

“Methodism as Machine”¹: Structure as Mission?

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Methodism, says Russell Richey, has always been ambivalent about its machinery—the “central, executive, decision-making apparatus” through which the denomination has organized, mobilized, and managed its mission. Over its machinery, he says, Methodists have alternatively “gloried and agonized.” We have gloried in times when structure served mission, only to agonize when that same structure became mission-stifling bureaucracy. And yet, even as we roundly denounced and derided our bureaucracy, we have energetically set about restructuring and reinventing it to serve mission in a new day. And so it has gone.² This ambivalence about structure, concludes Richey, “runs deep in the Methodist psyche.” Structure and mission belong together, we insist. And yet, so often they appear mismatched, at cross-purposes, even in conflict.³

Dana Robert and Doug Tzan pick up on the same ambivalence in their fine history of Methodist mission. Methodists, they observe, have tended to equate “church” with structure, institution, and machinery. As such, church came to typify inwardness and self-preoccupation. Mission, on the other hand, represented an outward posture, a preoccupation with the world, embodied in proclamation (evangelism) and social transformation (kingdom). In this way, “mission” came to represent movement, creativity, and renewal while “church” symbolized rigidity and stasis. Hence arose what Robert and Tzan call the “classic Methodist mission paradigm”: “a cycle of successful

¹ The phrase comes from an essay by the same title by Russell Richey. See his “Methodism as Machine,” in *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009), 172-82.

² *Ibid.*, 172, 180-81.

³ *Ibid.*, 180.

mission movements followed by institutionalization, followed by rebellions against institutionalization in the name of renewing the mission.” At the heart of this movement-institution juxtaposition, they conclude, is the tension Methodism has always experienced “between its tradition as a mission movement, and ecclesiocentrism.”⁴

This cycle of “glory and agony” continues today in United Methodism’s struggle to avert a church-dividing crisis over human sexuality. Here, too, the ambivalence about our machinery is clear. We wrangle incessantly over the requisite structures to accommodate greater “contextual differentiation”⁵ in mission while rescuing as much unity as possible, even as we resist the specter of ecclesiocentrism such wrangling encourages. Our institutional disputes, many worry, turn our gaze inward, on ourselves, instead of outward, toward “the transformation of the world.”⁶ And yet we acknowledge that renewal of denominational mission and vitality happens not *despite* but *through* structural innovation. The ambivalence continues.

I think our ambivalence about structure has much to do with our sensibility as a “mission movement” Robert and Tzan refer to above. Early Methodism’s experience as a renewal movement in the Church of England has inclined us to view our primary task as “evangelism” and “kingdom,” not building churches. These activities constitute our “real” mission, the main thing. “Church” as institution is secondary, ancillary—important,

⁴ Dana L. Robert and Douglas D. Tzan, “Traditions and Transitions in Mission Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, eds. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford University Press, 2009), 435-36.

⁵ See Heather Hahn, “Bishops Propose Plan for Way Forward,” *United Methodist News Service* (May 4, 2018); <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishops-propose-plan-for-way-forward>.

⁶ For gestures of such worries, see Heather Hahn, “Making Disciples Tops Sexuality as Church Priority,” *United Methodist News Service* (June 4, 2014); <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/poll-making-disciples-tops-sexuality-as-church-priority>, and Heather Hahn, “Bishops: Pray for Us amid Sexuality Debate,” *United Methodist News Service* (November 7, 2014); <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/bishops-pray-for-us-amid-sexuality-debate>.

to be sure, but not essential to our witness.⁷ As a result, while we have devoted considerable theological energy to proclamation and social outreach, we have expended considerably less on “structure” and “institution” as topics of missional reflection. The exception, for United Methodists, is our scholarship on polity. Here we find excellent theological reflection, and I will draw on this research below.

Of course, Methodists have become quintessential church builders and created and managed elaborate ecclesial apparatuses. And so we have been ambivalent. I don't think United Methodists can afford to leave our ambivalence unexamined, if we hope to flourish as a global church in the future. We scholars of mission and evangelism need to join our polity colleagues in providing a theological grounding for the place and role of “structure” as part of a holistic United Methodist witness.

In this essay, I venture some modest musings in this direction. United Methodists, I suggest, are right in our intuition that our structures are not incidental or ancillary to our mission but an indispensable component of it. Our institutional life is a crucial part of our witness in the world. How we “order” and conduct our life together communicates our values, beliefs, and commitments as much as do our activities of evangelism and social justice.

I am emboldened in this claim by the work of Roman Catholic missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder. Significantly, they include an analysis of the organization

⁷ Albert Outler has advanced this sentiment with great theological subtlety and nuance in his classic essay “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” He acknowledges Methodism's evolution from “movement” to “church” and urges us to discharge the duties of “book, bell, and candle” responsibly and faithfully. However, being a church is not our chief business. Our *real* mission (our *notae ecclesiae*, as he puts it) is to be a movement of “evangelism, worship, discipline.” The essay can be found in Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 211-26.

of the church under their treatment of “witness” in their model of mission as “prophetic dialogue.” The church’s witness in the world, they note, is carried out not only by individuals or even local church communities but also corporately, through the church as institution. That means witness is also “institutional in nature.”⁸ Additionally, David Roozen and James Neiman sound a similar sentiment in their massive study of American denominations. A denomination’s organization, they claim, is crucial in cultivating and mediating the denomination’s identity.⁹ That makes “[o]rganizing religious work . . . a theological task.”

In what follows, I develop my argument in four sections. I begin with a definition and clarification of central concepts and themes. In the two sections that follow, I unpack two ways in which structure mediates our United Methodist missional identity: respectively, to mediate mission differentially to different ends, and to aid effective contextualization of our witness across our global connection. I conclude with a few theological moves that might strengthen the integration of “structure” and “mission” within a holistic United Methodist witness.

Some Definitions

Let me begin with a definition of what I mean by *structure* and *institution*—the “machinery” of our corporate life as United Methodists. These terms signify the institutions and bodies that constitute our connection—congregations, conferences

⁸ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants In Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Orbis, 2004), 355-56.

⁹ David A. Roozen, “National Denominational Structures’ Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective,” in David A. Roozen and James R. Neiman, eds., *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures In Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2005), 604, 614.

(annual, jurisdictional, central), general church (agencies, councils, caucuses), church-related institutions (colleges, universities, seminaries, hospitals), and the like. But structure also means, as Bevans and Schroeder indicate in their discussion, the values, norms, and beliefs embodied and enacted in these structures. So, structure includes attention to how power and authority are allocated and practiced, how and by whom decisions are made, and so on. In short, structure refers to the “politics” of our shared life for the sake of the church and the world.

As noted above, I find in United Methodist scholarship on polity helpful resources in trying to articulate the meaning and role of this institutional structure for mission. The study of polity encompasses our whole subject matter in its purview and therefore offers valuable tools of theological analysis and construction. And, crucial to our purposes here, polity allows us to get at the *normative* dimension of structure—how beliefs, values, and commitments shape and direct the theological work structures do.

Thomas Frank’s definition of polity offers a comprehensive definition of what I mean by “structure” in this paper. Polity, he says, concerns “arrangements of authority and power that [make] ordered practices possible.” Such “ordered practices” include “means of governance, patterns of order, authority, participation, and decision-making.” Polity, therefore, deals with the “politics” of the community (*polity* and *politics*, after all, share the same Greek root): “the political arrangements that will structure the people of God for effective witness to the gospel.” Here the connection between structure and mission already begins to come clear. Polity, says Frank, “serves not the institution itself but the institution’s mission,” its witness to God’s grace for the sake of the world. Similarly, Lacey Warner talks about polity as the “method of our mission.” A key burden of her

book is to “*connect denominational governance and organization to our beliefs—as well as our mission.*”¹⁰

For purposes of convenience and ease of reading, I will use “structure” and “polity” interchangeably, noting nuances as needed. With this definition in hand, I seek to develop my argument by way of three claims.

Structure mediates mission differentially and to different ends.

Our values, norms, and beliefs are mediated differently and to different ends in our connectional structure. This means they do different kinds of theological work depending on the place and level. This differential work is crucial for a holistic mission. Our United Methodist witness is a function of the *whole* connection. Every part of the connection—from congregation to annual conference to general church—has a responsibility in nurturing and implementing our missional identity in its distinctive way. Reductionisms of any sort, such as fixation on the local church, damages our capacity to do so.¹¹

To develop my point, I will use the general church structures, especially the general agencies, as a test case. It is safe to say, I think, that most United Methodists view these structures as the source of our ecclesiocentrism, the poster child of institutional navel-gazing. Of all aspects of our life together, the structures seem the least missional—indeed, more frequently, we consider them obstacles to mission. And yet,

¹⁰ Lacey C. Warner, *The Method of Our Mission: United Methodist Polity and Organization* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 1 (italics in original).

¹¹ See my essay “In Praise of Bureaucracy: Mission, Structure, and Renewal in The United Methodist Church,” *Occasional Papers* 103 (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Dec. 2010), 8.

the fact that we spend so much effort and time trying to revise and restructure them suggests that important missional values are at stake in what these structures do.

General church structures play an especially important role in mediating our unity in diversity as United Methodists. As our only worldwide connectional structures, they offer resources, services, modes of global collective deliberation, collaboration, and fellowship that no other part of our system is capable of doing. As such, they embody and symbolize our connectional unity in distinctive and indispensable ways. Elsewhere, I have put the matter this way, in that case with reference to the general agencies:

[T]he general agencies should view as their principal task . . . to function as stewards of the church's missional identity *in its worldwide expression*. Given their distinctive location within the global connection, [general agencies] are uniquely positioned as symbolic spaces in which United Methodists can debate, contest, negotiate, and formulate the meaning and implications of our identity as . . . a worldwide body.¹²

This means we should pay careful theological attention when seeking to amend or reconstruct our connectional structures. Otherwise, we risk distorting or even abandoning the missional values they embody and mediate. This risk is particularly pertinent during times of denominational conflict, such as we are experiencing now. Under pressure to resolve discord, taking adequate time for this theological work usually falls by the wayside. In this respect, Russell Richey's caution is especially well taken: "To recognize our corporate life, even our institutional structures, as enacted theology should make us wary of unthinking or simply tactical change."¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Russell E. Richey, *Marks of Methodism: Theology In Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 91-112.

To illustrate, I will briefly discuss a value particularly pertinent to our general church structures, namely, catholicity. As noted above, these institutional forms especially United Methodists mediate and enact our global connectional unity in diversity as United Methodists. Not surprisingly, when our sense of denominational unity is under stress, we turn to structural solutions. Our current crisis over sexuality is a good case in point. One need only consider the vision statement of the Commission on a Way Forward, the body charged by the 2016 General Conference to resolve our impasse over sexuality. It reads in part: “The Commission will design a way for being church that . . . balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible.”¹⁴

I applaud the Committee’s vision. It is surely right. My concern is with the theology—or paucity thereof—that accompany the Committee’s recommendations for structural change. I fear the three models for denominational renewal they have put forward—the Traditionalist Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, and the One Church Plan¹⁵— threaten to introduce troubling theological shifts in our understanding and practice of connectional unity. In my view, all three of these plans for restructure encourage us to *substitute affinity for unity*. The reason is because a particular issue—sexuality—becomes the criterion for deciding how, why, and with whom we belong. The very real danger, I have suggested, is that “such a view of unity can easily justify a move to unity as affinity, as conformity by self-selection. Such an understanding of unity

¹⁴ Commission on a Way Forward, “About Us,” online: <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward-about-us>.

¹⁵ Heather Hahn, “GC 2019 Delegates Discuss Way Forward,” *United Methodist News Service* (July 17, 2018).

and diversity puts paid to the possibility of a worldwide connectional covenant. Our calling is to live our unity *in* and not *despite* our diversity.”¹⁶

James Neiman, in his study of the theological work of denominations, adds a further insight about denomination-wide structures and catholicity. A crucial way in which a denomination's national structures embody and facilitate its commitment to catholicity, he claims, is to safeguard the church “against the myopia and tunnel vision” that fixation on the local often brings. While a crucial expression of the church, the local congregation “is not coextensive with the entire church and stands as church only insofar as it exists for witness in the world.” National church structures connect uniquely—and I would claim, distinctively—a church's mission to the wider body of Christ and the world.¹⁷

Permit me to extend Neiman's caution about the myopia of the local in a slightly different (but, I hope, not contradictory) direction. I think it is fair to say that United Methodism's current crisis over sexuality, while clearly touching our connection globally, is dominated by discord in the U.S. part of the church precipitated by large-scale social change in the U.S. context. Might Neiman's warning about localism instruct us here as well? Does a dominant U.S. church not risk a similar fixation, in which U.S. United Methodists might be tempted to imagine *their* framing of the conflict as “coextensive with the entire church”? A U.S.-centrism that risks attempting to speak for the whole connection? Elsewhere, I have referred to this tendency as “center-periphery” thinking

¹⁶ See my blog contribution “My Hope for Methodism,” *UM&Global* (Friday, May 25, 2018).

¹⁷ James A. Neiman, “The Theological Work of Denominations,” in *Church, Identity, and Change*, 640.

and have noted what I consider damaging effects on our connectional unity.¹⁸ I return to this point in the next section.

To summarize my basic claim in this section: General church structures, and perhaps especially general agencies, mediate United Methodists' commitment to connectional unity differentially and to different ends. They do so differentially in fulfilling a missional role no other part of the connection can. And they do so to the unique end of stewarding our connectional unity in diversity not locally or even regionally but as a *global connection*—as a “worldwide web of interactive relationships,” as the *Book of Discipline* puts it.¹⁹

Structure is crucial to faithful and effective contextualization.²⁰

The contextualization literature teaches us that the gospel comes to us only in and through the language and cultural forms of the society to which the church belongs. Only then can it be meaningful, fitting, and persuasive—make a “home” among us.²¹ The church's institutional life, I argue in this section, plays a crucial mediating role in this work of contextualization.

¹⁸ See my essay “A Worldwide United Methodist Church? Soundings toward a Connectional Theological Imagination,” *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies* 5/13: 1-23.

¹⁹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016, para. 125.

²⁰ Parts of this section reproduce material from three of my previous publications: “In Praise of Bureaucracy: Mission, Structure, and Renewal in The United Methodist Church,” *Occasional Papers* 103 (Dec. 2010); and the blog posts “Connectionalism and Context” and “My Hope for Methodism” on *UM and Global* (www.umglobal.org), June 12, 2014 and May 25, 2018, respectively.

²¹ Andrew F. Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” in Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies In the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis, 1996), 7-9.

To me, for United Methodists, structure, system, organization, and polity are indispensable modes in giving *concrete form* to our ecclesial convictions in a particular time and place. The United Methodist mission document *Grace Upon Grace* makes this point in a rather striking fashion: “*Connectionalism*,” it says, “is the distinctive form of United Methodism’s organizational obedience. . . . [T]his connectional system expresses our missional life . . .” Through the mundane mechanisms of the structure, precept, and polity of our connectional system, United Methodists express “our bodily life in Christ”²²—or, equally, express our life in Christ *bodily*. Structure, organization, polity, and pattern are crucial in contextualizing our mission in and for a time and place. Our connectional system, in its often convoluted complexity, embodies and expresses what Russell Richey calls our “practiced or practical ecclesiology.” It is a form of being church in which theological self-understanding is “embedded in the everyday structures, policies, organizations, and patterns of Methodist life.” As “embodied theology,” church structures are visible enactments of the church’s self-understanding, concrete expressions of our theology in practice. Structure, mission, and ecclesial identity are inextricably linked in rendering our witness contextual.²³

The fact that the concrete forms our missional identity takes are always time- and place-bound means that the way the church orders its institutional life—its form of governance, its conception and exercise of authority and power, its understanding of freedom and obligation—draws heavily on analogous forms and practices in the society of which it is a part. American Methodism offers an excellent example of this dynamic.

²² *Grace Upon Grace: The Mission Statement of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1990), para. 50.

²³ See Richey, *Marks of Methodism*, x, 7, 113-17; for “embodied theology,” see Roozen and Neiman, “Introduction,” *Church, Identity, and Change*, 8.

Scholars like Thomas Frank, William Everett, Russell Richey, and William Lawrence have produced detailed accounts of the symbiotic relationship between Methodist (and later United Methodist) forms of governance and polity, on the one hand, and political structures, constitutional order, business philosophies, and civil polity operating in the U.S. context, on the other. In their in-depth analysis, Frank and Everett show how Methodists, and later United Methodists, have incorporated principles of public association, federalism, and corporatism into their governance structures.²⁴ These principles continue to shape United Methodist polity in fundamental ways today, as William Lawrence and Sally Askew have demonstrated in a recent essay.²⁵

In similar vein, Russell Richey demonstrates the formative role of American Methodism in the emergence of the denomination. A creature of modernity, the denomination evolved in response to American values of religious freedom, disestablishment, voluntarism, free enterprise, and the like. Denominationalism “is a form of church adjusted to the realities of American society.” Methodism played such a forceful role in this process that Richey, in a twist on Richard Niebuhr’s phrase, regards Methodism as a “social source” of denominationalism.²⁶

Mission scholarship over the past sixty years has called attention to the risks involved in such (necessary) cultural interchange. Perhaps the most important risk is unreflective and uncritical borrowing of ideas, norms, and conventions. It can cultivate a

²⁴ William Johnson Everett and Thomas Edward Frank, “Constitutional Order in United Methodism and American Culture,” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity*, eds. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 43-73.

²⁵ William B. Lawrence and Sally Curtis Askew, “Constitutional Methodism In Crisis: Historical and Operational Perspectives on Divisions Threatening United Methodism,” *Methodist Review* 10 (2018): 23-72.

²⁶ Russell E. Richey, *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained* (Portland, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), ch. 9.

kind of contextual tone-deafness that can blind the church to its cultural embeddedness, and thus to the danger of cultural captivity. In this respect, United Methodists' neglect of theological reflection on structure renders us particularly vulnerable to this danger. The danger is especially acute for the U.S. church, given its influence and power in the connection. I mention two challenges.

First, unwitting U.S. self-preoccupation cripples our capacity to attend with theological integrity to the growing contextual complexity of our denomination around the world. It makes us inattentive to the way contextual elements function within practice, for good or ill. Contexts are different, with different needs and demands for fittingness and relevance. What structures are appropriate for a global church of such striking contextual diversity? What "means of governance, patterns of order, authority, participation, and decision-making"—what politics (Frank)—mediate our unity diversity best? And, equally important, how does this corporate polity make room for, support, and oversee the diversity of polities that effective United Methodist witness requires in different parts of the world? Conversely, what challenges do we face in constructing such a connective polity, given the deep embeddedness of our current polity in U.S. political and social forms, as we saw above? If we remain obtuse to such questions, we will permit destructive habits to continue unexamined in our practice.

One such habit is the center-periphery thinking I mentioned earlier. The tendency to imagine Christian diversity as emanating from and regulated by a normative center has deep roots in Christianity's missionary expansion. It is thus neither unique to nor limited to United Methodists. It is, nevertheless, real in our connective polity, however unwittingly engaged. The U.S. church continues to set the agenda for the issues the

global connection faces—which concerns deserve priority, how they are to be framed, debated, and legislated, and so on. Efforts to mitigate this dynamic structurally are to be welcomed. However, for these efforts to be transformative in the long run, we simply must identify and address the theological issues at play.²⁷

Second, contextual tone-deafness discourages U.S. United Methodists from engaging *their own* rapidly changing context with the theological astuteness that effective contextualization demands. I suspect the tectonic cultural, economic, political, and religious shifts that are reconstructing the North American context provide vital clues to why, how, and to what ends we U.S. United Methodists continue to fight over certain issues (now, sexuality) and neglect or ignore others. Indeed, I submit that our current crisis is at heart a struggle of contextualization—namely, how to reconstitute denominational identity and mission in a U.S. context in which everything heretofore “solid” is “melting into the air” (to paraphrase Nietzsche). Note, therefore, the salience of calls for “contextual differentiation,” “contextual freedom,” and the like. In this respect, the U.S. crisis might be a cautionary tale—a parable, of sorts—for our capacity (and our willingness?) to negotiate the deep “contextual differentiation” confronting us as a global connection.

It is significant that Frank and Everett conclude their analysis of United Methodist polity and American culture with a plea for sustained theological analysis to assess the compatibility of our cultural borrowing with our ecclesiological convictions. Such analysis, I would add, would also need to include constructing a theology of contextualization. We United Methodists, especially those of us in the United States, still

²⁷ See my essay “A Worldwide United Methodist Church? Soundings toward a Connectional Theological Imagination,” *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies* 5/13: 1-23.

tend to do our contextual theologizing on the fly, especially in times of denominational crisis. This habit does little to remedy our tone-deafness; and, more importantly, keeps us from doing the hard theological work that faithful contextualization of our global connective covenant requires and deserves. As I have argued recently, contextualization is not a strategy for resolving denominational conflict or a tool for ameliorating discord, negotiating compromises, and forestalling division. In fact, “contextualization is the church’s obedience to a profound theological truth, namely, that God has chosen to dwell with us as one of us, in the cultural particularity of our cultural forms, our language, our context. That is, contextualization is the church’s acknowledgment of the logic of the Incarnation.”²⁸ In this respect, United Methodists have much work to do.

Contextualization is a dynamic, constantly evolving process, since changing circumstances present ever-new challenges. Our polity must therefore be flexible and responsive, attuned to cultural and contextual needs. Indeed, in a global church, we need to conceive and practice our polity *interculturally*. The eminent Dutch polity scholar Leo Koffeman has argued this point persuasively.²⁹ This is one place where United Methodist scholars of mission and of polity can make common cause, as I suggested earlier. The nascent discipline of intercultural theology emerging in theology of mission offers promising resources for this task.³⁰

²⁸ See my blog “My Hope for Methodism.”

²⁹ Leo J. Koffeman, “The Dark Side of the Good News? A Theological Approach to Church Polity, in Allan J. Janssen and Leo Koffeman, eds., *Protestant Church Polity In Changing Contexts I: Ecclesiological and Historical Contributions* (LIT Verlag, 2014), 1-16.

³⁰ “Interculturality” as a mode of being church and doing theology has become a prominent topic in missiology. See my essay “A New Global Theology? Intercultural Theology and the Challenge of Public Discourse In a Global Church,” *Missiology* 45:2 (April 2017): 138-55.

A Theology of Structure? Two Suggestions

I conclude with two suggestions that might aid United Methodists in constructing a theological framework capable of integrating mission and structure into a holistic missional witness. Needless to say, these ruminations are modest and tentative in the extreme. I do believe, however, they are useful for the theological work yet to be done.

The first suggestion is that *we think of 'structure' as an ecclesial practice*. The idea is by no means original to me. Russell Richey, in his extensive writings on United Methodist connectionalism and ecclesiology, has demonstrated this insight persuasively. And one finds the same argument in the work of United Methodist polity scholars Thomas Frank and Douglas Koskela.³¹

Let us begin with the following observation by Richey: United Methodists, he suggests in *Marks of Methodism*, embed their theology in their ecclesial practices. Some of these practices they embed in their institutional structures. Our theological convictions, therefore, are 'marked' by the structures that give them form and expression. (For Richey, our practices of connectionalism, itinerancy, discipline, and catholicity express the classic 'marks' of the church—one, holy, apostolic, and catholic.) Thus, what United Methodists do and how they do it—*including in and through our institutional structures*—"teach," instruct, mediate our doctrinal affirmations and missional commitments. Or, as I have tried to argue above, *our institutional life witnesses*. In other words, within our institutional structures, too, we "practice" our mission. Our corporate life is a fundamental component of our ecclesial life in practice,

³¹ Thomas Frank referring to it as 'ecclesial practice and 'practical theology.' See ch. 1 in his *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

our “practiced ecclesiology,” to use Richey’s felicitous phrase.³² This is the theological context for Richey’s caution, cited earlier, and my claim throughout, that we should take care in undertaking structural revisions or innovations without engaging in careful and sustained theological reflection.

These reflections allow me to state explicitly a key claim I have advanced largely implicitly thus far. (I realize that some readers might well see in me an unreconstructed apologist for the status quo in the service of vested interest and entrenched privilege!) Here is the claim: *Intentional, sustained reflection on the theological work ecclesial structures do is crucial to renewal and reform of United Methodist witness.* Richey has stated this claim pointedly with reference to connectionalism. Understood as an ecclesial practice, he asserts, connectionalism has and should serve as a constant critique of institutional inertia and myopia and a consistent stimulus for renewal. The reason is that, at its best our connectional spirit stimulates creativity, innovation, and openness in our missional witness. Buoyed by the Spirit’s energy, Richey says, our connectionalism gives us confidence “to experiment, to try new things, to change. . . . [C]onnectionalism is and has been *forming and reforming.*”³³ Connectionalism rightly practiced, therefore, stands as antithesis of the ecclesiocentrism and ecclesial stasis over which Methodists have agonized. However, such right practice, as I have sought to argue throughout, requires intentional, sustained, and consistent theological attention.

The notion of structure as ecclesial practice opens the way for the second suggestion: *Structure is ultimately a function of United Methodism’s historic concern with the disciplined life.* As Thomas Frank observes, in the United Methodist heritage,

³² Richey, *Marks of Methodism*, 115-16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

“discipline’ was peculiarly related to the ‘methods’ of Methodism—disciplines of growth in the Christian life and practices of love in Christian community.” These disciplines of mutual support and accountability were given “structure” in the General Rules. From these structured rules, says Frank, “flows the character of Methodist . . . polity.”³⁴ Douglas Koskela sounds the same sentiment: “For Methodists, the structures and practices of polity *are* structures and practices of discipline.” Hence, our institutional structures “exist to sustain and nourish a community of faith living out its vocation.”³⁵

Here, I believe, we reach the doctrinal bedrock of a United Methodist “theology of structure.” The centrality of *discipline* in the formation of United Methodist identity and witness, coupled with its doctrinal fecundity, renders discipline the linchpin for integrating “structure” and “mission” in our witness. Here, *structure as mission* receives its orienting theological rationale. Developing these convictions into a full-fledged theological framework awaits another day and greater expertise than I can muster.

Conclusion

Over their churchly machinery, Methodists have alternatively gloried and agonized, says Russell Richey, rendering us deeply ambivalence over the relationship between *structure* and *mission*. As I have sought to argue, United Methodists can no longer afford this ambivalence. The integrity and vitality of our connectional witness as a global church into the future depend upon it as a matter of urgency. In taking up this task, I have suggested, United Methodists have rich theological resources to hand. My reflections in the above pages represent a modest effort toward that end.

³⁴ Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*, 48.

³⁵ Douglas M. Koskela, “Discipline and Polity,” in Jason E. Vickers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 156-57.