

Sanctifying Space and the Liminal Bridge
Lisa Withrow – Methodist Theological School in Ohio

Working Group 8. Theology and Ethics

Focus for the Working Group: *We are living in a time when pressing ethical questions divide and threaten the world at every level of individual and social life. These range from debates about the nature and flourishing of human beings in the midst of technological innovations and changes in human self-understanding, to the fracturing of international structures intended to foster equity and stability among nations and peoples. These circumstances call out for the theological and ethical reflection of the church as a community gathered across time and space, at the same time that they challenge the foundations of our unity and shared mission. We invite papers that reflect upon our situation as a global church, and investigate the resources of our broad Wesleyan heritage for loving critical engagement with issues and institutions both ecclesial and secular. What insights do we have to offer? What models of constructive critique and reform can we draw upon? What practices has our history shown can sustain us through the painful conflicts that emerge as we struggle to discern the shape of holiness and the path of faithfulness in the 21st century?*

Abstract

In an increasingly polarized world, civil discourse or adventuresome engagement about difference in social location and belief systems can be rare in the public sphere. In this troublesome meta-context, the Wesleyan tradition has an opportunity to deepen and widen its understanding of sanctification. Sanctification often is interpreted in the church as our working out our own salvation in a rather private manner, or at least within our own tribe. Foci on personal holiness and social holiness spend little time engaging intercultural and intersectional socio-economic curiosity as a means of expanding ethical choices based on theological belief systems; rather, fear-based theological entrenchment is rendering the church “stuck” in a conversation in which persons in surrounding secular contexts show less and less interest. This phenomenon can be true in missionary work and certainly on mission trips as well as in local neighborhoods and civic organizations. Therefore, the Wesleyan understanding of the process of sanctification, a growing in grace and holiness, must include not only the work of the Holy Spirit but the intent to cross bridges into the unknown territory of adventuresome learning from others, some who may even may be deemed “enemy.” This paper will propose a Wesley-based model for moving into the liminal space of the relational, intersectional bridge as a critical component of moving more deeply and widely into the path of sanctification.

Introduction

In 2007 at the Oxford Institute, I delivered a paper on the relevance of John Wesley's social ethics for our age.¹ More than a decade later, that paper, based on Wesley's understanding of the Great Commandment and the use of money for the sake of uplifting neighbor, still resonates as our Christian purpose. In 2013, I attempted again to address social injustice via a Wesleyan perspective, this time attempting to disrupt center-margin socio-economic dichotomies by calling for holy conversation in liminal spaces, or spaces that did not reside in center or on margin, but somewhere between them. The point was for participants to experience a sense of disruption of their situational perspectives. Pronouncements and papers continue to be produced about what we "ought" to be doing to usher in socio-economic justice; there are many important starting points and intersections for this work. However, despite best efforts and much proclamation, polarization is on the rise, and according to the Pew Research Center, the European Commission, and the International Labour Organisation, the middle class has been diminishing in number for decades (and as of 2015, no longer the majority population) in the United States and Europe, and plateauing in emerging economies,² complicated by economic and cultural injustices occurring at crisis levels. Wesley's guidance for personal and social holiness still holds true, but it seems to me that people in the North and Western worlds today either do not know the path forward or cannot sustain it, or they are calling for further polarization, on both the so-called right and the left by demonizing the "enemy." To co-create with God this social holiness in light of the constant stream of bad news and hate-mongering activity becomes more challenging by the year. So, with the premise that love of neighbor requires work for justice in intersectional ways, I propose here a process by which we can move forward in this never-ending faith journey.

In a time of paradox, where nation-states scurry to re-establish their identities by securing borders in light of refugee crises that blur those very borders, in a time of unprecedented, rapid global economic shifts and a widening gap between rich and poor, and in a time when terrorism is taking on more creative forms and extreme acts of violence are becoming normative, there is great need to address cultural difference, learn different understandings of power, and re-think how the church understands its role of inviting personal and social holiness into the conversation, for the sake of the world. This focus for the church is a tall order. It will require difficult, brave conversations and a willingness to self-critique. It will demand that dominant cultures address their dominant mindsets, all-but-invisible to many who live in privileged space, and think through what solidarity and partnership might look like for those in non-dominant contexts. It also will require dominant cultures to stand against hate groups, fear-mongering, and greed resulting from backlashes to global and local crises: risky business indeed. It will be easier to proclaim enemy status and keep polarization alive.

To do this work well, the church has a difficult road ahead of itself, requiring first the desire to do the work at all. There will be many who do not wish to find a "third way" forward (as contrasted to a compromise). This work will not be relevant to them. With that said, for those who wish to be disciples of

¹ See Lisa Withrow, "Success and the Prosperity Gospel: From Commodification to Transformation - A Wesleyan Perspective," in Ethics, Economics, and Globalization working group: <https://oxford-institute.org/2007-twelfth-institute/working-groups/> (Accessed July 4, 2018). See also "Seeking Meaningful Discourse through Disruption of the Center/Margin Dichotomy," in Practical Theology working group: <https://oxford-institute.org/2013-thirteenth-institute/working-groups/> (Accessed July 4, 2018).

² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/5-charts-which-show-what-is-happening-to-the-middle-class-around-the-world/> (accessed July 18, 2018).

the Good News for the sake of the world, there is a way forward. This paper explores one option that is not a quick-fix, but an invitation into a process that takes intentional commitment and willingness to change. The call here is to enter liminal space as a path forward in holy conversation, grounded in the Wesleyan notion of sanctifying grace leading us into new movements of hope and healing in the world. Holy conversation includes some of the components outlined in Wesley's rules for bands, and also expands the parameters beyond rules and into unknown, disruptive liminal territory.

Why Liminality?

The etymology of the word "liminal" originates in the Latin, "limen," which means "threshold."³ Sometimes these threshold spaces are physical, called "thin places," such as where the sea and the shore meet. Celtic lore often describes thin places as spaces where the otherworld and this world permeate each other's boundaries. Unusual experiences can occur in thin places, including spiritual encounters, visions, transfigurations, adventures, and significant transformations.⁴ These places are liminal in nature.

The word "liminality" itself was coined by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep based on his study of rites of passage for the transitional stages in male lives in African and Australian tribes. In *The Rites of Passage*, van Gennep studies a pattern or process of status changes throughout the life cycle that follow a distinct set of phases: separation, transition, and incorporation.⁵ The middle phase, transition, is the liminal period, where new and/or expanded understandings of values, abilities, and meanings for an individual are created, within the context of the tribe. More widely, van Gennep and his later students and followers claimed that life and the development of cultures is not possible without transitional spaces and times, both personal and social. Thresholds occur in every individual life as well as in whole societies, where we "go through" or bridge from one realm to another. This experience changes us, perhaps minutely or perhaps dramatically.⁶

Homi Bhabha addresses liminality as a space for positive expression of cultural hybridity⁷ without hierarchical values placed on difference, in *The Location of Culture*. While he does not address the crucial work needed to dismantle hierarchical/patriarchal constructs, he does wonder about intersections of identity and identities that can be engaged with a learning posture in this space. Indeed, increasingly found in cultural studies, anthropology, and political science, is the attempt to disengage the notion of "modernity" (roughly the 17th century through the current day), as a "melting pot," a pot in which we assume uniformity of particular ideals and institutions as commonly-held values, namely values espoused by nations in the North and West. Instead, intersectionality of identity in all its complexity requires respectful attention. Bjørn Thomassen also argues the contrary to this notion of melting pot "sameness" as a characteristic of modern times. For Thomassen, the historical movement to modernity was a demarcation of difference from the past, with evolving horizons that included an element of the transgressive:

³ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/liminal> (accessed July 4, 2018).

⁴ See a thorough description of thin places in the United Kingdom in Margaret Silf, *Sacred Spaces: Stations on a Celtic Way*. Oxford, England: Lion Publishing, plc, 2001.

⁵ Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*, English translation. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960. 11. (Original work published in French in 1909.)

⁶ One caution: liminality is not the same as marginality. Both are boundary-based ideas, though liminality is interstitial rather than "outside." It is in-between.

⁷ See Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 266-282.

The modern was the new, the diverse, the forward-looking: it had no definite form and no definite end result, other than a continuously moving horizon; it was about change and movement, speeding up, dissolving and transforming everything at hand.⁸

At the same time, perhaps paradoxically so, early modernity valued learning through classification and systematization, the onset of the scientific method, which often functioned to dehumanize human beings into “human subjects.” This tendency toward classification as delineation of human categories such as race, gender, economic status, ethical values, and cultural rituals continues today as part of many anthropological, cultural, societal, and ethnographic studies.

In the 1960s, Victor Turner took up van Gennep’s study of the rites of passage and liminality with the hope of emancipating such dehumanization, re-appropriating an understanding of threshold times and spaces as a cultural space of human creativity and agency.⁹ Based on his research, cultural practices and values evolved organically through experiences rather than as a systematized process of development.

For our purposes, the value of focusing on liminality as a threshold or bridge process, a transition, is to create a holy sojourn, an adventure or pilgrimage into a space and time of relational intersection, with the risks and dangers inherent in engaging difference, while being held in a loose “container” or framework for the journey. This space is one of possibility, intersectional relationality, and meaning-creation that ultimately leads to disruption of polarizing forces and dehumanization. It creates opportunity for holy conversation that disrupts social, often uninformed classification, particularly in terms of stereotype: an implicit or explicit bias that becomes entrenched. Participants in liminal space for the purpose of holy conversation will need to suspend their own notions and values and adopt a learning posture, open to receive new experiences and ideas. Such vulnerability involves risk; it is not an easy endeavor. The hope is to move toward flourishing together rather than the “overcoming” of the other.

The Nature of Liminal Space

The value of liminality is in understanding it as a balance between two points – the limit and the limitless, perhaps better described as a finite adventure or pilgrimage where the starting point is *status quo* and the end point is a new meaning created out of the journey-experience. The in-between is the transitional, and hopefully, transformational space. Liminal space has a temporal aspect, a beginning and an end. In short, liminal space *is* transitional space with temporal finitude inherent to it. It is interstitial, punctuating life with a series of movements across thresholds into transition, and then arriving in a new place, figuratively or literally.

Further, one cannot know or describe liminality without engaging it *experientially*. Thus, it is the transitional experience in particular, “contained” space that is important for meaningful interaction among human beings, groups, and societies, rather than the classification or systematization of stages in their cultural and relational development.

It is easy to make over-simplified statements about the work occurring in liminal space. Often the liminal period is fraught with high anxiety, conflict, and fragility, or it is at least deeply ambivalent. In this “container,” human beings question their own ethics, perhaps refreshing them or even riskier, discarding them in light of new experience. The risk found in liminal spaces is the possibility of the community

⁸ Thomassen, Bjørn. *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*. Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

engaged in the work becoming its own deeply-connected group, which can choose a path of loving care or contrarily, one of destruction. Much depends on intent and parameters of the container (for example, tribal expectations of the path from boyhood to manhood in a rite of passage determine beginning and end points as parameters of the immersion in the wilderness). Whatever the liminal experience, the suspension of normal order into transitional space and time is intended to return to a condition of stability and normality, a new “home” or structure, albeit with a change of identity, status, and/or values.

This description begs the question of whether liminal space can be permanent. The answer is yes, liminal space can be permanent, but to detrimental effect. The paradox of permanent transition (even if geographic location keeps changing) leads to harm. Liminal space-time is not meant to be a permanent state for those doing maturing or soul-work. One engages in interstitial space with its temporal component, or the experience between two stable points. Then, at the point of stability, one reflects about new understandings of meaning and resulting ethics. In time, moving across another threshold marks the next transition. In essence, one does not dwell in liminal space forever unless one becomes fixed or stuck in such a state, resulting in a permanent suspension where liminality becomes the *modus operandi* for life itself. This stuckness stems from loss of meaning in the transition, but seeks to live in without being grounded in a “home” (stability) at any time. It is permanent transience by choice. Examples of this permanent suspension eschew rites of passage, end points, reflection points, and a time set apart time for the passage itself; heavy gambling, constant pursuit of entertainment, gratuitous violence and gratuitous sex, repeated, perhaps obsessive pursuit of extreme adventure with high-risk danger “just to say I did it,” as well as early-phase addiction behaviors all point toward this loss of meaning and un-grounding from anchor points that define the containers for liminal space. Even monastics who are preparing constantly for separation without *arriving* at the new state of monastic life can be considered stuck in permanent liminality. In other words, the separation phase occurs, the transition never becomes complete, and incorporation back into community or self in a new, more mature, different role is never realized. Life becomes a surface carnival,¹⁰ or an exercise in despair filled with constant, mind-numbing entertainment, self-anesthetization, or constant posturing to impress others.

A contemporary example of liminal space that is contained for a particular function is an airport. The purpose of an airport is to help persons organize themselves in a prescribed way and then move through it quickly, rather than dwell in it (or get stuck in it, despite frequent experiences of being so!). There is tremendous activity, often high anxiety, and an expectation that in a number of hours, a person will be in a different place altogether.¹¹ Another example is interim ministry, which at its core, has a temporal focus. Interim ministers serve for a particular time period in congregations between one permanent pastor and the next. Everyone expects change and also an end-point. This interstitial time, or threshold work, is meant to move the congregation into its new identity with a new leader. This time, like in an airport, can be fraught with anxiety, high activity, as well as expectations for a new order. Finally, the new leader arrives, and a new normal prevails.

These examples do not constitute rites of passage, but they are in-between spaces with temporal aspects that bring about change. Transformational change, the great hope for liminal space, can occur through holy conversation to bridge difference by claiming difference as a gift rather than a threat. The liminal bridging has potential to change everyone immersed in this “passage” from our old “home base” to a new one, avoiding polarization and “stuckness.” Such change can revitalize relationships or even point toward revolutionary shifts in power.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹¹ Thanks to discussion-partner Dr. Terri Elton, faculty at Lutheran Theological Seminary, for this metaphor.

Wesley's Band Groups and Liminal Space

There is direct correlation between liminal space and the “container” loosely held around a group that is attending to spiritual development. Some liminal spaces are created by forces of nature such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or floods, disrupting daily life until a new normal can be realized. Other liminal spaces are created intentionally for the sake of transformational journeying, or pilgrimage, with a purpose. This intentional transitional pathway cannot be controlled like a scientific experiment. It must have parameters for engagement while allowing for adventure, surprise, and even new vision altogether.

To enter liminal space intentionally¹² for the purpose of spiritual growth in personal and social holiness, was the purpose of Wesley's band groups. The liminality of these groups occurs in two concurrent levels: first, on a wide level, the process of sanctification itself might be called long-term “liminal” or threshold time, beginning with intentional soul-work after recognition of God's prevenient grace and the acceptance of it (justification). Once this initial threshold has been crossed, the process of sanctification, the long-term personal and social development in the Christian faith based on what God does *in* us rather than *for* us, begins. Second, and on a deeper, more intensive level, such liminal space for God's work and human response was created in “containers”—class meetings for care of the poor and sick as well as the spiritual life of its members (social holiness), and more intensively, band groups within Methodist societies, formed and initially based on the Moravian tradition, for the confession of sin and mutual prayer for growth in personal holiness.¹³

They were small groups of five to ten persons who voluntarily banded together for intense spiritual nurture and support. Their primary activities were confession and prayer; their goal was spiritual growth.¹⁴

While the bands were established in homogeneous groups—marital status and sex were the same in each group to foster the highest level of openness—their purpose was to stress nurture by “means of mutual accountability, confession, and growth in grace through Christian fellowship, and religious conference.”¹⁵ The Christian experience, while considered a continuous process of sanctification unto perfection, required the weekly holy conversation for reflection as the spirit transitioned toward a new depth of holiness. Each meeting was a ritual as outlined in Wesley's rules that promoted a rite of passage into deeper Christian faithfulness. Transformation occurred through experience, and then a new normal was established, with hopes for further transformation in the future. Meanwhile, the whole journey also can be encompassed in transformational language.

Markedly similar to van Gennep's descriptions of liminal space as intentional rites of passage in tribes are the prescribed rules for development of the faith in the band groups. For Wesley, there were particular “rules” for the band groups written on Christmas Day 1738, outlining structure, process, and content, that is, the “container” for the meetings.¹⁶ The purpose was to leave the realm of an over-simplified faith,

¹² Unintentional liminality occurs when there is unexpected disruption, ranging from personal tragedy to widespread disaster. Trauma itself has liminal aspects as persons journey from one reality to a new one. This paper will not cover unintentional liminality due to the limits of its purview.

¹³ See Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, and David Lowes Watson, *Class Meetings: Recovering a Tradition*, Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991 for a discussion of the purpose and work of classes and bands.

¹⁴ Heitzenrater, 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁶ From http://www.housechurch.org/miscellaneous/wesley_band-societies.html (accessed July 4, 2018).

taught with tenets of right or righteous behavior, to do the hard work with God of sanctifying the soul. Through dialogical accountability and ritual on a weekly basis at least, members of a band deepened their identities in Christ. Those who progressed into a maturing faith often became the leaders of band groups. “Backsliders” attended “penitential” band groups, with the assumption that they were not sustaining progress in spiritual holiness.

While not meeting in groups for the purpose of Christian sanctification, those who were undergoing rites of passage in van Gennep’s studies also were held in community, even as they had to pursue personal transition. Van Gennep describes tribal rituals where boys are removed from the safety of the village and sent out on their own into the wilderness to learn survival, and “become a man.” Upon their return, they would be welcomed back with a new identity, having learned to brave the wilderness and survive, if not thrive, as differentiated adults.¹⁷ There were particular understandings about how this *dangerous* liminal space and time were to be encountered (contained) on a personal level, while acknowledging the necessity

Drawn up December 25, 1738. The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."

To this end, we intend.

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may he to this effect.

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins.
2. Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God.
4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart.
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you.
6. Do you desire to be told of your faults.
7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home.
8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you.
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you.
10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom.
11. Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve.

Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion others; the four following at every meeting.

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting.
2. What temptations have you met with.
3. How were you delivered.
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not.

¹⁷ Of course, becoming a woman was tied more to bodily function than a ritualized sending out, but even then girls were presented with their own rituals/rites of passage as they grew into women. The different gender journeys and role-expectations are the subject of much feminist critique of biological destiny, with which I agree but cannot cover here.

of the passage back into the community.¹⁸ If boys were not able to survive in the wild, they either died, were shunned, or returned in shame to the community without change in status.¹⁹

Turner expanded van Gennep's work in several ways, notably by naming the religious nature of all ritual, which involves social experience and a body of systematic beliefs upon which the participants depend; in other words, he claimed that ritual has ontological value.²⁰ What is useful here is Bjørn Thomassen's work this century with both van Gennep's patterns of ritual and Turner's expansion of ritual meaning. Thomassen himself further expands notions of liminality that not only ring true for rites of passage and Wesley's bands but also more widely for our modern times. He suggests that liminality's space and time elements can be expanded to "types," which work in combinations. Liminality can be experienced by three sets of subjects: single individuals; social groups (cohorts/minorities), and whole societies, populations and civilizations. The temporal dimension of liminality can be experienced in moments, periods, and epochs (decades, generations, and he argues, also centuries). He argues that when one begins to question values and ethics, one is entering liminal space.²¹ This questioning can be true for groups as well. Groups intentionally can celebrate rituals or calendar events that can occur for short or extended periods of time. Societies can face sudden, surprising events or longer-term wars with enduring instability for great periods of time.²² Thus, liminal space can be an intentional creation, such as the rules for bands as containers for the process of sanctification, or as rites of passage that include a sending out and receiving home, and they can also determine the course of history through great upheaval through natural disaster or as human capabilities and values change. What matters for relationship-bridging across difference is the intentional invitation into the contained space so that we are not controlled by unintended reactivity when we face human challenges or even natural catastrophe. Instead, we adopt the learning posture as a path of transformation (van Gennep), a.k.a., in Christian terms, sanctification (Wesley), bridging the *status quo* to a new "home base."

How Intentional Liminal Bridging Helps

Just as in Wesley's band groups, there is value in creating containers for holy conversation among people bringing diverse cultures, socio-economic locations, their own intersectionality, and belief-systems to the table. Wesley's purpose was to deepen Christian holiness on the path of sanctification. Likewise, there is room for deepened holiness in this day and age as we continue to live in what might be called a liminal era of competing values at local, national, and global levels. But we have significant and deep work to do because we are in grave peril as human beings and more alarming, as a whole planet.

Our era shows all the signs of massive transitional space and time. Polarization is growing, violence is rising, emigration—forced and voluntary—is at epic proportions. Wars, internal and across borders, with guerilla soldiers and drone attacks, and cyber intelligence and hacking, manifest themselves on a global level as portrayed on the nightly news. Humanity is struggling to understand not only the nation-state as an identity (or even if it really can exist anymore other than through erroneous, oft-changed borders and

¹⁸ Girls had their own rituals, but were not sent off into the wilderness to survive. They were nurtured into household/private realm roles, with marriage and motherhood rituals cementing the hierarchical and traditional values of the tribe.

¹⁹ Some of the Boy Scout rituals in the U.S. have similar status changes incorporated into them, especially as boys attempt to reach the highest designation of the scouting tradition: Eagle Scout.

²⁰ Turner, Victor W. *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975. 31-32.

²¹ Thomassen, 89.

²² *Ibid.*, 90.

language differences), but its own human identity itself as the purveyor of the future of the planet. As we see, crisis of leadership and lack of stability lead to revolutionary moments, often taken up by persons whose only loyalty is to themselves. Such leaders promise the end of suffering and increased justice for all while continuing to weave a web of chaos. They are not interested in peace, but in power, which becomes very concentrated when fear abounds and structures are not in place for relationship-building. “Divide and conquer” is the operating procedure for these leaders, who are often charismatic.²³ Further, in contrast to rites of passage and holy conversations in liminal states, the times we witness now have no clear end point and no clear leadership that can bring us “home” to a new normal. We are in danger of institutionalizing constant fear, which leads to a cycle of crises, and a constant, perhaps permanent negative liminal space—stuckness. History books tell us that this state of crises leads to more polarization, fewer freedoms and rights, and more state centralization rather than less.²⁴

Creating a container as Wesley did, complete with ritual or practice, provides us with an alternative. Providing structure for the liminal times and spaces reduces anxiety and allows for examination of values and their meaning. It also provides for understanding of intersections on personal and community levels: how is complexity of our identities and values made manifest in our relationships? How do we understand alterity? In what ways are we privileged? In what ways are we not? To create brave space that has some rudimentary safety to it for small groups to examine diversity, and to learn to value it in new ways, is the only way to break down the stuckness. Such liminal space provides a bridge from dehumanizing polarization to adventuresome, hopeful engagement. To experience this space counters self-serving leadership tactics. While not promoting revolutionary change *per se*, those participating in liminal work are not merely choosing a “middle way” or a compromise. They are working on radical reconciliation via a “third way” of relating to those who might normally be considered “enemy” or at least “other.”

For Christians, liminal space helps persons and groups cross the threshold into loving critical engagement about life, faith-based ethics, and spiritual development. Such an intentional container for meeting together necessitates attention to the spiritual life, the way of salvation, so that we are guided by the Great Commandment as we move into the risky space of encountering “other.” Theoretically, this encounter sounds like a beautiful relationship just waiting to blossom. In reality, conflicting views of what it means to be neighbor, what it means to act for social justice, and what values guide ethical decision-making depend on social location and theological worldview. Liminal space, in containers that share common ritual or practices, allows a framework for difficult conversations that must address hegemony, patriarchy, theological worldviews, and economic, racial, gender, and social displacement. Participants can expect anger, confusion, sorrow, and temptations to abandon the dialogue in frustration. The common thread is desire for a better future than what the vast majority of the world’s population is experiencing now, including fostering and supporting interconnected, agile, active leaders who actually care about humanity beyond their own tribes and who care about the planet itself. Transformational work requires intention to learn, sustained interaction despite disagreement, good leadership, and civility. Such is the path to both personal and social holiness, to flourishing.

The liminal space must also have its closure. Toward what are we aiming? Basic rights for all people as the foundation for God’s love? Perhaps so, but the local work must set its sights at its own level. Globalization has been celebrated deeply in the 1990s by opening boundaries and eschewing limits. The

²³ See Arpad Szokolczai, “Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events” in *International Political Anthropology*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2009. 141-172.

²⁴ Arped Szokolczai *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, London: Routledge, 2000. 183.

backlash of the 2010s and surely into the 2020s is resulting in protectionism and a renewal of dehumanization for the sake of concentrated power “over” based on “othering.” The pendulum swings too wildly. Wesley himself knew that there needed to be a spiritual focus and a clear goal for the people called Methodists. He also knew that this focus could only occur effectively in relationship, with intention and sometimes tension. He knew what we know today. These holy conversations occur in relationship that need boundaries, a self-differentiation while also retaining intention to stay together in community. They are bridging conversations in liminal space. Further, there must be space to call “home” where one can rest and be whole rather than fragmented and permanently disconnected. Bands were meant to be these liminal spaces, the transformational sanctification containers where Methodists could speak about their spiritual lives, confess their sins, and pray for forgiveness and well-being. History shows that the bands were demanding in terms of discipline, so they did not survive long after Wesley’s death; however, they served to provide a container for burgeoning attention to personal and social holiness as the Methodist movement established itself. They were the punctuation points of the week that looked closely at daily lives and the life of the spirit.

Structure does not negate creativity or the movement of the Holy Spirit. In fact, ritual itself can provide frameworks for significant revelation and creative expression while “holding” the boundary safely and loosely around participants. Ritual, as demarcations of rites of passage or as Sunday morning communal devotion, keeps community together despite difference and in best case scenarios, in celebration of it. Ritual does not have to be “high church” or “low church,” or really church at all. It simply is commitment to gathering within a covenantal community with particular norms of behavior so that the unexpected can occur without complete pandemonium. Rituals also move us in and out of spaces or zones, with an expectation that we can move safely in and through the thresholds of these spaces. Band members confessed their sins with the understanding that none were to speak beyond the group about the conversation therein. Likewise, when hard work of dialogue occurs, the container must be space that attempts safety so that brave conversation actually can occur. Participants who can be vulnerable and express their anger and hurt, while being well-listened-to, are far more likely to sustain relationships and work toward restorative justice than those who cannot step onto the bridge at all. In this space, mindset evolves. Everyday life operates on a different plane each time transition is experienced. Interstitial transition times continue as sanctifying work of God deepens.

Conclusion

Band groups provide us with a model for our work. The intent of mission trips (charity), international conversations about the future of Methodism and United Methodism, the threats of a split denomination over sexual identity, gender roles, racism, church power, marginalization—all these topics require holy conversation in small groups. Some of these conversations have been occurring of late. With practice, the conversations widen beyond the church. Such conversations however must be able to address the suspicions we hold of each other as “other,” must not assume the worst in the “other,” and must be approached with the intention of connection identified in the Great Commandment. Without these components, or the intentions that Wesley put forth in his rules for bands, there is little likelihood of finding a way forward in such vulnerable space. So it is essential to be in covenant and intention to hold the container while the difficult unveiling of our deepest angers and fears. It will require trusted leadership to hold this container honestly and consistently. With this practice, this experience of liminality as van Gennep, Turner, and Thomassen would have it, a sanctifying growth in personal and social holiness via holy conversation is nurtured. Ritual has potential to draw people together more deeply as the bridge-work continues.

A renewed quest for re-grounding in the Source of our being is emerging in response to the destructive hegemonic tendencies of the political and socio-economic world. Counter to the polarization we face are movements for people to rekindle spirituality, more frequently outside the church than in it in the Northern and Western worlds, and as can be seen in church growth in the East and Southern world. While greed and prosperity gospel are present in the church, there seems to be a desire to experience and reflect on a personal sanctification and social holiness.²⁵ There will always be those who do not wish to divert from personal or national power-gathering, or who refuse to participate when offered an alternative, but there seems to be a significant population searching for more; Wesley provides us with a way forward though his “container” even as his work needs to be contextualized for our day. Covenantal containers within the church, local and at conference, jurisdictional, and general levels, would need to be established by skilled leaders on a regular basis to follow his example well. Ritual and covenantal agreement would need to be developed for the social locations represented while groups meet for difficult, brave conversation. This conversation would engage intersectionalities as layers of difference and commonality for the maturing discipleship of Christians. It also provides a model for civil discourse in the secular arena regarding politics, social and economic stress, as well as racial and gender discord. Sanctifying space and the liminal bridge, in whatever context this connection is made, is the hope for fostering equitable, sustainable communities and practicing the deepest nature of the Great Commandment.

Growing in holiness, the process of sanctification, is the way of salvation, according to Wesley. In our times, to do so requires intentional entry into liminal space of relationship with people we normally would not engage. To model this willingness, to undertake it, and to do the work, sets forth a way of life that can and should ripple through other areas of society beyond the church. What better form of love for neighbor than to see and hear them clearly, with respect rather than judgment? To accept, if not celebrate, diversity? To create a pilgrimage together for a time and see what emerges from our learning postures along the way? Once such things can occur *regularly* in a small group, and another small group, and then another, there is potential to create a matrix of intention that counters the self-serving tricksters, the violence, and the polarization that leads to ongoing destruction. Holiness builds up, rather than declares war on the other. Holiness grows in love even in the midst of disagreement. Holiness overcomes self-satisfaction and power-mongering. Holiness widens and deepens perspectives. Holiness leads to transitions that call us to a series of transformations throughout our lives, and indeed, throughout the centuries.

It is a lot of work to cross thresholds in the way of salvation. May we learn to walk in solidarity as companions on the journey, punctuated by liminal experiences.

²⁵ Some of these observations stem from my conversations with younger generations in the seminary and also in a variety of churches. Further, see Linda Mercadante’s studies on the SBNRs (spiritual but not religious). Finally, there is growing interest in the U.S. and Europe in New Age rituals, which often are modern replications of older rituals, where people are finding community and meaning.