Radical Economics and Wesleyan Congregations in the U.S.

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Introduction

Wesley did not have a lot to say about congregations. About other distinctive ecclesial features of his own unique reforming movement—connection, conference, classes, bands—we have much from Wesley. But since his movement worked alongside and outside of traditional congregational and parish structures, it did not take on a congregational form in its earliest stages. Yet Wesley had plenty to say about the obligation upon Christians to live out what we might call a radical Christian economics, and all the more so in the context of Christian communities such as his societies, classes, and bands. Is it possible to trace ways the reforming economic impulses of the Wesleyan movement make a difference today at the congregational level and to project or propose a future for that relation?

In getting at the basic contours of Wesley's economics, it is worth noting that he is often understood to be a *primitivist*.[1] As Wesley says, Methodism is "the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England."[2] This "*old religion*," Wesley goes on to say, is

> no other than love: the love of God and of all [humanity]; the loving God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, as having first loved us, as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every [person] on earth, as our own soul.[3]

To claim Wesley was a primitivist is not to say that he was interested in naively jumping backwards to some sort of pristine apostolic era. Indeed, he rejected the self-righteous and separatist attitudes of other primitivist Christians in his time. But he did want to affirm the Methodist movement's rootedness in the early church, including the kinds of communal life one finds described in the book of Acts. When engaged in the work of reformation and renewal, sometimes you have to go backward before you can go forward.

Wesley's primitivism early on expressed itself in the way he adopted ancient liturgies and ecclesiastical practices in the context of the Holy Club at Oxford, though he would later go on to modulate those for his own time and cultural context. But Wesley was also drawn to primitive economic practices, such as collecting money for the poor and material sharing in the form of a community of goods, or "common stock." His commitment to many of these practices remained constant throughout his life, even if he tempered his approach in some cases. Economic practices gave visible and concrete expression to the love he claimed was at the heart of that "old religion." As Luke Keefer observes, "So confident was he that Methodism had revived significant aspects of the apostolic age that he wrote: 'I can now say to all the world, "come and see how these Christians love one another!"'" [4] This economics, moreover, was directly related to key theological convictions held by Wesley such as the egalitarianism implied in universal grace, the inherently social nature of salvation and sanctification, the capacity as well as

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[1] Carter, *Love Bade Me Welcome*

[2] Wesley, "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel," 3:585.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Keefer, "John Wesley: Disciple of Early Christianity," 27; cf. *Letters* (Telford), II, 308.

responsibility of humans to respond to grace, the sovereignty of God understood in terms of love, and the Christian ethic as likewise fundamentally an ethic of love.

Given Wesley's economic convictions, an important question suggests itself for our time. How, *if at all*, do 21st century Wesleyan congregations enact these radical commitments and practices? Some of the most interesting congregational experiments around the world are attempts to do something very much like what Wesley attempted—to shed worn-out ways of being the church in order to retrieve what is most "essential" and "primitive" about the church. But do we see that with Wesleyan congregations in relation to economic commitments and practices?

There are many dimensions to Wesley's economics: (1) his direct care for and solidarity with the poor, the sick, the uneducated, and the unemployed; (2) his attitudes toward property and possessions; (3) his efforts to ameliorate poverty, redistribute wealth, and challenge unjust social and economic structures; (4) his advocacy of a personal ethic that included the cultivation of virtues such as industry, thrift, simplicity, and generosity; (5) his efforts to nurture Christian communities that exhibit these same virtues through patterns of simplicity, mutuality, accountability, stewardship, and the sharing of material goods; and (6) the centrality of economic life in his theology more generally, including his "demystification of wealth" (Jennings) and the incorporation of economic virtues, patterns, and practices into his doctrine of sanctification.

We might hope to find any or all of these reflected in some way in contemporary Wesleyan congregations, though naturally we would not expect to see Wesley's specific approaches or solutions (for example his medical remedies for the poor). But are there creative new attempts among Wesleyans to live out holiness in economically radical and reforming ways in the spirit of Wesley? Or have the economic dimensions of Wesley's legacy been forgotten, deemed irrelevant or unrealistic, or perhaps judged too difficult and extreme? That is what our project attempted to learn.

This Study's Approach

For this paper we set out to identify and study current Wesleyan congregations that were suggested to us as practicing a form of economics that could be considered radical and reforming in the United States. So, for example, that might include congregations that operate with a shared economic structure (for example, a common purse), that are committed to practices of simplicity, or that practice an economics of justice for and solidarity with the poor. The aim of the study was to explore 6-12 Wesleyan-identifying congregations attempting to embody a "radical economics." In the end we connected with 20 congregations representing three Wesleyan denominations – the United Methodist Church, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Wesleyan Church – from the five denominations we contacted, that agreed to participate in the study.

Our research employed qualitative research methods in order to gain insights into current embodiments of church that are re-imagining their economic and organizational practices. The study included direct qualitative research in the form of interviews with the church leader/s and review of the church's website. We conducted the study over a period of six months (beginning February 2018) and included three phases: recruitment, interviews, and data analysis.[5]

During Phase One, the recruitment stage, Wesleyan-identifying congregations were found through online research and by contacting denominational offices from the United Methodist Church, the Church of the Nazarene, The African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Wesleyan Church, and the Free Methodist Church. We asked denomination officials in various judicatory

[5] Internal Review Board approval was granted by Boston University.

offices to identify what congregations they knew of that exhibit "radical economics"—i.e., a shared economic structure, an economics of simplicity, or an economics of justice for and solidarity with the poor. We contacted by phone and/or email the congregations referred to us, shared the research study details, and sought the ministers' interest in and consent to being interviewed. We interviewed people who identified as a leader or minister in the church and who agreed to make themselves available for interview via phone or video conference.

Phase Two, which overlapped with phase one during the first two months, was a four-month period during which the interviews were conducted. Interviews took place "virtually" either by phone or video-conference, were mostly one-on-one except for one case in which the co-pastors chose to be interviewed together, lasted between 30 to 45 minutes long, and were audio-recorded to assist in the accurate recall of the content. Phase Three included interview transcribing and data coding. The transcriptions were thematized and coded based on the research questions: What economic practices do the congregations embody? What is radical or reforming about their ecclesial economics? What are their theological motivations? Does being Wesleyan make a difference to a congregation's economic practices, and if so, in what ways?

Radical and Reforming Wesleyan Congregations

Our analysis of the data collected through the interviews resulted in findings we here present through two frameworks, the first is general descriptive information about the congregations, who are they and what do they do? And the second relates to how the congregations organize economically – their organizational patterns and emphases. Below then are, first, the general descriptive details, followed by major themes and patterns emerging from a more focused analysis on the congregations' economic life.

General Congregational Descriptions

The congregations included in the study represented most major geographic areas of the United States with the exception of the Northwestern states. After initiating contact with over 50 recommended congregations, 21 congregations agreed to participate in the study; one was dropped from the data analysis for lack of relevance.[6] Though a final 20 congregations are represented in the analysis, the study includes a total of 21 ministers as one interview included two co-pastors from the same congregation.[7] Overall, the congregations reflect great diversity, with wide variations in size, founding dates, tenure of the minister, budget, church structure, and ministries. Ministers' tenure ranged from 3 months to 26 years, with 9 of the 21 pastors interviewed being the founding pastors of the congregation. Congregations were founded as

[6] 1) Cass Community UMC, Detroit, MI; 2) Church for All People UMC, Columbus, OH; 3) Central Arlington UMC, Arlington, VA; 4) Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministry, Oklahoma City, OK; 5) Emory UMC Fellowship, Washington, D.C.; 6) Galveston Central UMC, Galveston, TX; 7) Grace Place, Memphis, TN; 8) Harvard-Epworth UMC, Cambridge, MA; 9) Peace River Christian Fellowship, San Diego, CA; 10) Reach 77 Network (Nazarene), Chicago, IL; 11) Resurrection Church of the Nazarene, Manhattan, NY; 12) Simple Church (UMC), Grafton, MA; 13) The Hub (Wesleyan), Roseville, CA; 14) Trinity Atlanta UMC, Atlanta, GA; 15) Trinity Granite City UMC, Granite City, IL; 16) Trinity Wesleyan, Allentown, PA; 17) True Life Family Resource Center Nazarene, Kansas City, MO; 18) Union Dallas UMC, Dallas, TX; 19) Wesleyan Stroudsburg, Stroudsburg, PA; 20) Zip Code Connection (UMC), North, TX.

[7] Reach 77 Network.

early as 1854 and as recently as one year ago; 7 congregations are new church plants (NCP) and were founded within the last 6 years.[8]

In terms of their church form and structure, of the 20 congregations included in the data analysis, 11 of them are stand-alone congregations and 8 of them are or have an affiliated not-for-profit organization (6 are affiliated and 2 exist as their own 501(c)3).[9] One final ministry, Zip Code Connection, is a project of the North Texas Annual Conference that focuses its efforts on the two financially poorest zip codes in its geographic area. One fourth of the congregations have bi-vocational ministers, two of which have ministers who are fully volunteer and receive no pay from the congregation.[10] Two other clergy identified themselves as "low-paid" and mentioned that, "fortunately," their spouse was able to support them financially.

Ecclesial Economic Structure and Forms

In our interviews with the ministers, we asked a series of questions to help us get at their congregation's economic structure and form. As these were congregations that were recommended to us by a denominational leader as fitting our criteria of practicing a radical or reforming economics, we asked questions that would reveal how each congregation organized themselves economically and the character of their practices. Questions included: Tell us what is important to you as a community financially, economically; Can you tell us any favorite stories related to your congregation's economic life together?; How do you address economic concerns or questions as a community when they arise?; Tell us about your church budget and its priorities. The themes and patterns we describe below emerge from a two-part analysis of, 1) what was shared in the interview as a whole by each minister about their congregation and 2) the transcripts of all the interviews collectively.

When looking at the individual congregations, there were three significant groupings observed about their economic organization: 1) congregations whose structure includes a non-profit, 2) congregations that are economically reforming in creative ways, and 3) congregations experiencing a renewal such that their economics are also transforming. The question as to whether and to what degree their structure or reform is inspired and shaped by Wesleyan theology is a separate consideration we return to in the last section.

1. *Non-Profit Affiliated Congregations*

Of the eight congregations with an affiliated non-profit organization, seven of them founded a 501(c)3 and make up this first grouping.[11] Their forming of a non-profit developed out of their efforts to respond to the needs of their community. Specifically, all seven congregations are

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[8] New church plants included: Grace Place, Memphis, TN; Peace River Christian Fellowship, San Diego, CA; Reach 77 Network, Chicago, IL; Resurrection Church of the Nazarene, Manhattan, NY; Simple Church, Grafton, MA; The Hub, Roseville, CA; Union Dallas, Dallas, TX.

[9] 1) Cass Community UMC, Detroit, MI; 2) Church for All People UMC, Columbus, OH; 3) Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministry, Oklahoma City, OK; 4) Emory UMC Fellowship, Washington, D.C.; 5) Trinity Atlanta UMC, Atlanta, GA; 6) Trinity Granite City UMC, Granite City, IL; 7) True Life Family Resource Center Nazarene, Kansas City, MO; 8) Union Dallas UMC, Dallas, TX.

[10] These include: Peace River Christian Fellowship, Reach 77 Network, Resurrection Church of the Nazarene, The Hub, and True Life Resource Center. Ministers of Resurrection Church and True Life Christian Center are fully volunteer.

[11] One of the 8, Union Dallas UMC, while it runs as a non-profit and could be included in this grouping, is a better fit in the next category because of its more creative, reforming character (coffee house church). See footnote 12 above for the list of all 8 non-profit affiliated congregations.

comprised of, and also minister to, low-income/below-poverty, working class, homeless or unstably housed persons, and/or currently or previously incarcerated persons. Several of them identify as being made up of persons from mixed socio-economic levels but also emphasize the great financial strains experienced by those in their community—both within and outside of their congregation. Responding to the financial struggles of their community was the primary recurring theme of this grouping of non-profit founding congregations. In one interview, the minister reported the story of when a congregant came to her and said, “I need help…Lisa, I don’t, I have no way to feed the kiddos…I literally have one can of food in my house, I don’t know what I’m gonna do.” These words of a grandfather who was raising seven grandchildren caused Lisa and the congregation to conduct an informal two-question survey within a ten-block radius of their church: 1) What is your greatest need? 2) How might we be a better neighbor? Within minutes, even as the surveys were being distributed in the community, they were being returned, a total of 200, and the recurring theme was “We’re hungry, we need help with food.” As Pastor Lisa reports, “That was one of the first times that we began to understand the hunger.” Stories of this character were repeatedly relayed by the ministers of these non-profit affiliated congregations as part of how their congregations moved into founding a non-profit as they responded to their communities’ needs.

At Trinity Atlanta, one-fourth of the congregation is homeless or unstably housed. Their ministries include a community kitchen (formerly a soup kitchen), a shelter for homeless men with substance abuse, and emergency housing for women and children. At Church for All People, the minister reports that church congregants are “very very low-income” with two-thirds living below poverty such that “they can’t pay their bills.” They run a (free) Fresh Food Market as part of their healthy living and eating initiative and run a Community Development Organization that is developing affordable housing. True Life Family Resource Center is located in an economically depressed community where “people are barely making it.” Their non-profit, *which is all volunteer run* and has no paid staff (not even the minister), runs a kitchen that serves lunch every day 365 days a year, as well as a community breakfast every Saturday. They also run Emancipation Station and Freedom House, a day shelter for women and children and a transitional housing for women where that also teach skill-building classes, respectively.

For these 501(c)3-founding congregations, it is their direct encounter with the basic unmet needs of their community that shapes their economic structure and organization around a non-profit. They are located in mostly poor and economically depressed areas and actively address at least two of three recurring primary concerns: food insecurity, emergency shelter/affordable housing, and breaking the cycle of poverty and incarceration. In terms of housing, three of these congregations mention the gentrification taking place in their community and the displacement people are experiencing as they are being priced out of their homes and neighborhoods. Within this grouping of congregations, some of the projects their non-profits are developing include affordable housing in the form of “Tiny Home” communities, an affordable housing project of 91 rental units, transitional housing for people coming out of prison, as well as emergency shelter. Several of them referenced housing homeless individuals and families in their church buildings. They directly feed hungry people through a variety of programs, from running a free Fresh Food Market, “Twigs” – a summer lunch program for kids run in partnership with area schools, that in one summer alone provides over 103,000 lunches, to running soup kitchens/community kitchens that provide hundreds of thousands of meals yearly.

At the same time, these congregations express actively seeking to disrupt the cycle of poverty and committing themselves to investing in the economic mobility of their communities. Their

commitment is not simply to address the immediate need of people in their community, but also the causes behind the need. Trinity Atlanta explicitly identified a two-pronged approach to its work: 1) address the immediate needs and 2) address their causes in the form of advocacy and effort toward making systemic change. Faith Fowler of Cass Community in Detroit stated "I'm actually sick of running a soup kitchen." What she wants is to eradicate poverty. She seeks her community member's economic mobility so that they may "have a chance not only to stop being homeless but to stop being poor. And that's a whole different…scenario." They do their work in ways that seek to address systemic issues behind the needs of their communities through both collaborative partnerships across their community. Almost all of them mentioned their partnerships and collaboration with city government, schools, and other community organizations, with many of their ministries being joint effort, along with more personalized efforts such as financial literacy classes, offering no-interest loans, job training and skills-building classes, recovery programs, and developing creative incentive programs to encourage people to start a savings account. At Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries in Oklahoma City (CJAMM), the focus is specifically "to break the generational cycle of incarceration in Oklahoma," which "incarcerates the highest [number of persons] of any other state in the nation."

Finally, while these congregations with their affiliated non-profits are comprised of low-income/below-poverty, working class, homeless or unstably housed, and incarcerated persons, their congregations both *receive from* and at the same time *give to* the ministries. They are churches with "people who understand what it means to live in poverty," and they "take what they have and share it – then it multiplies." The minister of Church for All People in Columbus, Ohio, proudly reported that though

> the majority of the members have very low income… the church pays a hundred percent of its apportionments. It's actually a leader in the annual conference in per capita giving, just so you know. Um, uh, and, you know, people have very limited income, um…it is sacrificial giving of very low-income people, right, very, very low-income. It somewhere between inspires, humbles, uh, or flat-out embarrasses the third of us that have full income.

In the case of CJAMM, which is run by a very small staff (three sites, 7 staff total) and over 600 volunteers, when we asked the minister to share a favorite story of their congregation's financial life together, she referenced the way people always give back after graduating from their programs, whether in the form of volunteering or through financial support: "[it is] great to see someone who gets out of prison with absolutely nothing and within a few years, they're donating back to make sure that someone else who has nothing can then, uh, be able to have a successful life."

These seven congregations, then, are economically and institutionally organized around the very basic yet unmet needs of their communities—food and shelter—and the overarching concerns of living in systemic poverty and generational cycles of incarceration. They are both concerned to meet the needs of the community and address their causes; they seek the systemic transformation of their communities, and that takes the form of establishing a not-for-profit organization.

2. *Economically Reforming Congregations*

Another grouping of eight congregations, different in character from the non-profit affiliated congregations above, are those that are economically reforming in creative ways though not

necessarily in response to the economic needs of their community. One note of comparison that stands out between the first category of congregations above and this one is that the congregations in the first grouping are all *long-standing* congregations – none of them are new church plants. In contrast, this second grouping of economically reforming congregations are all new church plants. And while their reform is not *necessarily* shaped by economic concerns revolving around food, shelter, and systemic poverty, they are nonetheless creative in the economic character their church plant takes and represents a spectrum of creatively innovative entrepreneurial forms working with very small budgets and un-paid staffing.

Simple Church, Union Dallas, Grace Place, and Reach 77 Network are all reforming through a design overhaul of sorts. Simple Church is a "farm to table" dinner church that revolves always around a simple shared meal of bread and soup, conversational sermons, and the eucharist. It is a NCP started with seed money given to them as a result of another church closing down. They do not have or want a church building, but instead rent space. It has a total budget of about 100,000 dollars a year that is in part raised by selling loaves of bread, running a catering service, and a food truck. They prioritize having a small environmental footprint and intend to multiply one church a year, with three already in place. Additionally, it has 55 affiliated in places across the United States that use their liturgies and design. Union Dallas is a church that runs *as* a not-for-profit coffee shop that is similar in entrepreneurial spirit and has as their goal to "ultimately… transform customers into positive agents of change." They explicitly express their value for sustainability and use the coffee shop as both their non-profit business and location for their various services, events, and gathering on site. Most of its budget is directed to the coffee shop operations, but ten percent of their revenue is directly diverted to local causes. And while Union Dallas is a non-profit affiliated congregation, it is different in character from the first group of congregations above and fits more consistently with this group of reforming NCPs.

Differently reforming than these first two examples is Grace Place—a congregation in a women's prison. While they own a building that is necessarily outside the walls of the prison, its congregants are primarily women in prison. The minister reports that Grace Place is a congregation that practices "Sacrificial Giving." From prison, the women raise own funds, create crafts and wares to be sold outside the prison, and directs the funds to go toward programming, the pastor's salary, and missions/outreach. Not financially supported by the conference and raising their own funds, they help provide food for those who are hungry outside the walls of the prison and recovery programming such as 12-steps. The women also play an active role in the decision-making process about the congregation's budget and its use of funds, including in their recent decision to buy their own building.

Reach 77 Network and Zip Code Connection are ministries distinct from the first three congregations – these two projects have more of a network design than a traditional congregation. The first, Reach 77 Network, is a Nazarene "church type mission" that attempts to rethink church so as to connect intentionally with the 77 communities of Chicago's urban context, which the denomination requested they help them do: "We don't know how to do the city—help us figure it out." There are no paid staff at Reach 77 Network and all money raised and received is used for events, community partnerships, and outreach/ministries supporting survivors of human trafficking, refugees, and other community organizations. They seek to be a model of church committed to "simplicity," that is, not financially dependent, and is able to give all their money away. They are interested in creating a model of church that can be reproduced anywhere, with no funds necessary, and shaped appropriate for its context. The second, Zip Code Connection, is an economic development effort of the North Texas Annual Conference that

“leverages resources” to support congregations in their region from the two most low-income zip codes in order to enable them to better engage with community, build relationships, garner trust, and become a hub for ministry and mission in their context. Zip Code Connection is apportionment-supported and was born of the leadership’s intention to live into better ministry with the poor.

In line with the emphasis to reform church in more simple and sustainable forms are Peace River Christian Fellowship, Resurrection Church of the Nazarene, and The Hub—the last three congregations in this category. While they might resemble a more “typical” congregation in their visible form, they are new church plants intentionally seeking to keep a streamlined budget. This they do by renting space, being “light on staff pay” by having bi-vocational staff or unpaid staff, and being generally frugal so as to focus their expenses on shared meals, outreach to the community, hospitality, and contributing to community partners such as the local food pantry. Their congregants are not necessarily *primarily* low-income, but they seek to witness to the Kingdom of God through their active presence in the community and by being a “hub” and directing most of their funding toward those efforts.

3. Renewing Congregations

This last grouping of five congregations stands out in that they are all over 100 year-old churches that have experienced a renewing such that they are more connected and involved with their community than they previously were and are directing more finances toward those efforts. Beginning by first simply opening its doors to their neighborhood with a simple offering of coffee and donuts, Central Arlington UMC in Arlington, Virginia, which has a history of structural racism built into its founding, now serves as a weekly gathering place for people seeking social services. They provide a weekly breakfast and partner with a local non-profit organization to be a site and point of contact to other social services. In our interview with her, the minister commented that she continually is in awe at the congregation’s ability to preserve its current economic and ethnic diversity – from people who live in multi-million dollar homes to people who sleep on the street. She describes them as a congregation that has a “spirit of generosity” and that includes people for whom $1 a week offering truly represents their sacrificial giving. This, she says, was all inspired when “over a decade ago, Bishop Peter Storey came to this church and did a workshop with them and led them on a prayer walk, and that prayer walk opened their eyes to their neighbors who were sleeping on their doorsteps.”

Trinity Wesleyan in Allentown, Pennsylvania was a “previously dying church” that is now a “new believer’s church” interested in “changing how church happens.” With their new pastor of just four years and in response to the rapid growth in population and influx of former Manhattan residents into their community following the 9/11 attack in New York City, the congregation sought to “bridge the gap between the church and the community.” Their approach, as described by the pastor, is:

> a very intentional vision of, we’re gonna reach outside these four walls and be part of our community. Which means, we’re gonna be very creative, we’re gonna do things that perhaps the church has never done before. I say this all the time, if we’re gonna be an effective church in 2018 and beyond, it’ll be because we’re doing things that the church hasn’t, um, dreamed of yet. And, so, how do we become a hub in the community? And that’s really kind of our focus, hm, is, is, is that very question, and we ask that in almost all of our leadership

> meetings. How do we become a hub in this community? What relationships do we need to build, um, in order to show people who Jesus is?

A couple examples of their "totally [thinking] outside the box" is to *not* run a standard stewardship campaign or a weekly collection plate, but to explicitly state to the congregation the concrete needs of the church and community at a given moment and "give them…that opportunity." The objective is "always point them back to mission and what we're about…just being intentional about, this is who we are, and we're gonna continue to move forward. We're going to practice irrational generosity." Or when, for example, a "connect card" is filled out by a visitor, or whenever someone "checks-in" on Facebook the congregation makes a donation back to whatever ministry partner in their community they have committed to that month. This "previously dying church" actively working to be "a hub in the community," is mostly made up of de-churched and unchurched people. It now holds a "homeless warming station" in the winter, runs Zumba classes, pays for counseling and life coaches; and is planning to open a Coffee Shop that can serve as a safe space for tutoring, counseling, and for community. It is an alive and thriving church, active in its community.

The remaining three congregations have similar stories or characteristics. Galveston Central UMC in Texas, also with a new minister of just four years, came to a point of having only 4 people left in the congregation. In 2014 they shut down the church for six-months and relaunched in 2015. They now run programs to connect with the community, such as Iconoclast Artists that teaches kids poetry and visual arts, teach about sustainable farming, are beginning a catering business, and have had homeless people live in the church. They identify as a "community of misfits" and include people who "have felt systemic marginalization and exclusion, including a large number of homeless and lower-income people." They value simplicity, seek a fair distribution of salaries among the paid staff, and guide their spending (and everything else they do) around four values: Curiosity, Creativity, Community, and Care for the Whole Person. Wesleyan Stroudsburg in Pennsylvania was a congregation with "a bad reputation," but is now known to actively respond to the needs of the community. Each of their new ministries was started in response to people's needs, using their building for a food pantry, clothing closet, to "celebrate recovery," and as a cold-weather homeless shelter, with an emphasis on preserving people's dignity. And, lastly, Harvard-Epworth UMC in Cambridge, Massachusetts, also with a new pastor of just 4 years, is a church founded in the 1860s that is conservative theologically, but socially progressive. They hold an Outdoor Church as part of their ministry to the homeless, participates in the Poor People's Campaign, and gives ten percent of their budget away, supporting 24 national and global organizations.

Though these last five congregations are more traditional in form than the non-profit affiliated congregations or the ones that are new church plants, they seemed to have been recommended for our study because of the more recent renewing they are manifesting. Four of the five congregations have new ministers who have been there for only just four years – Wesleyan Stroudsburg's minister has been there for eight years. Part of what stands out among these congregations is their renewed focus on connecting with the community and a new sense of vision or purpose, which, for some, seems to be a consequence of a "near death" experience.

What's Wesleyan about these Congregational Economics?

When asked about the theological motivations and inspirations undergirding their approaches to economic and financial concerns, most pastors cited biblical support while only a few

mentioned theologians or other resources—such as, for example, John Wesley. This was true whether they were thinking in terms of their own budgets and finances or their economic ministry to others. Very few mentioned other theologians, though several mentioned theological ideas or doctrines, such as a theology of economic abundance, our creation in the image of God, or the importance of trusting God. One name came up several times, David Ramsey, of Financial Peace University. Ramsey's website and podcasts are often used by church folks in the U.S. as a way of helping people get out of debt. Ramsey critiques reliance on the federal government, and he preaches self-reliance, the elimination of debt, and financial independence. Some progressive Wesleyan churches have found the individualistic and capitalistic framework in Ramsey's thinking about finance a bit at odds with their own outlook and so have abandoned the FPU program.

Pastors in our study were asked about whether being a Wesleyan was important to the work of their congregations (again, with regard to economic concerns). For about one-third of the 20 pastors we talked to, Wesley was relatively unimportant. For another third, Wesley was unimportant in any explicit or direct way, though his influence was understood to be embedded implicitly in the life, DNA, or history of the congregation and the congregation's leadership. For the last third, Wesley was explicitly important in a variety of ways. All six of those in the last category were congregations in the United Methodist Church. Wesley was not explicitly or centrally important in the four Nazarene congregations and in the three congregations in the Wesleyan denomination (even if some of those pastors found ways of expressing some remote or implicit connection, especially in their own lives and training).

The work these congregations are doing is impressive and inspiring. But clearly, for most, there is not a direct connection to Wesleyan economics. Of course, we should not discount the importance of the "DNA" factor, mentioned by several pastors. Among the pastors who expressed some connection to or influence from Wesley or Wesleyan theology in their congregations' economic life and ministry, that influence showed up in five primary ways, with each of the five getting roughly equal mention within the group of 20 congregations, when considered as a whole. In identifying each of these five below, therefore, they are not listed in any order of priority or frequency.

1. Wesley's Example. Unsurprisingly, the first is Wesley's own example and solidarity with the poor, his emphasis on economic justice, his own personal economic commitments, or his creative approaches to economic ministry and reform. Said the pastor of UM Church For All People in Columbus, Ohio,

> We think we take much more seriously than the vast majority of United Methodists in North America Wesley's commitment to minister with the poor. I don't think there's any authentic reading of John Wesley's own life and ministry, that doesn't come to terms with the fact that Wesley was committed to having the church minister to, with, and for the people who were economically poor.

This pastor went on to cite Wesley's efforts around caring for people who were hungry and poor as well as his efforts to fight negative influences such as the gin industry. The pastor claimed that the fact their congregation holds three worship services four days a week where they open a Free Store "is for us a pretty meaningful translation of bringing into the twenty-first century Wesley's understanding of field preaching—preaching in front of the mines, factories."

Most of the pastors who cited Wesley's own example cited it less as a congregational influence or motivation (though it may well have inspired the hearts and minds of those who had read about Wesley) and instead simply wanted to make the point that they were consistent with Wesley's own commitments. As the pastor of Trinity UMC in Granite City, Illinois, put it, Wesley would be "very okay" with what they were doing because Wesley "was big into the poor and the imprisoned and the widows . . . and that whole, you know, world is my parish." That same pastor went on to draw a comparison between her congregation's posture toward others in need and Wesley's own simple lifestyle and generosity where possessions over and above what is needed for the basics of life was concerned.

The Simple Church in Grafton, Massachusetts is a dinner church that supports itself through various trades along the lines of a monastic funding model. The pastor of Simple Church noted the fact that Wesley likewise sold a significant number of books and pamphlets but gave so much of those proceeds away. Along the same lines, the pastor of Union UMC in Dallas cited the fact that Wesley operated various social enterprises to fund ministry with the poor without having to rely overly much on outside sources, and then likened their coffee shop operations to that approach. As the pastor noted,

> Wesley would send out these circuit riders from Bristol to go to various parts of England, [and] he would stuff their saddlebags full of books to sell, . . . many of which were, you know, theology that was important to either the Methodist movement or was written by other people who were part of the Methodist movement. And, and so, you know, before there was Amazon dot com, right, like, Wesley's delivering books out to people who wouldn't have access to be able to purchase the books otherwise.

Quoting Wesley, the pastor referred to this willingness to be involved in creative social and business enterprises as a willingness "to become vile for the sake of the gospel."

2. Wesleyan Connections. When asked if being a Wesleyan made any difference to their congregation's economic life and ministry, several pastors mentioned the importance of the Methodist connection or other denominational partnerships and collaborations. As one pastor put it, "being a connectional church directly influences how we understand how we are entrusted with resources and how we're called to be church." The Executive Director of Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries in Oklahoma City, for example, claimed that the Methodist connection is vital to their work, with over 40 churches helping people in their Exodus House move into society after incarceration: "I don't think that we could really survive if it wasn't for our Methodist congregations." In a similar way, the pastor of Trinity UMC in Atlanta, when pressed about whether being a Wesleyan makes any difference to that congregation, went straight to United Methodist polity, and in particular to "the idea of the connection." As Pastor Ezell put it,

> we're a small church, [and] we could not do the work that we do without the support of the connection. The Trinity Table was an advance special for many, many years. . . . the homeless shelter was an advance special. We have volunteers come in from other churches all over the conference. . . . The Wesleyan idea of connectionalism enables Trinity to do the work that it does. It's not just us. We're not in this by ourselves. We really have been able to harness the power of the connection to provide services in our community and to really engage our community and build relationships in our community.

Yet another UM pastor claimed that "being a connectional church directly influences how we understand how we are entrusted with resources and how we're called to be church." And one of the leaders of Zip Code Connection in North Texas said that he sees Methodist connectionalism enabling them "to combine local leadership and local power with the resources and connections of our global church."

While United Methodists have a vigorous sense of connectionalism built into their polity, Nazarenes and Wesleyans were also quick to point out the importance of historically Wesleyan commitments in their denomination and in the present way denominations and congregational networks at various levels sustain and support their efforts. For one of the Nazarene congregations, for example, the pastors referenced the fact that the true DNA of the Church of the Nazarene, the reason it came into being, was a motivation to be among the least of these. They referenced the story that the word Nazarene was originally chosen because it was associated in Jesus' time with those who are looked down on ("nothing good comes from Nazareth"). As one of the pastors described the Nazarene origins with which their church identified, "we want to identify with the people that nobody else wanted to be with." This reference to Nazarene DNA was more than a historical reference, however. Being a Nazarene means being part of a "family," and this includes paying apportionments and participating in global mission giving and other denominational initiatives. It means having global partners that shape and support local efforts and ministry.

3. A Wesleyan Theology of Grace. A third important influence on economic life and ministry among Wesleyan congregations is a Wesleyan theology of grace. The Methodist congregation in Columbus, Ohio, for example, operates a Free Store, which they understand to be a literal contexualization of their theology of grace, a free gift. The core affirmation of their church, claims the pastor, is that "God loves you just the way you are" and that "God's not finished with you yet." Both of these affirmations are rooted in a Wesleyan theology of grace that is prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. The UM congregation we talked to in Memphis is even called "Grace Place," which the pastor related explicitly to Wesleyan sensibilities and to Wesley's emphasis on caring for others, especially those who were incarcerated or had been treated in an unjust manner. The pastor of Grace Place emphasized the way this emphasis on grace was also connected to their weekly Eucharistic services.

For Galveston Central UMC in Texas, the Wesleyan emphasis on grace leads them to offer radical inclusion and acceptance—"belonging precedes believing," as the pastor put it. Likewise, the pastor of Emory Fellowship in Washington, D.C. emphasized a Wesleyan theology of grace because "it is a theology that calls for us to include and not exclude, to embrace not send away, to realize that while we have great accountability to live the best life we can for Jesus, we are also people who have sinned, but we have been forgiven. Therefore, we should offer forgiveness, we should offer salvation, and we should offer salvation in its totality. [This] again is physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, relational, and financial."

The pastor of Dallas Union UMC, which operates its non-profit through the proceeds of a coffee shop, said "we're rooted very heavily in the notion of the omnipresence of God and in Wesleyan notions of prevenient grace and actually trying to build ministry around that assumption." For this congregation, that means that God is already present in their community and even in corporations and businesses. The pastor (loosely) quoted John Wesley from his sermon *On the Omnipresence of God*, where Wesley says, "what shall we do with this awful

consideration that God is present in all things, in all places, in all situations, in all people? Should we not labor continually to acknowledge His presence?"

4. Wesleyan Three Economic Rules. Fourth, several pastors cited the importance to their congregations of Wesley's famous three economic "rules"— "earn all you can," "save all you can," and "give all you can." None of the pastors placed any notable emphasis on first of these three rules, but several related the second rule closely to congregational emphases on faithful stewardship and a radical dependence upon God's care and provision. The third rule on "giving all you can" underlay postures of generosity in contrast to holding on to one's goods or attempting to hoard, secure, and possess. While Wesley's economic rules were mentioned as frequently as the other influences here, there was not as much depth of conversation around them from the pastors.

5. Wesleyan Formation. Lastly, several pastors mentioned the importance of various forms of Wesleyan formation such as small groups, discipleship, eucharistic practice, prayer, or accountability. The pastor of a small Nazarene church in San Diego, for example, claimed that their small groups focused on prayer, discipleship, and Bible study in a way that reflected a Wesleyan influence (again, relying on the language of "DNA"), and that these groups were often a place where financial concerns were shared and prayed over. The pastor of Simple Church described their model of church as "very Wesleyan" in that, like Wesley's model, they are basically "extra church," and a small, simple form of sharing, fellowship, and formation. As the pastor described Wesley's model from which they borrowed:

> People were still expected to go to church on Sunday and take the eucharist. And then they came and had these classes of people that were basically small groups of people who were holding each other accountable, reading the scriptures together, having conversations, eating together.

The simplicity expressed here was echoed in several congregations and their attempts to get back to basics when it comes to being the church. This simplicity, accountability, and accent on small groups frequently was claimed to have an economic shape and impact.

Concluding Observations

The first and most obvious conclusion from our study is that Wesleyan congregations that understand themselves, or who are perceived by others within their tradition, as economically radical and reforming are relatively few. Denominational and judicatory leaders were hard pressed to identify congregations that operate with a shared economic structure (shared purse, etc.), that are committed to practices of simplicity, or that practice an economics of justice for and solidarity with the poor. We are confident there are many more congregations that would fit that identity than were surfaced in our study. Yet it was sobering to interact with leaders in the denominations we studied and to learn they could not identify many such churches.

Second, congregations that are radical and reforming in relation to the economic needs of their communities often tend to be those whose life and experience are or become (there are differences in chronological order) closely knit with the lives and experiences of the poor, dispossessed, or marginalized. Those congregations exhibit (or come to exhibit) a solidarity with the poor that shapes their economic shape and commitments. This, of course, parallels Wesley's

own experience and approach to ministry, in which direct proximity and relationship with the sick, hungry, poor, and imprisoned is necessary to "soften our heart, and to make us naturally care for each other."[12] As Jennings points out, for Wesley, "it was far better 'to *carry* relief to the poor, than to *send* it,'" (his emphasis), thus, a practice such as visitation, "was directly necessary for developing the sort of compassion that, for Wesley, was the heart of true religion."[13]

Third, congregations increasingly utilize a 501(c)(3) corporate structure to carry out their reforming economic work. That is worth interrogating a bit more theologically, however. While the public nonprofit structure is an effective model for raising funds and garnering grants from donors that may not normally give to churches (such as major foundations or governmental entities), does that structure have the net effect of distancing the congregation from its economic work in communities, handing it over to a separate corporation? And what might this mean for a congregation's theology of ministry, including specifically its theology of economic ministry? For some congregations, the line demarcating the church and the non-profit corporation is fairly thin, and one can detect a lively "sourcing" of the non-profits work from church members. But that is not always the case.

Lastly, we learned that the translation of Wesley's theology, personal example, and legacy when it comes to congregational life and practice is at best indirect, if at all. That is not to disregard or denigrate the importance of leadership formation in Wesleyan tradition. Often that deeper formation is a powerful shaping influence that inclines persons toward caring about the economic dimensions of Wesley's legacy. But the link from pastoral formation to congregational priorities and action is tenuous when it comes to Wesleyan economic practices. Most congregational leaders could not claim that their own Wesleyan training had made much direct difference in their congregations.

In looking at contemporary Wesleyan congregations, even if we might have *hoped* to find numerous examples or traces of a radical Wesleyan economics, perhaps we should not really have *expected* it. Wesley appears to have abandoned or seriously altered some of his own approaches over time, including his desire that within the select societies, "every member, till we can have all things in common, will bring once a week, bona fide, all he can toward a common stock"[14] While there is no evidence that Wesley stopped believing in such a practice, he faced enough opposition within his societies that he stopped pressing it.

If Wesley's radical economic practices—and the theology of holiness that both sustained and was sustained by those practices—have not caught the imagination of most Wesleyan congregations today, it is also not clear, then, that Wesley himself was successful in his reforming work where economic life is concerned—for example, in his efforts to put into place organizational structures, ecclesial practices, and theological frameworks that would nourish those economic commitments. Perhaps we should conclude with Theodore Jennings that if "solidarity with the poor is not one program among others, however important, but is the norm of all activity of the people called Methodists, of those who seek to embody scriptural Christianity," then "by Wesley's own standard, the Methodist movement must be reckoned a failure."[15]

We found that Wesley still inspires congregations and their leaders to think creatively and in radical ways about the economic dimensions of their lives together. But Wesley set the bar high. His practices and commitments may end up being treated as something of a shiny relic to be kept

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[12] Jennings, 54, quoting *Journal*, Nov. 24, 1760, III:28.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist*, §VIII: 3
[15] Jennings, 66, 181.

on the fireplace mantle, dusted off now and then, admired, and then re-shelved. Whether contemporary Wesleyan congregations can catch something of Wesley's vision in ways that exceed a few isolated examples remains to be seen. We know that Wesley's radical commitments to economic generosity, simplicity, and justice were intricately connected to his theological commitments where holiness is concerned. We should not be surprised then, if economic reform among Wesleyans today will require a theological reform as well.

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