

Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, August 2018

**RESTORING GRACE, RESTORING *UBUNTU*: RECLAIMING WESLEYAN SOCIAL HOLINESS BY
RECOVERING THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF *UBUNTU***

M. Fulgence Nyengele, PhD
Methodist Theological School in Ohio
Copyright©2018 by M. Fulgence Nyengele

In what ways can the Wesleyan tradition inspire a robust social witness in contexts of political violence and oppression? How can the recovery of *ubuntu* deepen our understanding of God's grace and inform prophetic pastoral practices in situations of oppression? How can we mobilize the spiritual vitality generated by personal holiness to influence society and bring about lasting social change in contexts of recurring violence and political instability? This paper examines the African concept of *ubuntu* as a resource that can deepen our understanding of holiness or perfect love and the related call to promote and advance human dignity and justice based on *ubuntu*'s affirmation of the humanity of others as inextricably linked to our own humanity. The paper explores ways that works of piety and works of mercy are essential in the development of holiness, suggesting that the practice of *ubuntu* could also be viewed as a means of grace, and more specifically an expression of works of mercy. Recovering the notion of *ubuntu* can help to redress the neglect of social holiness and uphold social action and reform as equally important as personal piety; a link clearly established in the Wesleyan tradition. More specifically, the paper assesses the relevance of holiness and *ubuntu* in addressing public issues of significance in situations of violence, oppression, and marginalization.

The Context: DR Congo

The context informing my thinking is DR Congo's history of political violence and recurring patterns of social instability that undermine people's dignity and impede human

flourishing. DR Congo has had one of the most brutal and unfortunate colonial histories of any country on the African continent.¹ The legacies of colonialism continue to be manifested through recurring patterns of armed conflicts, war, successive dictatorships, gross violations of human rights, mismanagement and misappropriation of the country's resources by a small group in power, the growing gap between the rich minority and the poor majority, massive unemployment, displacement of people due to war and corporate greed, arbitrary arrests of people who resist, and the killing of activists and innocent civilians, etc. Indeed, DR Congo has been mired in the spiral of violence since its independence in 1960, with periods of relative peace interspersed throughout its tumultuous history. The first democratic elections in forty-six years organized in 2006, and the second in 2011, seemed to signal a break with violence as the only solution to political differences and problems.² Unfortunately, the lack of a peaceful transition of power reasserted itself in 2016, when the presidential elections were not organized.³ It remains to be seen whether free and transparent elections will take place in December 2018 as scheduled. But the exclusion of some popular opposition leaders from the electoral process is already a cause for great concern as well as an indication that the cycle of violence may continue,

¹ For some details on colonial violence and the traumatizing effects of related historical injustices on the Congolese people, see M. Fulgence Nyengele, "Healing Postcolonial Trauma in the African Experience: The Case of DR Congo," in *Pastoral Care, Health, Healing, and Wholeness in African Contexts*, eds. Tapiwa Mucherera and Emmanuel Lartey (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 76-98.

² The first democratic elections were held in 1960 at independence. Patrice Emery Lumumba was elected Prime Minister, and Joseph Kasavubu was elected President. A political crisis developed very quickly that led to the assassination of Lumumba in January 1961. After several coup attempts, Joseph-Desiré Mobutu finally took power in 1965 and he ruled the country until 1997 when he was toppled by Laurent-Desiré Kabila, who was supported by neighboring Rwanda and Uganda. Kabila was assassinated in January 2001 and his son Joseph Kabila took power immediately after his death. J. Kabila was elected in 2006, and re-elected in 2011. His second and final term ended in December 2016. But elections to choose his successor were not organized, and he has not yet stepped down at this writing. Parliamentary and Presidential elections are scheduled for December 2018. It is not yet clear if things will go as scheduled, or whether the elections will be postponed again for a later time.

³ It is important to note here that there has never been a nonviolent transition of power in DR Congo since it gained independence from Belgium in 1960. Needless to say, this violent approach to power and governance has resulted in chronic instability of social and political institutions, recurring economic crises, and the use of violence as the sole solution to political problems. See Nyengele, "Healing Postcolonial Trauma," 87-88, 90, 98.

and the unnecessary suffering of the Congolese people will be prolonged; their humiliation, deepened and extended. The effects of all this on the dignity and integrity of the Congolese people have been enormous and difficult to describe, as words are really inadequate to capture the depth of the trauma suffered during the colonial period and the social pain and related political and economic crises endured in after independence. Some Congolese rightly ask the question, “What independence and for who?” when reflecting on the lack of social, political, and economic progress during the post-independence years.

It is in this context of massive and overwhelming human suffering caused by all these various aspects of Congolese realities that the United Methodist Church (UMC) does mission and ministry. The church has done well in terms of evangelizing, growing in numbers, and success in the teaching of personal piety that focuses on individual salvation, personal sanctification, and the promise of heaven. The UMC also must be credited for its efforts and struggles in attempting to carry out some social programs that address issues of education and health. However, there is a lack of a clear and robust prophetic voice that critiques the abuses of power and gross violations of human rights and unequivocally speak to the need to uphold the human dignity of the Congolese people who have suffered immeasurably and unnecessarily for too long. There is a need to reclaim social holiness as an equally important dimension of sanctification that can help create a framework for the message of Wesleyan holiness to address the need to rescue and defend the human dignity and integrity of the Congolese people who have suffered severe colonial violence and continue to experience the ongoing consequences of political violence. The problem is not the lack of social engagement by the church, but rather the need for the type of social engagement that challenges the recurring historical injustices that cause and perpetuate the horrific suffering of the Congolese people. Apolitical personal pietism

that does not address the persistent and recurrent public issues that diminish human well-being and undercut human flourishing is not faithful to the Wesleyan tradition, which views holiness as a reality that joins personal piety and social action and reform. There is a need to reclaim the form of Methodism that sees God's salvation as encompassing persons, communities, society, and the whole earth. Genuine Wesleyan pietism is the bringing together of the personal, societal, and cosmic dimensions of sanctification.⁴ Reclaiming such a robust understanding of salvation would inspire efforts and stimulate the imagination to work not only for the transformation of individual lives, but also for reforming the unjust, sinful and evil societal structures and institutions—not necessarily to make them Christian, but just and supportive of human dignity.

Holiness of Heart and Life

Holiness is an important concept in the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley taught that holiness, also known as Christian perfection, sanctification, and perfect love is a central feature of the Christian life. In his teaching, Wesley makes it clear that salvation is a process of growth in grace in which the Holy Spirit working in our life initiates God's transforming work, giving us assurance of God's forgiveness and enabling us to respond to God's gift of grace. Christian perfection, holiness, sanctification, or perfect love is therefore the ongoing work of God's saving activity in our lives.⁵

However, while Wesley understood that salvation is God's initiative, he also taught that there has to be a human response and collaboration for it to take place. Thus God's salvific initiative and our human response are integral to the process of salvation which in its fullness

⁴ Hyun Seok (Joseph) Kim, "Toward a New Paradigm of Holiness Theology of Mission in Korea: Cosmic Holiness in Divine Ecology," in *The Global Impact of the Wesleyan Traditions and Their Related Movements*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. (Lanham, Maryland, and London: The Scarecrow Press, 2002), 180-81.

⁵ John Wesley, *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 284, 293.

leads toward sanctification or holiness.⁶ This explains why John Wesley maintained that the doctrine of holiness was “the goal and crown of the Christian life.”⁷ His emphasis on holiness and the expectation to be made perfect in love in this life are some of the distinctive marks of Methodist belief and practice.⁸ Wesley was very clear in stating the nature of the mission of his Methodist societies as “to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”⁹ In this sense, Methodists have always understood themselves as people called out and sent forth in mission to live out a life of love, concretized in service to the world. Holiness, as the goal of spiritual growth, is a result of continued “training of all our affections on the will of God” and “having the mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰ This training of our affections takes place in relationships with others and it involves the development of the virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control¹¹ as deep-seated dispositions of the mind and deeply embedded emotional constitutions of the heart and soul that result from our response to and participation in the life of the Spirit. These affections or holy tempers, as manifestations of holiness, are qualities and virtues that reveal the meaning and orientation of Christian existence toward God’s kingdom of love, justice, and peace. Cracknell and White, interpreting the Wesley brothers, suggest that holiness, as a quality of heart and life, is the freedom from all that diminishes human life; it is the fullness of love, and growth toward “the full stature of

⁶ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 176-179.

⁷ Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975), 69.

⁸ It is important here to note that John Wesley sees salvation, and therefore the move toward perfect love, as something that happens both instantaneously as well as gradually. In its justifying expression, salvation is instantaneous, and in its sanctifying expression it is gradual and ongoing until one goes to glory.

⁹ Albert C. Outler, “Foreword.” In Ted Campbell, *The Apostolate of United Methodism*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1979, v.

¹⁰ Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White. *An Introduction to World Methodism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.110; Philippians 2:5; all scripture references are from the NRSV, unless noted otherwise.

¹¹ Galatians 5:22-26.

Christ.”¹² And this fullness of love and growth toward the full stature of Christ is shaped in community and exercised in relationships with others.

At the heart of all of this growth and transformation is the work of grace. Wesley’s notion of grace has three aspects: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Prevenient or preventing grace is the grace that is already present and active in us before we are even aware of it; it is “free in all and free for all”—hence the affirmation of the *catholicity of grace*. The notion of prevenient grace conveys a sense of optimism about God’s presence and influence in the world despite our response; it refuses to limit God’s presence and power to certain spheres of life or exclude God’s activity from certain people or contexts. Indeed, the notion of prevenient grace refuses to colonize God, or limit God’s work to some settings only, to the exclusion of other environments. Cracknell and White put it very well when they write, “[in] Wesleyan understanding, prevenient grace is replete with divine intentionality. God is at work among *all* people at *all* times to save and deliver humankind.”¹³ This statement affirms the ever-present divine initiative in salvation, which points to a universal solicitous concern for the well-being of all. As such, there is in prevenient grace an affirmation of universal human dignity. Justifying or saving grace is the dimension that prompts the new birth and initiates the Christian life, through faith. Sanctifying grace involves a deeper transformation toward holiness of heart and life, and into the full moral character of Christ.¹⁴ Randy Maddox makes it clear that both God’s initiative and human participation are crucial in the process of salvation. He suggests that “without grace, we cannot be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced)

¹² Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 110.

¹³ Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 260-61; my emphasis.

¹⁴ While Outler affirms the three dimensions of grace in Wesleyan theology, he has also noted, in some of his writings, four aspects of grace in Wesleyan theology: prevenient, saving (i.e., justifying), sanctifying, and sacramental; see Outler, *John Wesley*, 33.

participation, God's grace will not save." This is why he uses the term "responsible grace" to describe "the grace that empowers rather than overrides human responsibility."¹⁵ And so, God's grace not only invites a response, but most importantly it empowers us to participate in our own salvation and collaborate with God's salvific activity in the world. The inclusion and affirmation of human responsibility in the work of salvation is really essential in that it reinforces and strengthens the sense of human agency and, in situations of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion it restores human dignity. The notion of responsible grace is a powerful concept that shows that God's salvific work does not only transform individuals and shape their character; by empowering people to participate in their own salvation and to cooperate with God's salvific work in the world, it also restores their self-worth and boosts their self-esteem. God's salvific work restores human dignity. Wesley's understanding of salvation speaks to this:

By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health ... the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.¹⁶

The language of *restoring* the soul to its primitive health and the *renewal* of the soul in the image of God speaks deeply to the issue human dignity. In situation of oppression, marginalization, and violence, these insights can be harnessed to affirm the value, worth, and respectability of those whose dignity is trampled. Restoring the soul to its original health is a call to holiness of heart and life—a call to Christian perfection.

Wesley considered holiness or perfection as "the grand *depositum* which God had lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to

¹⁵ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 19.

¹⁶ John Wesley. *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Part I, paragraph 3.

have raised us up.”¹⁷ However, Wesley did not understand perfection as an end state of completed growth, or something achieved once and for all; he did not understand perfection as the state of being *perfected*. Rather, he viewed perfection as *perfecting*, which is an ongoing gradual process of growth in which “further horizons of love and of participation in God always opening up beyond any given level of spiritual progress.”¹⁸ Perfection in love, therefore, indicates the presence of Christian maturity, and *perfecting* points to its openness to further development and ongoing growth. The centrality of growth in love in the transforming work of grace is an important element in Wesley’s understanding of holiness. God’s grace prompts an inner transformation, a new disposition of love toward God and neighbor, a new self-understanding, and a new outlook and hope, which facilitate further development and growth toward deeper levels of love, sustained by the ongoing work of sanctification.¹⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr. describes this process as follows: “The new birth is the beginning of the process of sanctification in which [the love of God and neighbor] grows stronger and more dominant over other motives. This culminates in entire sanctification, in which human beings attain to perfect love. All other springs of action have disappeared, and love alone remains. Holiness is thus nothing other than love.”²⁰

Methodists were therefore called to a way of life characterized by deepening love that is nurtured, sustained in community, and expresses itself in a solicitous concern for the well-being of others and the whole of creation.²¹ Hence, the significance of the notion of responsible grace

¹⁷ Quoted in Lovett H. Weems, Jr. *John Wesley’s Message Today* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources; Abingdon Press edition, 1991), 59.

¹⁸ Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 73; see also Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 151. Maddox describes sanctification as a gradual process of salvation.

¹⁹ Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 73.

²⁰ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 57.

²¹ See Randy Maddox, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation: A Continuing Wesleyan Agenda,” in *Holy Imagination: Thinking about Social Holiness*, ed. Nathan Crawford, Jonathan Dohrill, and David Wilson (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2015), 41-54. See also Randy Maddox, Reclaiming Holistic Salvation, Circuit Rider, May/June 2003, 14-15.

as something that empowers us to work with God for our own salvation and the salvation of others, as well as the whole of the created order. But it is important to note that, as a perfecting process that is always open to “further horizons of love,” this loving way of life or holy living must be nurtured and sustained by a growing and maturing faith, because holiness or perfect love is understood as “the fullness of faith.”²²

Faith, Holiness, and the Means of Grace

The relationship between perfect love, as a mark of ongoing growth in grace, and faith is really important in sustaining God’s continuing work of sanctification. Indeed, faith in the Wesleyan tradition is viewed as a *means* to a higher aim—i.e., faith mediates the fullness of love for God and neighbor, with neighbor here meaning all human beings. As a covenantal relationship with God, faith is the fruition of perfect love, just as it is productive of all Christian holiness. As Outler, interpreting Wesley, puts it: “faith is a means in order to *love* just as love is in order to *goodness*, just as goodness is in order to *happiness*—which is what God made us for, in this world—and the next.”²³ Indeed, while faith in the Wesleyan tradition is viewed as an intensely personal experience, it is not self-focused or self-absorbed; faith shapes us toward a life of love lived out in community—a life of “faith working by love, faith zealous of good works, and faith as it hath opportunity doing good unto all men [sic].”²⁴ Faith working by love is, therefore, a deepest expression of holiness or Christian perfection. But for faith to produce holiness, it is essential that we participate in the means of grace. Indeed, while grace is unearned

Maddox states that salvation is not just forgiveness, but spiritual transformation; it is not just for individuals, but society as well; it is not just for souls, but for bodies as well; not just for humans, but also for the whole of creation.

²² Albert Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 28.

²³ Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, pp. 85-86, emphasis in the original. Another version of this statement reads as follows, “faith is in order to love, so love is in order to goodness—and so also goodness is in order to blessedness [or happiness]. (Outler, ed. *John Wesley*, 31).

²⁴ Preface, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739.

and holiness is God's gift, we are not to passively wait to experience grace, but are called to engage actively in the means of grace; which are ways that God works to shape, increase, and deepen not only faith, but also holiness—in keeping with the Wesleyan idea that holiness is the fullness of faith. In fact, we cannot grow in holiness without our active and intentional participation in the means of grace. In this sense, then, the means of grace constitute the vital work we are called to do in order to participate more fully in the missional and pastoral flow of God's grace and God's redemptive work in the world. More succinctly, we participate in God's mission of sanctification by participating in the means of grace.²⁵ Thus, a life of faith and holiness is a life in which we deeply engage in works of piety and works of mercy, which Wesley understood as means ordained by God to be channels of God's grace.²⁶ Works of piety are intended to “convey the grace of God”²⁷ to our souls, to improve our personal spiritual lives by drawing us closer to God. They include reading and studying the scriptures, receiving Holy Communion, public and private prayer, fasting, and regularly attending worship. Works of piety facilitate and strengthen the development of our personal holiness by not only nurturing but also deepening our faith and our relationship with God.

Now, Wesley argued that just as one should be zealous for the works of piety, one should also be zealous for the works of mercy.²⁸ Works of mercy involve doing good works that attend to the needs and concerns of others. They include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked,

²⁵ David M. Whitworth, *Missio Dei and the Means of Grace*, PhD dissertation, Cliff College, Calver, 2012, 6. John Wesley described the means of grace as the “outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God, and appointed for this end to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.” See John Wesley, ‘Sermon 16: The Means of Grace’ in R.P. Heitzenrater, ed, *The Works of John Wesley: The Bicentennial Edition*, section, 3, paragraph 12).

²⁶ Wesley, “Sermon 16: The Means of Grace,” section 1, paragraph 1.

²⁷ John Wesley, “Sermon 98: On Visiting the Sick,” in R.P. Heitzenrater, ed, *The Works of John Wesley: The Bicentennial Edition*, paragraph 1.

²⁸ Wesley understood “true Christian zeal [as] no other than the flame of love.” Thus to be zealous for the means of grace is to express the love of God and neighbor. See Wesley, “Sermon 92: On Zeal,” in R.P. Heitzenrater, ed., *The Works of John Wesley: The Bicentennial Edition*, section 1, paragraph 3.

visiting the sick and those in prison, and giving generously to the needs of others. In situations of injustice, marginalization and oppression, works of mercy may include seeking justice and engaging in struggles against oppression and discrimination, and addressing the causes of human suffering.

Works of mercy are acts of compassion and justice which point to Wesleyan emphasis on putting faith and love into action, including efforts to promote the common good. Works of mercy reflect a Wesleyan focus on shaping people and institutions who have an enduring moral commitment to the well-being of others. Just as works of piety communicate the grace of God, works of mercy are ways through which the recipients of good works and those who perform these acts experience the grace of God. Works of mercy, which we carry out for the sake of others draw us closer to our neighbor, are an expression of a growing and deepening faith and they are a reflection of our growth in social holiness—our relational involvement with others and with the world. As such, works of piety and works of mercy are necessary in order to be fully formed in the image of Christ. Both are manifestations of a growing and deepening faith and holy living. We can say here that, rather than narrowing one’s horizons, faith broadens one’s outlook and opens us to the larger world, involving us in “[thinking] and [acting] toward holiness, social and personal.”²⁹ Faith is therefore not merely an ascent but also a disposition. Indeed, calling us to increase in love and good works, faith compels us to become agents of moral and ethical change in the wider society whereby we live out Wesley’s assertion that there is no holiness but social holiness.³⁰ In this sense, spiritual formation and moral formation are

²⁹ Russell E. Richey, W. Dennis Campbell, William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 2004), 15.

³⁰ Kenneth J. Collins provides a detailed and highly nuanced and illuminating discussion of Wesley’s understanding of faith in its various expressions in justifying and sanctifying modes and beyond. What is important for our purposes here is his argument that “it is the grace of God, received through faith, that [justifies] and sanctifies.”

intricately intertwined in the Wesleyan tradition; meaning that personal piety and social holiness are inextricably connected in Wesleyan thinking and practice, so much so that the spiritual life involves the call and commitment to social reform. Christian perfection is therefore not only manifested in personal piety, but it is also demonstrated in concrete acts of love towards others, especially for those in need, and it is expressed in struggles for justice in contexts of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression. Works of piety and works of mercy, as dimensions of God's sanctifying grace, therefore, should orient the church and people of faith toward public engagement and social action, to address social ills and facilitate social transformation, by speaking to public issues of vital concern (see for example Wesley's effort to end slavery). Again, for people who are marginalized and oppressed, the call to participate in the means of grace as described above can be very empowering and affirming of their dignity as they embrace "responsible grace" as a call to holy living and to collaborate with God in God's healing and transformative work in the world.

I would like to suggest that the African concept of *ubuntu* can deepen our understanding of the Wesleyan call to holy living and the appropriation of the notion of responsible grace as an affirmation of human dignity and an expression of social responsibility reflected in works of mercy. The notion that my dignity and humanity are inextricably linked to the dignity and humanity of others, and the idea that your pain is my pain; your sorrow is my sorrow; your suffering is my suffering; and your happiness is my happiness express not only solidarity, and respect for others, but also compassion and a sense of engagement and responsibility toward the well-being of others. Like the works of mercy, the solicitous concern for others found in *ubuntu* draws us closer to others and enables us not only to listen and to relate in compassionate ways

See Kenneth J Collins, *The Scriptural Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 170.

but also to actively engage in the struggle for justice. *Ubuntu* can inspire us to pursue justice and act justly toward others by treating other people with respect in accordance with who they are as persons created in the image of God. As a way of being and living *ubuntu* reflects the deep transformation of character sought in sanctification.

Ubuntu Defined

Ubuntu is an African concept used to describe the human qualities of hospitality, generosity, friendliness, kindness, humility, caring, empathy, compassion, and connectedness.³¹ *Ubuntu* particularly affirms the fact that we are relational beings made for interdependence and, as such, we cannot be fully human in isolation, separate from other human beings.³² Basically, then, *ubuntu* embodies the essence of being human; it represents the substance and core of being a person. I become a person, with all the qualities of *ubuntu*, only through interaction and involvement with other persons.

Further, the term *ubuntu* also includes the word *buntu* which, in some African languages, points not only to the full manifestation of the human qualities noted above, but also has religious meaning in that it refers to the theological concept of grace. Thus to be fully human is to have *buntu* (i.e., grace) and to embody it in interactions with others. From this perspective, *buntu* denotes the humanness of grace, which means that grace is a quality of being fully human or a quality of human maturity. To say that somebody has *buntu* is to say that that person is grace-full, generous, humble, and merciful. To possess a greater degree of *buntu* is to strive

³¹ See Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Manyknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 13; and Emmanuel Twesigye, *African Religion, Philosophy, and Christianity in Logos-Christ: Common Ground Revisited* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 229-232.

³² A.M. Mungai, "Ubuntu: From Poverty to Destiny with Love." In D.M. Caracciolo and A.M. Mungai, ed. *In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research* (Rotterdam; Boston: Sense Publishers, 2009), 4-42.

towards authentic human existence that embodies goodness and the fullness of love.³³ Although, ultimately the source of *buntu* (grace) is God, it is interesting how in this way of thinking grace is deeply embedded in our humanness. To recover *ubuntu* is to recover grace.

Desmond Tutu has suggested that *ubuntu*, as a characteristic deeply rooted in community, is not something a person owns; neither is it a personal achievement. It is rather something that emerges in interaction with others in community; and it is the community that nurtures and sustains its growth. Tutu explains: “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ It is not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’”³⁴ Tutu goes on to add that “a person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated.”³⁵ *Ubuntu*, therefore, embodies the spiritual quest for human dignity, integrity, respect for others, social harmony and interconnectedness; and as such it is a major goal toward which traditional African communities oriented their members and a communal life into which they socialized them. Indeed, it is the belief in *ubuntu* that led Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and others to orient the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa in the 1990s toward restorative justice, instead of pursuing retributive justice or revenge for the atrocities committed by some white South Africans during the apartheid years.³⁶ The philosophy of *ubuntu* guided the work of the TRC toward the healing

³³ Mungai, “Ubuntu,” 44-50.

³⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31.

³⁵ Tutu, *No Future*, 31.

³⁶ G. Fox, “Remembering Ubuntu: Memory, Sovereignty and Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa.” *Platform*, Vol. 12, 2011: 100-117.

of personal and communal wounds, with a focus on the restoration of the dignity of victims as well as the restoration of offenders back into the community through *ubuntu*. Tutu maintained that in a real sense the supporters of apartheid were also victims of the vicious systems which they implemented and supported.³⁷ Pursuing retributive justice would have led to more social alienation and further fragmentation of racial relations, therefore making the dream of racial healing more elusive, and the effort to reclaim *ubuntu* in the building of a new racially diverse democratic society more difficult to achieve. Indeed, pursuing retributive justice would have led to more violence which, in turn, would have led to the loss of *ubuntu*. Thus, the spirit of *ubuntu* helps communities avoid destroying themselves in their search for retribution and punishment of the perpetrators. Instead, the emphasis is on rehabilitation of both the victim and perpetrator and their swift reintegration into the community.³⁸

***Ubuntu* Affirms the Human Dignity and Self-Worth of All**

Informed by the communal values of traditional African communities, *ubuntu* is a worldview and a moral vision that promotes values and practices that are antithetical to violence, prejudice, and exclusion. Involved in the notion of *ubuntu* is an inclusive vision of community which recognizes the importance of creating and building mutually nurturing and enhancing relationships in which the well-being of all is a central concern and commitment that fosters wholesome interconnectedness, relational humanness, and flourishing for all. As such, *ubuntu* is an antidote to extreme individualism that isolates and diminishes people's vitality and flourishing, causing them to live in oppressive loneliness. It also counters violence, racism,

³⁷ John Hailey, "Ubuntu: A Literature Review: A Paper Prepared for the Tutu Foundation," London: November 2008, 14. Retrieved 1/12/2018 at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.459.6489&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

³⁸ Hailey, "Ubuntu: A Literature Review," 14.

homophobia, or other kinds of exclusion. Stressing the importance of mutual commitment, belonging and participating in the communal life, *ubuntu* as a worldview advocates for a profound sense of group solidarity and emphasizes the fact that true human well-being and happiness can only be realized in partnership with others.

Ubuntu's emphasis on the individual's embeddedness within community is based on the idea that "interdependence is necessary for persons to exercise, develop, and fulfill their potential to be both individuals and a community."³⁹ As such, *ubuntu* emphasizes individuals being embedded within networks of relationships and interdependence for mutual aid and support, and yet it does not suppose that individuals lose their particularity and uniqueness, but rather it enables the community to affirm their place in the whole.⁴⁰ There is an organic relationship between the individual and the community in such a way that there cannot be community without individuals, just as there cannot be individuals without community.⁴¹ The affirmation of community is not intended to promote an oppressive collectivism in which the individual becomes dissolved and his or her personhood completely blurred and lost, but rather the community is viewed as the context in which individuality blossoms and is nurtured without ever equating it with excessive and isolating individualism, which is never viewed as a viable mode of being in a relational universe. As a vision of wholesome relationships and well-being, *ubuntu* creates a welcoming, caring, and supportive community sustained by the participation of unique individuals, with participation being a central element that connects individuals, affirms their particularity and uniqueness, without allowing community relations to obliterate or dissolve their

³⁹ Battle, *Ubuntu*, 40.

⁴⁰ Battle, *Ubuntu*, 3.

⁴¹ M. Fulgence Nyengele, "Family Systems Theory and the Concerns of African Women Theologians: Pastoral Theological Reflections." *Africa Theological Journal*, Volume 1, 71-91.

uniqueness and identity as persons.⁴² *Ubuntu*, as a love of neighbor, can help us develop compassion toward people who are different from us by helping us see that no matter how different we are or seem to be, at the core of who we are as human beings we have the same aspirations for love, respect, and justice. Further, our humanity and dignity are inextricably interconnected. To deny the humanity of others is to deny our own humanity. Indeed, to dehumanize others is to dehumanize ourselves, as our humanity is diminished in the act and/or process of diminishing the humanity of others. Involved in the concept of *ubuntu* is the recognition of the importance of building of mutually nurturing and enhancing relationships and society in which the well-being of all is a central concern and commitment that fosters interconnectedness, relational humanness, and flourishing for all. Thus, there is in *ubuntu* an affirmation of the humanity and dignity of all.

Concluding Remarks: Ideas for Further Constructive Reflection

- The concept of *ubuntu* can help to reclaim and revitalize the notion of holiness or holy living/perfect love with significant socio-political implications for the transformation of oppressive socio-political structures in contexts such as DR Congo
- *Ubuntu* can be reclaimed as a goal of sanctification, as described in the Wesleyan tradition—i.e., sanctification can be understood as formation toward fuller *ubuntu* and perfect love understood as *ubuntu* itself.
- The connection between responsible grace, *ubuntu*, and human dignity can inspire efforts to address public issues of vital concern such as social injustice and oppression, gender discrimination, and political violence, and thus lead to the development of a language needed to develop a more prophetically oriented ministry in DR Congo.

⁴² Vincent Mulago, *Un visage africain du Christianisme: L'union vitale Bantu face a l'unité ecclesiale* (Paris: Prsence Africaiane, 1962), 128-129.

- The Wesleyan tradition's interest in shaping persons who have an enduring moral commitment to the well-being of others can be greatly aided by reclaiming the concept of *Ubuntu*.
- Exploring the relationship between the Wesleyan understanding of holiness and the African concept of *ubuntu* can stimulate a more liberationist theological perspective that places the pursuit of human dignity at the heart of ministry, in contexts such as DR Congo where gross violations of human rights are extensive.
- The concept of *ubuntu* can provide a link between personal holiness and social action and reform, and it can also promote a sense of social responsibility towards others—particularly those whose dignity is being violated or crushed. In this sense, *ubuntu* cannot only inspire works of mercy; it can also be the very expression of social holiness. Recovering *ubuntu* as a theological resource, in dialogue with the Wesleyan notion of holiness, can reenergize, revitalize the church's witness in situations of oppression, marginalization, and violence; uphold the human dignity of the oppressed; and provide a language to use to resist oppressive and unjust societal structures. *Ubuntu* can help us rethink the church's missional orientation and focus, renew, and advance a bold and socially relevant and transformative pastoral public witness in situations of violence.