

**An Ethical Recommendation for United Methodist Worship and Preaching Now**  
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Introduction:

From its inception, the United Methodist Church [UMC] has articulated and enacted social justice within its ministries.<sup>1</sup> As an example, the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church included the full ordination of women. In the half century since that founding, the UMC has championed a wide range of initiatives to help liberate and cultivate human life in God. And Paragraph 120 of the current United Methodist Discipline states that “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs.”<sup>2</sup> The social influence of the UMC, however, has waned dramatically in recent decades. 2016 records of United Methodist membership count approximately 7 million members in the United States and 6 million in membership around the world, yielding an estimated total close to 13 million members, including laity and clergy.<sup>3</sup> The total membership when the United Methodist Church formed in 1968 was 11 million members. If membership trends continue to decline at 1.65% annually in the United States, the UMC may return to where it began within the next year or two, or even drop below that.

In contrast from the past, today’s membership indicates a striking rebalance. The originating union formed the largest Protestant denomination of its time was based mostly in the U.S. Outside of exceptions such as The Gathering St. Louis, most growth now happens across the globe, especially in the countries of Africa and Asia.<sup>4</sup> The shift coincides with increased disagreements regarding issues such as how to serve populations of queer community, and more widely, how to cultivate discipleship in Jesus Christ for transformation of the world in the generations ahead. Given the current denominational dynamics, the 50th-anniversary year of the denomination may therefore offer an opportune time for reflection upon the public witness of the

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<sup>1</sup> Here, social justice refers to collective endeavors to cultivate human flourishing and freedom.

<sup>2</sup> “The Ministry of All Christians” in the *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church: 2016* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Heather Hahn, “[Denomination’s Membership Tops 12.5 million](#),” *United Methodist News*, Jan. 29, 2018. See also estimated distribution of delegates by annual conference for the year 2020, [http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website\\_Properties/news-media/press-center/documents/2020\\_Delegate\\_Calc\\_by\\_AC\\_with\\_2016\\_comp.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/press-center/documents/2020_Delegate_Calc_by_AC_with_2016_comp.pdf), accessed July 21, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> See Doug Moore, “[At this fast-growing church, Everyone is welcome. No asterisks.](#)” *St. Louis Dispatch*, July 15, 2018.

UMC, and the current essay will in particular examine two historical calls for justice within the denomination and their relative inattention to worship and preaching as primary ecclesial sites of moral formation and how that deficiency might help to invigorate worship and preaching practices for justice moving forward.

### A Primary Line of Inquiry:

To be clear, the current essay will not proceed as another lament about United Methodist decline. Instead, I want to open a discussion about how to weigh United Methodist calls for social justice within practices of worship and preaching. That being said, the current essay does not trace how effective United Methodist social justice preaching and worship have been. What follows is not an examination of sermons for social justice and how they inspired change, or an investigation of social justice rites and how they led to social reform. I am not drafting a United Methodist account similar to histories of earlier Methodism from David Hempton, Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, and Lisa J. Shaver who show in detail how Methodist worship and preaching introduced and established widespread spaces and practices of piety and spiritually-led democratic nationhood and community shared by British and American men and women from varying backgrounds of human identity and socio-economic standing.<sup>5</sup> Nor will my line of argumentation lead to prescribing in detail how worship and preaching practices should look or sound going forward. Rather, what follows are brief accounts of calls for justice within United Methodism from the past, and how attention to those historical strands can help United Methodists envision an ethical locus for worship and preaching now.

### Protestant Hegemony:

Consider a claim from historian David Hollinger that includes how Methodism fits within a legacy of Protestant hegemony within the United States. In the preface to *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History*, David A. Hollinger writes:

Prior to 1960, if you were in charge of something big and had opportunities to influence the direction of the society [in the United States], chances are you grew up in a white Protestant milieu. And most likely you were affiliated, at least nominally, with one of the “mainline” churches, of which Methodists, Congregationalist, Presbyterians,

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<sup>5</sup> David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and popular religion c. 1750-1900* (London: Routledge 1996), 9. Hempton draws from Mark A. Noll, *A History of the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1992), 153. See also David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005); Nathan Hatch and John Wigger, *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood 2001); Lisa J. Shaver, *Beyond the Pulpit: Women’s Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press 2012), 72.

Episcopalians, Northern Baptists, and Disciples of Christ were prominent, along with several Lutheran and Reformed bodies and a smattering of smaller confessions.<sup>6</sup>

What Hollinger describes is the permeation of U.S. liberal Protestantism in political culture, the private sector, education, and philanthropy during a time prior to the formation of the United Methodist Church. That permeation, according to Hollinger, begins to dissipate and to reconfigure, however, after the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency, the social rise of secular and religious Jews, and a wave of immigration from “non-protestant” Latin America and Asia.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Hollinger takes care to note that he neither yearns for the former days of Protestant hegemony nor bemoans the changes that have taken place since then. Rather, he wants to remind his readers how much political power mainline Protestantism once had, and thereby, warrant scholarly attention to American forms of Protestant religion as prominent social forces. Why I think Hollinger’s historical claim about Protestant hegemony matters for the Oxford Institute Methodist Worship and Spirituality Working Group is because the dissipation of Protestant political power post-1960 coincides with the formation of the United Methodist Church in 1968.

One might reinterpret the unification of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church as an early strategy on the part of the Methodist Church. Both church bodies sought to retain their social significance in a unified Methodist identity in the earliest years of what would eventually become precipitous decline. In addition to the formation of the UMC being an effort to galvanize ecumenical Protestant strength, it may have been a measure to hedge against the loss of cultural power.

The social justice work of the UMC is vast and irreducible to any particular endeavor. Yet I want to suggest that two denominational initiatives raise enough questions about the cultural currency of United Methodism. The first is a foundation document from the Council of United Methodist Bishops entitled *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace* and discourse surrounding it.<sup>8</sup> The second comprises a brief introduction to selected resources from the United Methodist Women [UMW] advocating social justice within churches and a recent initiative for climate justice.

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<sup>6</sup> David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2013), ix.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent study examining the advent of parachurch and Catholic women’s politicization, see Amanda L. Izzo, *Liberal Christianity and Women’s Global Activism: The YWCA of the USA and the Maryknoll Sisters* (New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2018). Izzo includes mention of Methodist women’s and youth groups and describes in “the politicized landscape of women’s religious service” how “the YWCA and Maryknoll Sisters stand out for their innovation, influence, visibility, and scope of politicization” [7].

<sup>8</sup> United Methodist Council of Bishops, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace* (Nashville, TN: Graded Press, 1986).

Evaluating the effectiveness of the bishops' initiative or the work of the UMW for climate justice is not so important here. Commentaries about them that will be later introduced and the current reality regarding the reach of United Methodism in the American public sphere already does that work. Rather, the resources under consideration come under focus as prompts for two larger and admittedly work-in-progress questions:

How would the content and nature of worship and preaching adopt a different kind of reflexivity and ethic if understood as departing from denominational formation marked not only by ecumenical success and institutional connectionalism, but also the waning tide of Protestant hegemony in the United States?

How can worship and preaching reorient our understanding and expectations regarding the cultural impact of United Methodist calls for social justice, especially as the cultural influence of United Methodism fades?

#### In Defense of Creation:

Composed in 1986 by the Council of Bishops and in consultation with theological scholars, clergy, laity, and government officials during the final years of the Cold War, *In Defense of Creation* appeals to an interpretation of the biblical concept of *shalom* as a warrant for nuclear disarmament. The publication results from a two-year study sparked by a 13-hour public hearing held July 15-16, 1985 at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington D.C. discussing “The Nuclear Crisis and the Pursuit of Peace.”<sup>9</sup> At that meeting, twenty-five witnesses from the government, military, universities, research institutes, citizen movements, other denominations, and United Methodist churches offered verbal and written testimony regarding Christian imperatives for peace in response to threats of war, and especially nuclear war. In the opening pages, the bishops also clarify that they do not speak on behalf of the church. Rather, they “write in defense of creation” as “pastors of the church to the church.”<sup>10</sup>

The bishops call *shalom* a “marvelous Hebrew word that means peace.”<sup>11</sup> For them, “[s]halom is positive peace: harmony, wholeness, health, and well-being in all human relationships. It is the natural state of humanity birthed by God.”<sup>12</sup> They believe that the Methodist heritage is to bear witness to the things that make for peace. Their episcopal emphasis upon peace as an inherited

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<sup>9</sup> A 29-minute video documenting the gathering can be seen on VHS. “The Nuclear Crisis and the Pursuit of Peace: A United Methodist Initiative. [VHS] Narrator Matt Dibble. (Nashville, TN: West End Video for the United Methodist Church, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> United Methodist Council of Bishops, *In Defense of Creation*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

work of Methodist witness echoes the opening claim above that from its inception, the United Methodist Church has articulated and enacted social justice within its ministries. In fact, on the penultimate page of *In Defense of Creation*, the bishops write that the “arms race is a social justice issue, not only a war and peace issue.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the ways in which the bishops argue for nuclear disarmament and peace with respect to ethical positions related to social justice such as pacifism or just war falter. So much so that the late Princeton University ethicist and United Methodist Paul Ramsey dedicates an entire monograph -- *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism: A Critique of the United Methodist Bishops’ Pastoral Letter “In Defense of Creation”* to troubling the biblical, theological, moral, and political dimensions of their reasoning.<sup>14</sup> Stanley Hauerwas also offers remarks of disapproval for the episcopal statement in an epilogue at the close of Ramsey’s book.

Both critiques from Ramsey and Hauerwas are meticulous, thorny, and not always on topic.<sup>15</sup> What is important for the working group discussion is not to encapsulate the content of the exchange that they ignite. Rather, I want to extrapolate from their criticisms touchpoints for situating historical calls for social justice within the UMC as liturgically and homiletically disinterested, but nevertheless helpful as departure resources for imagining an ethical baseline for future worship and preaching in United Methodist Congregations and communities of faith.

Ramsey spends pages comparing *In Defense of Creation* to *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, a pastoral letter by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in order to pick apart how the United Methodist bishops misunderstand just war and vital dimensions of it such as discrimination (discerning the aims and recipients of force) and proportion (deciding how much force to use for particular objectives). Where Ramsey’s censure of *In Defense of Creation* becomes surgical, however, is when he criticizes the bishops as concerned with sustaining the earthly realm too much. He writes:

Since ours is not the Last Judgment, on what do we stand to call in question God’s righteousness or wisdom if the way it is to be is that his mercy over his creatures continues to thousands of generations of Australian aborigines, or new life-lines, or note at all on this earth? Moreover, species survival in itself is no great value; and we have it

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism: A Critique of the United Methodist Bishops Pastoral Letter “In Defense of Creation”* (University Park, PA: Penn State, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> At the conclusion of his writing, Ramsey decries abortion and surrogacy, and recommends that ads be placed in the *Daily Princetonian* offering “young pregnant women to live with a local Methodist family while continuing their education” in order to provide space and time to think twice before proceeding with an abortion. Ibid., 146. Hauerwas also uses the occasion of his response to insert a page-and-a-half single-spaced, smaller-font response to criticism from John Milbank regarding his pacifist views. Hauerwas does not in the first line of the insertion that Milbank’s “penetrating criticism is relevant to this argument.” Ibid., 176.

on good authority that in the Kingdom of Heaven there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage.<sup>16</sup>

For Ramsey, death is the ultimate “atom bomb.” Applying a classical understanding of eschatology to his critiques of *In Defense of Creation*, Ramsey sees the bishops flawed in their reasoning because for him, we have no reason to fear death in Christ. Drawing upon Revelation, Ramsey reminds his readers that the current earth and its inhabitants must pass away in order for creation and the children of God to be renewed. For Ramsey, the bishops have a utopian vision of what to expect and desire with regard to earthly life. They confuse creation with the earth. A better defense of creation would have an eschatological vision as well.

For Ramsey, peace should not be the aim of the UMC, or any church for that matter, but faithfulness to God. In his eschatological rebuttal, Ramsey does not think that the bishops take the liminal quality of our current existence seriously enough. For Ramsey, human life has suffered “deformation” from the Fall to the end of the world.<sup>17</sup> We’re simply passing through an existence marred by human sinfulness. To that extent, we all move with confidence and wariness in our living. Drawing upon Augustine, Ramsey explains that the Christian life entails hoping and working for the kingdom of God, while always realizing that we live in the world of human mortality and frailty. Ramsey sees *In Defense of Creation* as the bishops appropriating the church’s authority for their own personal opinions regarding nuclear warfare.<sup>18</sup> Instead, they should have rooted their writing for peace by yielding to the transiency of human life and the assurance of our citizenship in the city of God.

In an epilogue included in Ramsey’s volume, Hauerwas also sees in the bishops’ declaration a lack of faith. He venomously states:

Indeed, I suspect there is almost an inverse ratio between the undisciplined character of the Methodist people and the radical nature of our social statements. We draft radical statements as a substitute for being a radical people pledged to witness to the world that God’s peace is not just some ideal but a present possibility for us.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 140. For another pithy summarization of Ramsey within a larger book about Methodism’s relationship with peace and war in the twentieth century, especially in the British context, see Michael Hughes, *Conscience and Conflict: Methodism, Peace and War in the Twentieth Century* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth, 2008), 251.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “Epilogue: A Pacifist Response to the Bishops in *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*” in Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, 152-53. For a reprinting of Hauerwas’s epilogue, see also, “On Being a Christian Capable of Addressing a World at War” in *The Hauerwas Reader* eds. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001), 426-458.

Hauerwas's epilogue also responds to Ramsey. Ramsey has invited him to elucidate how Christian pacifism could adequately speak "*to the point* on military questions."<sup>20</sup> To which Hauerwas pithily replies "that a pacifist church is not in principle prevented from so speaking. It just must do so the way porcupines make love -- very, very carefully."<sup>21</sup> The discussion at hand will leave him there at his word, and readers are encouraged to study his detailed defense and recommendation of pacifism as a better way of situating the UMC as a church of peace at another time.

For the moment, other arguments from Hauerwas are more illuminating. Hauerwas laments that the bishops have focused too much on the survival of the human species. Echoing Ramsey, Hauerwas states that they have not concentrated enough upon faithfulness to God:

Moreover, I have the sense that, in spite of the obvious accommodation of the contemporary church to the world, God may well be winnowing us to be able once again to read the Gospel with non-Constantinian eyes. For the increasing irrelevance of the church—an irrelevance that fuels the desperation we feel—may well provide the opportunity for the church to discover again that God has made us an alternative to the world's violence. If only our Bishops had thought it possible to say that word, then they would have genuinely acted as our chief pastors.<sup>22</sup>

Hauerwas wonders if justice has become a covering word without content. According to Hauerwas, while the bishops claim that they want peace, they in fact legitimate by not going far enough to condemn all war.<sup>23</sup> He believes in the potential for the Methodist church to be a peace church. Yet Hauerwas does not view the bishops as providing a strong enough alternative to the ways in which peace is kept in current geopolitical processes.

For all of the fire that may detract from his comments, Hauerwas's critique that the bishops have failed to offer an alternative is compelling. Yet perhaps the inability to do so comes from a deeper problem than speaking in a measured way about peace in a nuclear era. Perhaps the rhetoric that Hauerwas admonishes as empty is without content because the UMC has not adequately reckoned with the ways in which it has colluded with unprecedented violence and oppression against humanity. Put straightforwardly, has the United Methodist Church, on behalf of the nation that it helped shape, sought forgiveness from God for the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima? Maybe posing a stronger alternative as a peace church first depends upon

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 152-158.

atonement for national transgressions rarely addressed in the worship and preaching of local congregations.

### A Feminist Correction:

At an annual meeting of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, held on October 2, 1986 in Atlanta, Georgia, Janice Love, current Dean of Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, also criticized *In Defense of Creation* for not providing a bold enough alternative to nuclear deterrence.<sup>24</sup> Yet in her speech, which occurred two years before Ramsey's book entered publication (though perhaps concurrently with the meetings that led to *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*), Love also forms a feminist challenge by zeroing in upon a lacuna in *In Defense of Creation* that is a neglect of how the "war system, oppression of poor people and people of color, the degradation of the earth, and women's oppression" go hand in hand.<sup>25</sup> Military establishments and war "are masculine instruments in a male dominated world."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, she reminded her hearers that "[t]here are thousands of women inside and outside of the church who devote their lives to peacemaking in one way or another, whether through formal organization or not." Love decries how patriarchal the United Methodist Church is. For her, without reform to the patriarchal character of the denomination, true peace as a denomination cannot possibly be achieved.<sup>27</sup> In her speech, Love also reminds the bishops of another basic moral and spiritual injustice - patriarchy - plaguing the everyday operations of the UMC and the nation at large.

### God's Renewed Creation:

In 2004, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church asked the Council of Bishops to revisit the 1986 *In Defense of Creation* materials.<sup>28</sup> In 2009, the new Council released another pastoral letter and foundation document entitled, *God's Renewed Creation*, which included

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<sup>24</sup> Naming her as Janice here follows how she identifies herself in the speech under discussion. In her role as Dean of Candler School of Theology, she publicly identifies as "Jan" Love.

<sup>25</sup> Janice Love, "Commentary on the United Methodist Council of Bishop's Foundation Document -- In Defense of Creation" Speech delivered to the Annual Meeting of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, (Atlanta, GA: October 2, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Chaves, *Religious Congregations in 21st Century America* (National Congregations Study, 2015), 15. See also [http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII_report_final.pdf). Taking Love's feminist challenge into account with regard to the UMC's founding, the receptivity of female ordination and leadership has also varied widely according to region in the United States. Furthermore, the number of women leading congregations, ordained and lay, has not increased since 1998. See Stump, R.W. "Women Clergy in the United States: A Geographical Analysis of Religious Change," *Social Science Quarterly*, 67, no. 2 (June 1986), 337-352.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to the book and foundation document, a study guide was also made available. George V. Palmer, *God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2010).



supplementary study guides and online materials ([www.hopeandaction.org](http://www.hopeandaction.org)). The newer document was decidedly more global in scope. In a two-year period United Methodists from every region of the denomination were consulted, included churches in Africa, Asia, the United States, Europe, and ecumenical and interreligious partners.<sup>29</sup> The Council grounded its writing in the story of “God’s loving gift of creation and culminates in God’s promise of renewal for all.”<sup>30</sup> The 2009 resource also seem to take into consideration the commentaries from Ramsey, Hauerwas, Love, and others as it included the interrelated threats of “pandemic poverty and disease,” “environmental degradation and climate change,” and “a world awash with weapons and violence.”<sup>31</sup>

The bishops illustrate those concerns by leaning heavily on particular stories of individuals to make the case for its calls for social justice. They include a story about a 7-year old Filipino girl named Rosalie who died of hunger caused by environmental devastation as a result of mining operations in the fishing village in which she lived. The Council describes how landmines make farmable land in Angola lie fallow because it is too expensive to remove the explosive devices. The speak of how Mountain Top Removal (MTR) in Appalachia (blasting away the tops of mountains in order to access coal) causes toxicity that destroys local ecologies and the plants, animals, and people who inhabit them. They also write about stories of hope.

The Council tells of East African dock workers who refuse to unload cargo of smuggled arms. The East African dock workers also warn dock workers further south so that they too can resist in a similar manner.<sup>32</sup> German United Methodists from Lage are praised for their assistance in installing solar panels at a maternity ward and seminary in Cambine, Mozambique. The first baby born in the newly solar-powered ward was named Solarino (“to celebrate the renewable energies bringing life to God’s new creation”).<sup>33</sup> The Council also identifies how some citizens in the United States are trying to end the practice of “straw purchasing” handguns, where firearms are purchased legally for persons prohibited from purchasing themselves.<sup>34</sup> They also speak of the Toberman Neighborhood House in San Pedro, California, which provides services for gang prevention and gang intervention, family counseling and mental health, child care, and community organizing.<sup>35</sup> As if building upon scholarship like Hollinger’s, they note that Methodists are active in legislatures, parliaments and congresses.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Foundation Document (Eng), adopted November 3, 2009 at Lake Junaluska, NC, USA, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

More agonizing and inspiring than the testimonial, however, is that the document also admits that generations and millions of dollars later, the world is no safer from the threat of nuclear warfare. One could also add that the world is also no safer from the poverty, ecological crisis, and other forms of violence which they seek to address. To be fair, the bishops also concede that they are not experts on “global issues,” but rather experts “on the moral and ethical life that strengthens and supports God’s intentions for Creation.”<sup>37</sup> The confidence is admirable. Yet they seem to underestimate the extent to which we can ever know or speak about God, a mysterious conundrum highlighted polemically in the writings of Ramsey and Hauerwas, and also grounded by Love, as she points out just how easy it is to overlook obvious transgressions against those who comprise the family of God in her feminist critique.

The interest in the current essay is not to determine whether *God’s Renewed Creation* does a better job than *In Defense of Creation*, or if pacifism is truly Christian or if the Gospel allows for just war or if it is ultimately statecraft (however conceived). What I want to highlight instead across the discourse at hand is the curious omission of much talk about how United Methodists mostly engage larger publics and what statistically, according to research like Chaves, they spend their most time and money upon - worship and preaching. Even though there is mention of prayer and a stress upon the United Methodist Church becoming more of a beacon of peace than it has been in the writing of the bishops and the commentaries from Ramsey, Hauerwas, and Love, there is hardly any mention of the primary practices of worship and preaching as conduits for bearing witness to the peace of God.<sup>38</sup> The resources all read as if Christian education and policy transformation were the primary activities of congregational life, and the primary channels through which United Methodist witness becomes real in the world.

That privileging of education and political engagement to the exclusion of a robust doxological and kerygmatic vision extends to other major operations of the United Methodist Church’s public witness.

#### The United Methodist Women:

The self-stated purpose of the UMW is “to be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.” The vision of the UMW is “[t]urning faith, hope and love into action on behalf of women, children and youth around the world.” They accomplish that hope by offering spiritual opportunities and resources deeply rooted in Christ and that put faith into

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *God’s Renewed Creation* includes prayer and a benediction on pages 16 and 22 respectively.

action, and providing educational experiences that lead to personal change in order to transform the world.

In 2010, The Mission Resource Center of the UMW published a 10-page guidebook for congregations entitled, *Why Should I get Involved with Social Issues*. It begins with swift interpretations of Genesis, Luke, and then Wesley to advance a five-step process for UMW to become involved in everyday political issues. Step 1 is to “Choose an issue.” The next two recommendations are to “[n]arrow your focus” and “learn about the problem.” Fourthly and fifthly, the resource encourages UMW to “design a plan of action” and to “act.” A final recommended action is prayer: [r]emember, prayer is one of the most powerful sources of support and change in our lives. Let the power of prayer support you in your actions for justice.<sup>39</sup>

More recent publications bring focus to the social issue discernment recommended by the UMW. One set includes children, youth, and adult studies concentrating upon ecological justice. In *God’s Extravagant Garden: A Children’s Study on Climate Change*, Pat Hoerth begins with detailed instructions to leaders driven by an imperative to teach children to understand themselves as part of God’s extravagant home.<sup>40</sup> One can see a kind of parallel with the consultative work of the bishops and nuclear disarmament, as Hoerth also appeals to the goods of science and theology, the language of the social principles in the *2012 Discipline* regarding creation belonging to God and our responsibility to care for it, Wesley’s two-volume work, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation* and *A Compendium of Natural Philosophy* [first published in 1763 and concluded with a third edition in 1777], and programs of the UMW such as the hunger-alleviating Henderson Settlement in Frakes, Kentucky, the summertime enrichment program of United Community Centers in Fort Worth, Texas, and the sustainable farm of Turtle Rock in Oklahoma, to bolster the arts-and-crafts and indoor and outdoor activities that follow in the study.<sup>41</sup> In the *Joining Voices for Climate Justice: A Study for Youth*, in addition to sobering facts regarding the ecological damage already present in the world, Jay Godfrey introduces voices such as Malena Lozada Montanari from Argentina, Jaqui Patterson from West Virginia, Pya Macliing Malayao from the Philippines, as well as a late 20th- and early 21st-century timeline to drive study guides and calls for coordinated and concrete responses to climate justice from adolescents. The adult study, *Climate Justice: A Call to Hope and Action*, edited by Pat Watkins, is a collection of essays from leaders in ministry, activism, marine biology, nonprofit leadership and more to unpack the complexities of climate justice and provide

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<sup>39</sup> United Methodist Women, *Why Should I Get Involved in Social Issues?* (Dallas, TX: Women’s Resource Center, 2010), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Pat Hoerth, *God’s Extravagant Garden: A Children’s Study on Climate Justice* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2016)

<sup>41</sup> Hoerth, *God’s Extravagant Garden*, 1-5.

theological, social, and scientific rationale for pursuing ecological reform as a witness to the love of God and creation.<sup>42</sup>

The three booklets, however, only briefly mention worship as a site for proclaiming climate justice. The adult study contains a 4-sentence paragraph with the subheading “Worship and Scripture.”<sup>43</sup> The children’s study includes breath prayer with trees and some antiphonal exercises that might be appropriated for a congregational setting.<sup>44</sup> The paucity leads one to wonder how much worship is seen as a part of the global ministries of the United Methodist Church that the UMW supports. The brief and concluding advice to pray at the conclusion of the social justice primer raises the question if prayer is seen as a catalyst for social justice or a blessing for initiatives after the fact or a spiritual exercise of support along the way.

I spoke with General Secretary and CEO of UMW, Harriet Jane Olson and Executive for Economic and Environmental Justice, Elizabeth [Liz] C.H. Lee regarding their thoughts about how the work of UMW influenced worship in local United Methodist congregations and the general public impact of the agency. Our conversations took place before I could closely read the climate justice materials. Olson mentioned that there are many anecdotes, and the agency was currently developing longitudinal and concrete ways to measure in particular how its calls for social justice were making an impact. She shared one story of a decorated female Air Force officer who served perilous tours in the Middle East as a result of feeling called because of her involvement with UMW. Olson also pointed to “The Girl Child” resolution from UMW in Liberia who have sought to end gender-based violence and financially support education for young women in Liberia.<sup>45</sup> Lee described how various UMW groups across the United States wrote 1800 letters in 11 days to petition Chevron, an American multinational energy corporation, to reduce its methane emissions.<sup>46</sup> The sending of the letters coincided with earth day worship services in local UMC congregations. And certainly, one can see the power of UMW advocacy in the recent UMC Assembly 2018 which gathered 6,000 United Methodist women.<sup>47</sup>

I still surmised, however, that clear and sustained interlacing of the worshipping lives of congregations with the advocacy of the UMW could be stronger.

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<sup>42</sup> Pat Watkins, *Climate Justice: A Call to Hope and Action* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>44</sup> Hoerth, *God’s Extravagant Garden*, 25-27; 30-31; 34-35; 38-40.

<sup>45</sup> Harriett Olson, conversation at the UMW headquarters in New York, 475 Riverside Drive, 10015, July 3, 2018. See also Julu Swen, “[Liberia churchwomen campaign for girls’ rights](#),” *United Methodist News Service*, Feb. 3, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Liz Lee, phone conversation, July 23, 2018. See also [http://umw.convio.net/site/MessageViewer?em\\_id=2702.0](http://umw.convio.net/site/MessageViewer?em_id=2702.0), accessed July 23, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Kathy L. Gilbert, “[United Methodist Women urge to boldly change world](#),” *United Methodist News Service*, May 22, 2018.

## Conclusion:

Methodism once blossomed with the formation of the United States. Any losses experienced in the pews were tempered with gains in the public sphere. The denomination witnessed the election of Methodist presidents, senators and congress members. In 1945, United Methodist labors contributed to the founding of the United Nations. United Methodists led changes in reproductive rights anti-racism, immigration, and other social reforms around the world. While that mid-twentieth century momentum of reform has subsided in the American public sphere, United Methodism still bears significant fruit in other parts of the world. For example, the former president of Liberia until 2018, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, is United Methodist. A recent report modeling the future of the United Methodist Church, however, shows nine years of consecutive decline in worship attendance from 2001 - 2010.<sup>48</sup> Since records have been kept, the pace of decline is rapid and unprecedented. The report goes so far as to project that a final worship service could be held in 2065. While doomsday predictions like that tend to misfire, only a quarter of the denomination's membership are active in the worship life of local United Methodist congregations.<sup>49</sup> The denominational decline is a sobering factor, not only with regard to sustaining United Methodism, but also and perhaps especially with regard to the reach of the denomination's calls for social justice?

Unquestionably, United Methodism has changed people's lives in ways that elude measurement. Even if the American Federation of Scientists now measures the world's nuclear arsenal at approximately 15,000 warheads and NASA has measured atmospheric carbon dioxide at levels never before seen (some 400 parts per million; prior to 1950, the threshold had never crossed approximately 300 parts per million), it would be shortsighted to dismiss the work of the Council of Bishops for peace and the United Methodist Women for climate justice.<sup>50</sup> Yet given the shrinking of the denomination, perhaps it would be fair to wonder if there is some interior work to be done in order to bolster the efficaciousness of the church's witness. The pages above have suggested that worship and preaching have been overlooked in terms of how United Methodism proceeds with working for social justice. I wonder if the disconnect shows not only an underestimation of how central worship and preaching are to what United Methodism already and mostly publicly offers, but also symbolizes an inattention to the ways in which we have not, in our conceptions of the justice that the world needs, adequately attended to anchoring and devastating transgressions that likely plague the integrity of our Christian witness.

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<sup>48</sup> Global Board of Higher Education and Ministry, *A National Projection Model for the Denomination in the U.S.*, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Pew Research Center, *Members of the United Methodist Church*.

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.icanw.org/the-facts/nuclear-arsenals/> and <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>, accessed July 23, 2018.

Again, has the United Methodist Church sufficiently atoned for the nuclear warfare committed by the U.S.? As United Methodists root calls for peace and environmental responsibility in care of God's creation, have church members, beyond the occasional service, knit into our liturgical and kerygmatic practices a deep atonement and reckoning with United Methodism's relationship to slavery and the slaughter and captivity of indigenous populations as a way of developing the land of creation that would become the United States. In 1820, the first *Discipline* of the church declared that "We will not receive any person into our societies who is a slave-holder." In the DNA of United Methodism, the church was antislavery while still comforting slave owners. Christian nationalism and deeply embedded cultural racism were inseparable.<sup>51</sup> Wesley called the American Indians "heathen." He wrote:

They have no comments to construe away the text; no vain philosophy to corrupt it; no luxurious, sensual, covetous, ambitious expounds to soften its unpleasing truths. They have no party, no interest to serve, and are therefore fit to receive the gospel in its simplicity. They are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God. October 10, 1735. Letter just before leaving England.

In 1748, George Whitefield urged the Trustees of Georgia to introduce slavery into that colony. He reasoned that the colony would not be prosperous until slavery was permitted. In my home church in Mississippi, it's likely that every family except for mine owned slaves. Today, United Methodism remains 94% white.<sup>52</sup> That cannot be excused given the apocalyptic vision of Revelation 7:9. While Ramsey and Hauerwas correctly pointed toward an eschatological need in their critique of *In Defense of Creation*, they did not go far enough in demanding a glimpse of how God's future of human diversity must be possible in the UMC now.

United Methodists could certainly stand to better acquaint themselves with denominational social justice initiatives from the Council of Bishops, the United Methodist Women, and a host of other agencies and collectives responding to the Spirit's nudging. More familiarity with those resources could strengthen weekly worship and preaching. To be fair, racial justice appears as a concern in the climate justice materials from the UMW and the writings from the Council of Bishops.<sup>53</sup> Yet the inclusion of the need to address a deeply ingrained and utterly obvious problem rooting so much dysfunction, and I would add, irrelevance, in the church such as racism is momentary. I want to suggest that sustained confession for national sins such as the

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<sup>51</sup> Morris Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Michael Lipka, "[The most and least racially diverse U.S. religious groups](#)," *Pew Research Center*, July 27, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Watkins, *Climate Justice*, 97. See Principle 9. United Methodist Council of Bishops, *In Defense of Creation*, 16.

depopulation of indigenous peoples, slavery and nuclear bombing should regularly feature in United Methodist worship and preaching, and not simply during an occasional service or especially-themed Sunday. How could the content of worship and preaching be informed with that kind of ethic on a regular basis? Yet even as I make this recommendation, I will not here prescribe practices. That work of developing particular rubrics should be undertaken in consultation. We must explore how the practices of worship and preaching can become sites where United Methodists regularly seek forgiveness and direction from God for the past sins of the denomination before or as we attend to the world's problems. Perhaps public rites of repentance could increase attendance and membership.

In the meantime we can follow the recommendation of sociologist Steve Tipton in *Public Pulpits, Methodists and Mainline Churches in the Moral Argument of Public Life*. He suggests that congregations can uplift practices of “moral community” where strangers “who are our true colleagues and biblical neighbors” cannot be avoided or shunned, but engaged in argumentation and love.<sup>54</sup> How can we enhance and amplify our current practices of worship and preaching to model new radical ways of addressing our transgressive pasts and love for our neighbors toward the future of God?

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<sup>54</sup> Steven M. Tipton, *Methodists and Mainline Churches in the Moral Argument of Public Life* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago, 2008), 423.

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