we can agree
- A posture of convicted humility
- A sense that to remain in relationship will contribute to the fruitfulness of our witness and mission

What would lead us to hold a convicted humility? In its essence the church is one, and yet every form of church is divided. In its essence the church is holy, and yet in every form of church there is darkness. In its essence the church is catholic, and yet every form of church errs toward affinity and tribalism. In its essence the church is apostolic, and yet every form of church is more secure within its walls.

And yet where the church transcends serious divisions and is reconciled, it is grace. Where the church focuses not on the sin of the world, but the sin that stains its own witness, and seeks forgiveness, it is grace. Where the church seeks the good of the whole people of God and not the advancement of one experience or perspective, it

²⁰ In response to the Council of Bishops' request for deeper theological work in support of a way forward, a small group worked on this original document: Professors Edgardo Colon-Emeric, Sondra Wheeler and Greg Jones, and Bishops Scott Jones, Greg Palmer and Ken Carter.

is grace. Where the church moves with the confidence that the faith of the apostles will accompany each step, it is grace.

To say that we believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church can never be the premise for claiming that we are that expression of church and another is not. We are never, in our own strength or power or goodness, that church. In the words of the bishop and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, "As for the individual, so also for the Church, there is only one way to be justified, and it is to say, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner'".²¹

Vi. Holiness as A Gift to the World

The motivation to be the churches God created us to be, and to see this as a way of walking together, will require a sense of urgency. Our planet is fractured. Our nation is fractured. Our denominations are fragmented. This has almost become normalized. A Gift to the World, as a document but also as a lived experience, is rooted in our gospel, in our life together, and in our mission.

Yet we must also acknowledge, perhaps more than we have in the past, that this work is contested. For this reason we will need to articulate the ongoing ministry and mission of the UMC and TEC as very clearly what we claim it to be, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Speaking from the Wesleyan tradition, and knowing that our deepest birthright gift was to be a holiness movement within Anglicanism, we will need to lean into the unique facets of what we can offer: grace is for all, grace transforms us, grace forms

²¹ The Household of God (London: SCM, 1953), p. 86.

communion and connection. We will also need to quickly confess that holiness is not arrogance or separation. Instead, holiness is the love of God—searching the scriptures, kneeling to receive the bread that is always our urgent need, singing the hymns of Charles Wesley—and love of our neighbor, which is increasingly the healing of divisions in a violent and fractured nation. At our best, we can be a gift to the world. And in the present moment, yes, this is to co-labor for the healing of brokenness. We have received the grace of God to do this work, together.

Yet we do this work in a complicated season.

VII. The Way Forward as the Healing of Brokenness

In the 2016 United Methodist General Conference in Portland, Oregon, the bishops of the church were asked to lead beyond the impasse in our denomination related to human sexuality. The fruit of this leadership was the Commission on a Way Forward, a thirty-two person global group that has completed its work and submitted a final report to a Special Session of the General Conference in February, 2019. In defining the work of that commission, a “Mission, Vision and Scope” was articulated. The “Mission” included the following language:

“The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions” (COWF, p. 6).

The plural (s) assumed that we are on parallel tracks or living in silos, or plotting alternative futures that mean more to some part of the church than the whole. This

assumption is relevant to many of our most passionate leaders in advocacy and renewal groups. If we want to create change, we would need to develop relationships beyond our echo chambers. If we want to maintain the status quo, we will try to fix or change those who differ from us. The exploration of the future would necessarily include major events in our denomination over the past few years, including the Western Jurisdiction episcopal election, annual conference and board of ordained ministry proclamations, negotiations with departing churches by annual conferences, and development of legal frameworks resulting parallel future denominations.

“We have a profound hope and confidence in the Triune God, and yet we acknowledge that we do this work in a climate of skepticism and distrust, from a human point of view” (COWF, p. 6).

We are more than a human institution, there is more going on here than organizational behavior, and we desire the unity that Jesus speaks of with the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit in John 17, and we believe that Jesus prays for this very reality on our behalf. At the same time the church is a human institution, and we are aware of the context in which we do this work; this is most obvious in social, secular and denominational media, which often interpreted the commission’s work through a hermeneutic of suspicion. This is a natural and human way of seeing the work, and may even be justified—institutions are flawed and can do harm to persons. Yet it does not capture the fullness of the commission’s mission, vision or scope, which is biblical and missional in nature.

“We are a connection, and we admit that our communion is strained; yet much transformative mission across our world is the fruit of our collaboration” (COWF, p. 6).

One of the beauties of United Methodism, from the local to the global level is our connectionalism—there is strength and power in these relationships. Yet the strain upon our connection (or communion) can be heard in the spoken desire (across perspectives) for “space”. Because persons have done harm to each other, and have objectified and stereotyped each other, there is a natural distancing. This is more evident in the meeting of the General Conference itself and in social media characterizations. This is a cautionary word, a reminder that much investment in sharing the gospel through word and action would be at risk should we not find a way forward.

“The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition. The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward” (COWF, p. 6).

Methodism in America has always included multiple streams of theological tradition, among them revivalism, social gospel, Boston personalism, neo-Wesleyanism, process theology, liberation theology.²² The present moment seems to be one that cannot abide by these different values. This led to the articulation of a “vision” that has been at the core of the dialogue between the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops:

“[We] will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible” (COWF, p. 6).

²² See Thomas Langford, Practical Divinity (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

To maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible is our apostolic calling. To allow for as much contextual differentiation as possible is our catholic mission. To balance different theological understandings of human sexuality is the work of convicted humility. And to desire as much unity as possibility is to join in prayer of Jesus and the sermon of John Wesley, that we be one, that we pursue a catholic spirit. And in the present moment with our Anglican forbears and colleagues, it is that we become healers of brokenness.

VIII. A Fresh Expression of Church?

A concluding question, and one that merits some reflection. What does it mean for a tradition that is in decline to invest significant energy and resources in seeking to clarify who it is in relation to another church? What does it mean for a church that is in decline to invest an equal measure of energy and resources in defining a perspective about human sexuality? To frame the questions starkly, will we, over generations, be present to be in communion with each other? And will our language about human sexuality matter, especially if increasingly we are not engaging the LGBTQ community? This is the question of relevance.

The Fresh Expressions movement began in England in 2004, through a report of the Church of England about the state of the church in that nation, and the need for a new direction. The word “fresh expression” is taken from the Book of Common Prayer:

“The Church of England...professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.”

The report was entitled "Mission Shaped Ministry." Those who helped to draft the report note that the original title was "Dying to Live," but the latter title was thought to be too dire and inflammatory. The conclusion of the report coincided with the beginning of the ministry of a new Archbishop, Rowan Williams. In his conversation with Rowan Williams, Bishop Graham Cray quickly learned that Williams was not only supportive of Fresh Expressions; he had anticipated many of these missional moves in his former diocese in Wales.

In meeting with Bishop Cray in York, he shared with us that, upon publication and endorsement of the report by the Church of England, the British Methodist Church immediately became a full partner, through the leadership of Martyn Atkins, General Secretary of the British Methodist Church. As Bishop Cray told us, "this was Anglican and Methodist from day one." The Florida Conference, led by Team Convener Audrey Warren, developed a partnership with Fresh Expressions US, which is seeking to translate this extraordinary work of God across denominations in England onto American soil. And a number of our leaders learned through immersion from a number of key figures the movement in England, among them Martyn Atkins, Graham Horsley, Bob and Mary Hopkins, Graham Cray, Shannon Hopkins and Adrian Chatfield. But the more profound reality is that Fresh Expressions is an international movement, with partnerships developing in Canada, New Zealand, Australia and other nations, and across a variety of denominations and theological traditions.

But what is a Fresh Expression of church? Here is the working definition:

"A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church. It will come into being through principles of listening, service, contextual mission and making disciples. It will

have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the Gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.”²³

In a nation that is increasingly multi-religious and non-religious, these two church traditions (and others) have recognized the need for planting expressions of Christianity outside the pattern of traditional church practice. Careful statistical work has been done by the Church of England and the British Methodist Church, with results that mirror realities in the United States: the growth of the unchurched and the de-churched, who correspond to the Pew Research language of “nones” and “dones,” and the differentiation of persons into categories such as “open unchurched” and “closed de-churched.”

One insight that came to me in an immersion with leaders in England was related to my presumption that Fresh Expressions was post-denominational. I came to grasp, in listening, worshipping and observing, that it is better described as *deeply ecumenical*; traditions do not lose their distinctiveness, but rather contribute the riches of who they are to others, and in return receive new and distinct strengths from beyond themselves. This differs from the common (and important) work of ecumenical movements that often occurs from the thirty-thousand foot vantage point of councils, dialogues and agreements. Fresh Expressions, particularly in post-Christian contexts, will necessarily have a deeply ecumenical character.

It is also clear that much of the initial work on Fresh Expressions in England in 2004 is in response to a previous report, *Breaking New Ground* (1994), which had been the Church of England's response to the experience of and the need for new church planting. While this response is both appreciative and respectful, there are clearly

²³ Steven Croft, <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles-php/897/02-2008>

cultural and ecclesial shifts which move the authors toward both a new language and a bolder vision. I am convinced that we find ourselves, in the U.S., in a similar place: we have invested greatly in new church planting as a form of evangelism, and will continue to do so. This work has arisen from a variety of motives, many of them faithful ones. Yet it is also true that our cultural landscape is clearly shifting, and we are called to consider diverse strategies.

Twenty-five years ago, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon wrote Resident Aliens, perhaps the first popular and sustained engagement with the reality that we are entering a post-Christian context in the United States. Our brothers and sisters in England are living more fully in this new world, and we can learn from their creativity and faithfulness.

The changing culture, in these contexts, was the recognition that we were shifting from parish-based assumptions—namely, that if you live in the geographical parish, you will have a relationship with the parish based church. Increasingly this was and is not the reality. The changing culture was based on a number of factors: the shift from neighborhoods to networks, the increased amount of time families were engaged in work, and perceptions about faith and its truthfulness and relevance. Recognition of the church's relationship to a changed culture in the west was at the heart of the work of the missiologist Lesslie Newbigin in The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, and was articulated in the U.S. context by Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, and also by Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker in Longing For Spring.

Established churches increasingly saw the necessity of seeing beyond their own memberships, for institutional, missional and theological reasons. Fresh Expressions of

church are established for just this purpose. That the Anglican and Methodist churches in England could come so quickly to a partnership in this movement is a recognition that missional urgency sometimes precedes and plows the soil for ecumenical relationship. This was primarily for the benefit of those in neither church, but for those who were “not yet members of any church”. In his Deep Change, Robert Quinn speaks of the difference between an institution’s public mission and its private mission.²⁴ For example a public mission is what a church claims as its purpose— to proclaim the gospel afresh, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The private mission is how a church actually functions, and in time that can be for internal stakeholders and matters of personnel, property, pension and finance.

How does a church connect with the mission field beyond it and in so doing rediscover its public mission and core purpose? The principles of “*listening, service, contextual mission and making disciples*” are very much the labor that bring about the healing of the world. And as we labor in the world’s vineyards we do in fact become a more mature expression of church, one that is shaped by the gospel that reconciles us to God and to one another in the one body through the cross (Ephesians 2) and one that exhibits the enduring marks of the church.

One of the strengths of the Fresh Expressions movement is this latter quality— Fresh Expressions are not para-church experiences. As a mission-shaped movement, they find unity in reaching people with the gospel beyond the walls of the church. Through engagement with persons outside of the church on their own terms they embody the the love of God expressed through love for the neighbor. The movement is

²⁴ New York: Jossey-Bass, 1996. I am grateful to Gil Rendle for his pointing me to the importance of public and private mission.

catholic in that they are signs of God's presence in our vastly different cultural contexts in which persons live, work and might conceivably worship. And the apostolic character of Fresh Expressions lie in their transition from attractional church (come and see) to missional community (the sending God sends us).

As the authors of Mission Shaped Church note, "Perhaps our greatest need is of a baptism of imagination about forms of church." God does indeed go before us, in space and in time, and is not confined by our categories of either/or: a traditionalist church or progressive church, and Anglican church or a Methodist church, an inherited church or a fresh expression of church. For the ancestors of John Wesley, this is as simple as rediscovering the power of God's prevenient grace and the call to see the world as our parish. Among ecumenists and activists, among evangelists and missionaries, there is the possibility for new forms of church. There are indeed profound gifts in our inheritance, which are like treasure, hidden in a field, awaiting waiting to be rediscovered (Matthew 13).

So, to conclude as we began, with a series of questions!

- Might a focus on co-laboring together for the healing of the world have something to teach adversarial parties who at times are too focused on the private mission of internal stakeholders?
- Might the shared activity of listening and incarnational presence with the increasingly large numbers of "nones" and "dones" remind us of the gift of the gospel—that it is for all, that it transforms us, that it creates community?

- And might an humility about the prayer of Jesus in John 17 for the church—that we be one, holy, catholic and apostolic—move us to hold our theological claims and ecclesial strategies with a convicted humility?

(Ken Carter is president of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church and resident bishop of the Florida Conference, USA. He was a moderator of the Commission on a Way Forward, a former member of the Committee on Faith and Order, and is author of Embracing The Wideness of God's Mercy (Abingdon, 2018) and, with Audrey Warren, Fresh Expressions: A New Kind of Methodist Church (Abingdon, 2017).