The United Methodist Church at 40: What Can We Hope For?

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Abstract

THE NECESSITY we face for the future of Methodism is the re-invention of traditions. To re-invent traditions is to re-visit the past with all of its richness; to discern what in our tradition is most central to Christian faith; to analyze those parts of our past that continue to give life; to discern and build upon what is of value in the newly emerging tradition; and to reflect on those aspects of the neglected and rejected past that challenge our present perspectives and practices. To re-invent traditions is to develop new perspectives and practices from the building blocks of the past and from the fresh movements of the Spirit in the present. To do so is to recognize that Christianity in general, and Methodism in particular, is marked by traditions that have continually been passed on, critiqued, eliminated, created, and re-invented for the sake of a living Christian witness. What we can hope for is that God is there in the future already, pulling us toward God’s own New Creation.¹

¹ EDITORIAL NOTE: This essay is a revised version of a plenary address given at the consultation on “The United Methodist Church at 40: Considering our History, Teaching our Traditions, Anticipating our Future,” which took place 14–17 August 2008, in Atlanta, GA. The consultation, sponsored by the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, was held with the support and assistance of the General Board of Discipleship, the General Board of Global Ministries, the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, the General Commission on Archives and History, the Foundation for Evangelism, and the World Methodist Evangelism Institute. The primary purpose of the consultation was to
Introduction

FORTY YEARS after the death of John Wesley, the Methodism that he had birthed was very different from what he had anticipated. First, it was still a movement, but it was also a church, both in Britain and in the U.S. Second, it was still drawing working people, but it was already becoming more middle class. Third, it had already divided more than once in the first forty years. This raises questions for us as we celebrate the first forty years of The United Methodist Church and anticipate the second forty years. What can we hope for?

Among the questions posed by this memory is whether the institutionalization of the vast and global UMC can be a movement in any sense of the word, or whether it is inevitably an institution without any movement qualities remaining. Another question is whether we can continue to appeal to and serve the workers of this world, including the poorest of the poor and the working poor, or whether we are inevitably held in the grip of our middle and upper middle class values. This question is particularly pertinent, given the decisions of the Council of Bishops and subsequently the 2008 General Conference to focus on serving the poor as one of the four quadrennial priorities for ministry. A third question is whether we can remain united, or whether the name “The United Methodist Church” remains a challenge, even a mark of our hypocrisy, as many have said of our slogan, “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.”

These questions provide the framework for my essay, but they are linked by a common social context and a common necessity. The social context is the interplay of tradition, diversity, and rapid social change. The UMC inherits a powerful nexus of traditions from the past, but its present social and historical context is
marked by a multiplication of diversities, sometimes in contrast to and sometimes in conflict with one another. It is also marked by an increasingly rapid rate of social change, both within and outside the church. If diversity and change form the common context, what is the common necessity? I propose that the necessity we face for the future of Methodism is the re-invention of traditions. To re-invent traditions is to re-visit the past with all of its richness; to discern what in our tradition is most central to Christian faith; to analyze those parts of our past that continue to give life; to discern and build upon what is of value in the newly emerging tradition; and to reflect on those aspects of the neglected and rejected past that challenge our present perspectives and practices. To re-invent traditions is to develop new perspectives and practices from the building blocks of the past and from the fresh movements of Spirit in the present. To do so is to recognize that Christian tradition itself, and Methodist tradition in particular, is marked by traditions that have continually been passed on, critiqued, eliminated, created, and re-invented for the sake of a living Christian witness.

The Process of Invention

My approach follows the path of Eric Hobsbawm, the economic and social historian who focused much of his work on the interplay between past and present. Hobsbawm describes the process of inventing tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” Such inventions typically seek “to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” This definition suggests four elements in a community’s invention process: (1) selecting formative practices; (2) following implicit or explicit rules in making those selections; (3) embodying the practices in ritual and symbol; and (4) reinforcing the values of the practices by repeated rehearsal of a suitable historic past. Hobsbawm gives two simple examples. One is the British Parliament’s choice to re-build their Parliament building in Gothic style, though it was rebuilt in the nineteenth century and partially rebuilt again in the twentieth. Another is the renewal of Christmas folk carols, which took place in the nineteenth century after the hymn-book carols of Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts had become dominant. When middle-class collectors reintroduced the

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3 Ibid., 1–2.
earlier folk carols, they invented tradition, and now the older and newer carols were sung side by side.\textsuperscript{4}

We can identify other, more extensive examples of this invention process. Consider how the Scots invented their Highland tradition in spite of the fact that they had no distinct cultural tradition before the late seventeenth century. According to Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The creation of an independent Highland tradition, and the imposition of that new tradition, with its outward badges, on the whole Scottish nation, was the work of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.”\textsuperscript{5} The process happened over time, but left a heritage of kilts and bagpipes that now mark Scot identity in Scotland and beyond. Consider also the reinvention of British monarchical rituals. According to David Cannadine, they shifted from ineptitude and near irrelevance to a sophisticated ritual form between 1820 and 1977 through a series of re-inventions.\textsuperscript{6}

The phenomenon of inventing tradition is particularly important as we United Methodists anticipate our future. Our traditions are new as a denomination, and they have undergone phenomenal change in the past forty years. On the other hand, our traditions are almost 300 years old when we look at the entire Wesleyan tradition, and they are ancient if we consider the traditions of ancient Israel and the early church. We have a richness of tradition from which to draw. We also have a rich history of invented traditions and many open questions about who we are now and where we are going. Recent debates at General Conference 2008 highlight the quandary, particularly debates about homosexuality. In that setting, some people argued that the questions are not debatable because God gave answers long ago in the Bible. The Bible, in this view, gives clear answers to all questions. Others argued that the Bible can be and has been interpreted in diverse ways. Still others argued that contemporary discoveries and the urgent cries of hurting people should guide our present decisions. This discourse reveals a contested tradition at best.

Hobsbawm would suggest that the United Methodist tradition has already been opened for the next phases of invention. He argues that, when people attempt to preserve old traditions or to take a “traditionalist” stance, they are aware (at least implicitly) that the tradition has already changed or been broken in some way. Efforts to revive tradition are themselves inventions that seek

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{5} Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Highland Tradition of Scotland,” in The Invention of Tradition, 16.
to overcome breaks in a tradition. This is different from the process of preserving or adapting a tradition over time, which is part of a tradition’s natural flow. This is, rather, the contestation and invention process that occurs after a break. Breaks occur when people have allowed a tradition to lie fallow or have deliberately ceased to practice and adapt it, and this is when invention is necessary. Hobsbawm illustrates with the radical break created by the nineteenth century liberal ideology of social change in Britain. He argues that the leaders of this movement created a deliberate break, but they “failed to provide for the social and authority ties taken for granted in earlier societies”; thus, they “created voids which might have to be filled by invented practices.” In the aftermath, people had to invent traditions to fill the gaps.

I have chosen to use the term “re-inventing tradition” rather than “inventing” because inventions are always made from materials of the past, however novel they may be. Thus, my effort in this essay is to discern how the UMC might re-invent itself as it looks to the future. Re-inventing tradition does not follow a set method, so I will proceed in ways that have marked other invention and re-invention movements. The sources for this analysis are three: (1) historical shifts within Methodism; (2) the witness of people on the margins of the Methodism; and (3) the actions and discourse of the UMC in its general conferences. These sources account for historical sweep, perspectives from the margins, and perspectives from the body that speaks on behalf of the UMC. Together these present a picture (albeit partial) of our denomination and the challenges it faces as it seeks now to reinvent traditions. With this methodological approach, I turn now to the three challenges that I earlier identified for the future of the UMC. First, is the challenge of re-inventing our movement qualities.

Re-Inventing Movement Qualities of Methodism

The world into which the Methodism was born was tumultuous. The French Revolution was budding across the English Channel; slave trade was flourishing and the critique of slavery was growing loud; the gap between the rich and poor was increasing; and the Industrial Revolution was revolutionizing the social fabric. Details of this tumult are treated elsewhere but remembering it can help us anticipate the future. The Wesleyan tradition emerged within conflicted traditions in the Church of England and across Christian commu-

7 Hobsbawm, 7–8.
nions; it arose in a society of rapid change. The spirit of walking on the margins
was inherent in the movement. It was embodied in the Wesleys’ Holy Club;
the intimate sharing of the classes and bands; Charles Wesley’s new styles of
music; John Wesley’s ministry in prisons and open fields and street corners;
the social resistance that John Wesley and others exhibited as regards slavery
and mistreatment of the poor; and vast efforts to spread scriptural holiness
across the land.

Remembering the Past

This early Wesleyan movement was not a mild-mannered, socially accept-
able groundswell. It evoked charges of “enthusiasm” and, on occasion, pro-
voked crowds to anger. Its own spiritual depths, together with the eagerness
that miners and others expressed and the anger that still others expressed, led
this early movement to create new church forms. Such forms could help people
respond to the inner witness of the Spirit within a changing religious landscape.
Some of the invented forms, like class meetings, were already in practice within
England, having been shaped by seventeenth century German Lutheran
pietists, as well as by English Puritans. Other forms were more novel, such as
the societies and chapels, the heavy use of lay preachers, the encouragement of
women in leadership (especially as class leaders), and the tight form of organi-
zation and discipline within the connexion. Even more extreme was John Wes-
ley’s ordaining of Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey in 1784 and then
setting Thomas Coke apart as superintendent of the ministry in the American
colonies. This action set Wesley in sharp disagreement with the Church of
England and even with his brother. This said, we can see the extent to which
the Wesleyan tradition that we inherit is itself a tradition of re-invention.

Re-invention did not end with Wesley’s death; in fact, it increased exponen-
tially. John Wesley had guided the people called Methodist with a tight
rein, thus moderating some of the more enthusiastic and independent-minded
elements of the movement. The force of his personality had held people to-
gether who might have otherwise pulled apart. Further, Wesley did not build a
structure and equip leaders to make an easy transition after his death. In fact,
one hundred preachers (the Legal 100) were designated as his legal heirs to
govern the movement, as set forth in the Deed of Declaration of 1784. This
plan did not last long, but the transition was difficult from the benevolent dicta-
torship of John Wesley to the rule of a large group of preachers, especially since
some obvious leaders of the movement were not included in the Legal 100. In
the first forty years after the death of John Wesley, many organizational, structural, and ethos changes took place. Some were marked by structural breaks, as the following in Britain:

- 1791 – After the death of John Wesley, the British Wesleyans were generally known as “the people called Methodists.”
- 1797 – The Methodist New Connexion was founded by Alexander Kilham (a strong character who advocated a complete break with Church of England) and William Thom, largely in response to governance issues and their desire for strong lay leadership.
- 1797 – “The people called Methodists” were given the name Wesleyan Methodists to distinguish them from the New Connexion. In popular discourse, they continued to be known as “the people called Methodists.”
- 1810 – The Primitive Methodist Church emerged in Britain as a new revival movement, but in tension with the Wesleyan Methodists’ opposition to camp meetings.
- 1815 – The Bible Christian Church was founded by William O’Bryan (a Methodist local pastor with no interest in structures and processes but with ardent desire to save souls). This church was particularly active in Devon and Cornwall, but it sponsored missionary activity, spreading into Kent, London, Scilly Islands, Channel Islands, and Isle of Wight.
- 1828 – The Protestant Methodists left the Methodist Church in Leeds to protest the installation of an organ in Brunswick Chapel. They also had differences with the Methodist Church as regards conference governance.

Many more changes were taking place in the Methodist Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ in the United States. I will not name these here, but will reference two changes that took place in the United States in the early years. In 1792, the Republican Methodist Church formed in the United States, breaking away from the Methodist Episcopal Church, objecting to the emerging Episcopal form of governance by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury. Even earlier, in 1787, Richard Allen led African Americans away from St. George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia rather than be segregated into an African American gallery. Both of these changes were to have revolutionary influence. Even this small sampling of changes in the first forty years of the
post-Wesley Methodist movement reveals the degree to which the church was in tumult and the degree to which the people were re-inventing tradition.

The changes in post-Wesleyan Methodism make the first forty years of the UMC seem continuous with earlier traditions. Consider some of these changes:

- Women have continued to be ordained in ever-increasing numbers, having been admitted to ordination within the former Methodist Church in 1956, just twelve years before the union that created the UMC.
- With the ordination of women have come new approaches to ministry.
- Women have been consecrated as bishop since the 1980 election of Marjorie Matthews, the first woman to be elected bishop in any mainline denomination of the United States. The first African American bishop, Leontine T. Kelly, was consecrated in 1984, and the first African woman bishop in 2008.
- The first woman, Susan Henry-Crowe, was selected in 2008 as president of the Judicial Council.
- The denomination has engaged in extensive theological study of baptism and Eucharist.
- The UMC has developed specialized ministry plans to support Hispanic, Native American, Asian American, Korean American, Town and Country, and Pacific American churches, as well as diverse plans to support the ministries of each central conference (annual conferences outside of the United States that function similarly to jurisdictional conferences).
- Several caucus groups have sustained considerable programmatic and visionary strength over the past forty years, such as Black Methodists for Church Renewal.
- The movement to reshape orders of ministry in the UMC has led to greater accent on lay ministries and an expansion of specialized ministries of Word and Service, as well as deeper reflection on the theology of baptism in relation to ordination.
- The denomination has developed new organizational structures, seeking ever new ways to integrate and coordinate the full ministry of the church. In forty short years, the denomination has structured the Council of Ministries, and has studied its strengths and limits, replacing it in 2004 with the Connectional Table.
• New structures (e.g., regional conferences for all) are being studied by the church now, seeking to strengthen the equality and uniqueness of each region of the church while maintaining the wholeness and connectional functioning of the whole body.

This list is obviously only partial, and it does not identify the strengths and limits of these various efforts. It does, however, reveal a church that is open to movement. What would be required if we were to re-invent the movement qualities of the UMC for the future?

**Anticipating the Future**

Based on early Wesleyan history and a sweep of United Methodist history, I suggest three accents that are important in re-invention: governance that is truly accessible and participatory; openness to diverse approaches to ministry; and inclusiveness.

**Governance**

If the UMC learns well from its forebears and from itself, we will invent governance structures that maximize participation by all United Methodist people, while providing strong leaders who can build collaborative relationships among the people, facilitate their visioning, equip them for ministry, and coordinate and implement their visions. This will mean full participation of all forms of lay and clergy; in this era, it will also mean full participation by youth and young adults. Further, we will make decisions about the numbers of delegates to General Conference and the numbers on UMC boards and agencies to maximize participation in governance by lay and clergy, women and men, and the full range of our racial, ethnic, national, and regional peoples. We will move beyond contests for power that use one region against another, or make judgments solely on membership numbers. Indeed, we will seek true representation of our colorful and messy diversity.

**Diverse Ministry Approaches**

The UMC can learn from its earlier divisions over camp meetings and church organs that people need diverse ministry forms, and a large denomination needs openness to many diverse forms. We can learn from the ethnically-focused initiatives of the past three decades, recognizing the values and vitality that emerge from these initiatives. Such specialized programs are not
temporary remedies to a “diversity problem”; they are central and vital programs if we are to be a whole body with many unique parts. The current flaw in UMC thinking is that some ethnic and regional communities are considered unique while others are considered standard. Consider, for example, our UMC language of “ethnic churches” as if all churches were not ethnic. Consider our structures that include central conferences for those churches outside the United States, but not those within. In re-inventing our traditions, we need to re-invent our language and structures.

Inclusiveness

The early Methodist movement struggled with who would be included and who would not be. Those people whose views and ministry styles strayed from the mainstream were asked to leave, or they chose to leave. Those people whose ethnicity was different from the dominant group were pushed to the side in separate churches, a separate jurisdiction, and/or less opportunity to exercise leadership and influence. The same thing takes place today in the UMC, but usually without sprouting new denominations. The development of rules and guidelines for ordained ministers, local churches, and annual conferences provides ways to negotiate difference and make decisions about what does and does not fit the ethos and mission of the denomination. The shadow side of these rules and guidelines is that the majority rules in church discipline. This means that some positions are not included, however prayerfully they are discerned and however faithful a large minority thinks they are.

On a local and annual conference level, the denomination can tolerate and celebrate a mix of evangelical witnesses; healing ministries; advocacy for justice and peace; Strength for the Journey retreats for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) persons; Walk to Emmaus; and diverse approaches to worship. On a denominational level, however, the Church has resisted for the past four General Conferences to add language to The Book of Discipline regarding the UMC’s lack of agreement on values related to homosexuality. The closest it has come was in 2008 when the following was added to the Preamble to the UMC Social Principles: “We pledge to continue to be in respectful dialogue with those with whom we differ, to explore the sources of our difference, to honor the sacred worth of all persons as we continue to seek the mind of...”

8 The acronym GLBT is not the only term in public use, but it is the most common language in the United Methodist discourse at the present time.
Christ and to do the will of God in all things.” This insertion reveals some movement in the direction of embracing difference. The UMC also has passed resolutions regarding care of the earth, care for the poor, and advocacy for justice and peace. These resolutions show concern for the world’s complexities, and diverse United Methodists have widely accepted them. On the other hand, we have not widely practiced them.

To re-invent our denomination’s movement quality of inclusiveness would mean that we would identify our differences as part of who we are as a movement still on the way toward God’s New Creation but not yet finished. Further, we would identify our failure to care for God’s creation. We would create opportunities to witness more boldly—to act in accord with our prophetic words regarding earth care, people care, justice-building, and peace-making.

One recent example of re-inventing inclusiveness does exist. The slogan “all means all” became popular at the UMC General Conference 2008. This slogan was an invention that emerged from at least two directions. Some people longed for a language that avoided inclusiveness lists because they did not want to list GLBT persons. Others wanted to avoid lists altogether because lists are inevitably incomplete; no list could possibly name all of the peoples who need to be included. The phrase “all means all” appealed to people with diverse ideologies but with generally shared ideals of inclusiveness; it left room for interpretation while still making a strong statement.

What is needed in the future of the UMC is a re-invention of tradition that has a movement quality. A Christian movement is a dynamic engagement of people, inspired and guided by the Spirit, who work toward and hope for social transformation. For the Church to be an inspired movement in any sense re-

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10 I define the term “movement” in two ways, and I express both definitions in the language of Christian tradition within this essay. First, and most specifically, it is a dynamic engagement of people, inspired by the Spirit, working toward and hoping for social transformation. Second, it is the more ineffable but still dynamic quality of Christian faith and Christian bodies as they open themselves to the leading of God’s Spirit. Methodism began as a movement in the first sense—a community of people, inspired by the Spirit and moving for change within the Church of England. It eventually evolved into formal church structures. Since that time, it has continued both as a denomination or family of denominations and as a transformative community of people who seek to be faithful on their ever-changing journey of following Jesus Christ. Methodism has included denominations and formal structures as well as informal relationships, emergent forms, and diverse practices that stand within and outside of the formal structures. The United Methodist
quires that it be open to the bold, transformative movements within and outside of it, such as the ecclesial base communities in Latin America. In short, the movement qualities of the church at a macro level are made possible by social movements at the micro level. This requires an inclusive and flexible governance system that leaves space for the dynamism of movements to permeate the realities of institutional life. This also requires openness to diverse and bold ministry approaches and to the witness, service, and insights that will emerge from each, and it requires an open embrace of those named as “other.” Such actions can thwart divisions and maximize the ability of people to remain in honest, compassionate community while disagreeing. Such have been qualities of earlier movements, as in early Christianity’s “followers of the Way” or in early Methodism’s “people called Methodist.” These same movement qualities can enrich the UMC of the future.

Re-inventing Our Relations with the Working Class and the Poor

The second question posed in this paper is whether we can appeal to and serve the workers of this world, including the poorest of the poor and the working poor, or whether we are inevitably held in the grip of our middle- and upper middle-class values. This question is particularly pertinent, given the decision by the Council of Bishops and consequently by the 2008 General Conference to focus on serving the poor as one of four quadrennial priorities for ministry for 2009–2012.

Church is itself a formal institution but, at its best, it is permeated by God-inspired movements toward God’s New Creation. At its best, the United Methodist Church opens itself for God’s Spirit and the movements that are inspired by God’s Spirit to invigorate, challenge, and transform its life. The United Methodist Church cannot be fully equated with a movement in the most specific definition of that word because movements refuse to be bound within institutional forms. We can hope, however, that the Church will welcome and be transformed by bold movements within and beyond it (first definition) and will embody many movement qualities, opening thus to the ever-moving, life-expanding Spirit of God (second definition).

Remembering the Past

To explore this topic, we visit Methodist history again, but this time in the form of prophets on the margins. Consider, for example, four people, nurtured in Methodism, who were active in the anti-slavery movement in the United States. These people were motivated by their empathy on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

Dorothy Ripley (1769–1831) was an early Methodist preacher, resisting the obstacles in eighteenth century England to that role. She was inspired into ministry by a vision when she was in her late twenties, a time when, as we have already noted, some in the British Methodist movement were fiercely advocating lay leadership. Ripley believed that her call was to minister to African American slaves. This led her to the United States, where she addressed President Thomas Jefferson with the question of how many slaves he held. He explained that he once had three hundred, but now had fewer. In reply, she said to Jefferson that her nature “was shocked to hear of the souls and bodies of men being exposed to sale like the brute creation” and she “implored his pity and commiseration.”

After her exchange with Jefferson, Ripley continued her ministry, urging white Americans to abolish slavery, ministering with African Americans, and eventually speaking out against slavery to the United States Congress. She also became active in prison reform and in advocating for Native Americans. Throughout this time, Ripley continued to have direct and powerful religious experiences that propelled her life and ministry. The combination of her advocacy for the oppressed—a passion born and nourished in the Methodist parsonage of her childhood—and her vivid religious experiences led her to become non-denominational in a world where her social witness and religious experience were akin in some ways to the Quakers and in other ways to the Methodists.

13 Chilcote, Her Own Story, 140.
Overlapping the life of Ripley was that of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), who was born a slave and grew to be one of the most effective abolitionists and advocates for racial and gender justice in the nineteenth century. In his adult life, Douglass was an editor, orator, author, statesman and reformer, using words to inspire the abolitionist movement and using wit to create networks and lead organizations to effect political changes. What is less well known about Douglass is that he was a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. In his autobiography, Douglass recalls an experience when he was twelve years old. His owner’s wife was teaching him to read when the owner burst in and insisted that she stop; he argued that a slave who learns to read will want freedom. Douglass later recalled this as the first anti-abolitionist speech he ever heard. Douglass met a similar resistance a few years later when he, largely self-taught, began teaching other slaves to read the New Testament in his Sabbath school. Some of the slaves faced lashes as a result. Douglass’s love for the slaves and his devotion to their learning, plus the resistance he encountered to his own learning and to that of other slaves, were signals for him of where he needed to focus his work.

Two other famous abolitionists were connected to Methodist churches in the United States. Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), known for her preaching and speaking, was an ardent abolitionist and witness for women’s rights. Born a slave, she was nurtured in religious life by her mother, who conducted evening services involving “the heady mixture of African animism and mystical Christianity that inspired her lifelong religious quest.” Through much of her life, the Methodist Church was to influence Truth, alongside the Afro-centric churches with which she affiliated. She would spend her entire life talking directly with God and working endlessly to effect freedom. Influenced by Methodist experiential religion but suspicious of Methodism’s shift toward a more formal and doctrinaire style, she became a traveling preacher or evangelist, proclaiming the merits of God and abolition. She later became an avid

speaker on women’s rights, known especially for her “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention of 1851.  

More than two decades later, Harriet Tubman (1820–1913) was also born a slave. She escaped on the Underground Railroad and later made several trips on the Railroad to help other slaves to freedom, in spite of a damaging head injury from a former slave master. Tubman became an abolitionist, and she worked with the Union Army during the Civil War, recruiting black soldiers, spying, and nursing the wounded. After the war, she became an advocate for women’s suffrage. Tubman, like Truth, had experiences through her life of speaking directly with God and receiving God’s responses. She also had early experiences of effective slave resistance, as when her mother hid her son and finally stood against her owner, who wanted to sell the boy to someone else. In the last decades of her life, Tubman made her home in the African American Episcopal Church Zion and, when she died, she left the church her property to be used for aged, poor African Americans.

These biographical sketches are selective, and we know that many Methodist people in the United States owned slaves, mistreated slaves, and fought extensively to maintain the system of slavery. Indeed, the Methodist Episcopal Church divided over these very issues. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that some of the most famous abolitionists were related to one of the Methodist denominations. Further, this tradition has continued.  

At General Conference 2008, the Council of Bishops laid out four ministry priorities for the coming quadrennium, one of which is poverty. This followed an eight-year emphasis on Children and Poverty (1996–2004) and a 2007 statement advocating U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. These in turn followed earlier statements against war and on behalf of creation. All of these statements have been concerned with the devastations of war and environmental destruction for God’s creation and human life; several of them recognize the special burden of all destructive forces on people who are poor. Responding to the most recent statement on U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, Bishop James Swanson explained that “the church needs to be about helping the Iraqi people rebuild
their lives.”

This echoes the life-building impetus of figures such as Ripley, Douglass, Truth, and Tubman.

The UMC also has made many direct responses to the poor, as in Katrina Relief, designed to help clear and rebuild after the devastations of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, and the “Nothing but Nets” campaign, designed to provide mosquito nets to protect African children from malaria. These responses are direct services on behalf of people who need extra human and financial resources to respond to devastating life situations. One of the most comprehensive responses has been the Shalom Zones, initiated on the floor of the 1992 General Conference by a delegate from Los Angeles who had just undergone the devastations of the civil uprising in his city. A committee was formed of General Conference delegates representing diverse ethnicities and theological perspectives. This committee recommended the formation of Shalom Zones, which has since generated many ongoing projects across the connection and sparked the International Communities of Shalom Initiative based at Drew University.

In Des Moines, Iowa, one Shalom Zone serves children who face internal and external distresses of poverty, and in Baltimore, Maryland, nine congregations are working together to create six Shalom Zones for community development, responding to the rash of murders in their city. According to Bishop John Schol, “Shalom brings the church into the community and the community into the church.” Unlike some relief efforts, the Shalom Zones are intended to identify and respond to root causes of poverty, rather than to focus largely on symptoms.

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21 For further information about this initiative, see the Communities of Shalom website, http://www.communitiesofshalom.org (accessed 8 March 2009).


Anticipating the Future

These highlights from the Methodist movement raise questions about our United Methodist future. I suggest three actions that are important for re-inventing our relations with the working class and poor. These are evoked by stories of people on the margins and efforts of our denomination to proclaim solidarity with those who suffer.

Prayer

The first action is prayer, which was central to the four abolitionists I introduced. Dorothy Ripley’s life commitment to free and minister with enslaved people arose from her own communion with God. Both Truth and Tubman were eloquent in describing their active prayer lives. They spoke to God, God listened, and God spoke back to them. If United Methodists are to re-invent our relations with the poor in a full-bodied way, we need much conversation with God, and the courage that comes from such conversations.

Prophetic Witness through Words

Two of our prophetic figures wrote and spoke words with punctuation to slave holders, government officials, and slaves themselves. Ripley wrote letters and a book, besides engaging leading political figures in barbed dialogue. Douglass published a newspaper and delivered eloquent speeches. Truth, preacher that she was, had a gift with words as well. Likewise, the UMC Bishops have proclaimed in oratory, sermons, and written forms that poverty must be a ministry priority and that anything that destroys life, whether war or ecological destruction, needs to be actively resisted. The Bishops argue for equally active efforts to build justice and peace for all.

If the UMC of tomorrow is to witness with words on behalf of the poor, we will need to underscore our Social Principles regarding poverty. We need to proclaim the biblical injunctions to love, advocate for, and share with the poor.24 We need to stay awake at night, engaging with the poor about their lives, encouraging their voices, inviting their critiques and proposals for United Methodist ministries, and seeking ways to serve more justly, collaboratively, and humanly.

Prophetic Witness through Actions

Words have been important in movements of the past such as abolition, but words were not an end in themselves. The intention was to end slavery. I name five actions to underscore the strenuous call to prophetic action.

(1) **Claiming freedom.** Claiming freedom, escaping bondage—as done by Douglass, Truth, and Tubman—maximizes one’s ability to live and serve fully.

(2) **Freeing others.** Freeing others, as Tubman did on the Underground Railroad, opens doors for others to live and serve fully.

(3) **Countering oppression.** Countering oppressive systems is what Truth and Tubman did in helping the Union Army in the Civil War. It is why the UMC Council of Bishops advocated against war and ecological destruction. Of course, the two together leave us with an ambivalent legacy regarding war and violent conflict, suggesting that the ideal approach to justice-building is not fully resolved by Methodists or, at least, is open to different discernments in diverse contexts.

(4) **Acting with and for others.** What is needed now is listening to, working with, and following the lead of the poor in serving needs. Acting with others begins with a relationship of respect and equanimity. This will reinforce much of what the church is already doing, but it will transform the church’s relations with the poor in small and large ways. First, the poor will be part of the church and will be wise leaders in the church’s response to poverty. Second, we will continue to respond to needs. Indeed, serving needs, exemplified in Katrina Relief and the “Nothing but Nets” campaign, catches people’s imagination, and such action is vital. What is challenging is to persist in such service, even when it becomes less visible; to do so in partnership with people in need; and to address systemic issues that come to the fore, such as issues of government infrastructures (levees) and global warming (changed weather patterns).

This leads to the third aspect of acting with and for others. The church needs to engage with others in analyzing oppressive systems, then in creating multi-layered action that responds to immediate and long-term needs. The Shalom Zones provide a vivid example. They emerged from careful listening to the people who raged in Los Angeles after the legal exoneration of those who had beaten Rodney King. Whatever one might say about the burning of a city, the church can listen and learn from such tragedies and then respond accordingly. The Shalom Zones offer one comprehensive example of listening to and acting with and for others.
(5) **Educating.** The fifth action is to educate. Not only did Douglass have a passion to educate himself, but he worked to educate others, beginning in the days when he taught other slaves to read the Bible. His master, who objected to Douglass’s reading, argued that people who can read will no longer be satisfied with servitude. Douglass himself recognized that reading sets souls free. If we take this seriously, we will not view United Methodist schools as instruments to prepare people for jobs or even for ministry in United Methodist churches. We will encourage education that enhances human lives and strong social values.

This entire discussion leaves the UMC with challenges for the future: to be in prayer; to proclaim with words wherever our various gifts lead; and to live prophetically, claiming freedom for ourselves, encouraging others in their freedom journeys, addressing oppression and its root causes, and educating people for life abundant. These actions point less to an *anticipated* future and more to a *hoped-for* future—the future toward which God is calling us. In the words of our *Book of Discipline*, this call to action is both a gift and task.²⁵

**Re-inventing Church Unity**

A third question for consideration in the next forty years of the UMC is whether we can remain united, or whether the name “The United Methodist Church” remains a challenge, even a mark of our hypocrisy. Of course, other questions remain: What do we mean by “united”? How is that related to diversity? What values does Christian unity embrace? How do we achieve it?

**Remembering the Past**

Interestingly, the phrase “United Methodist Church” is not new. In the first forty years after John Wesley’s death, reunifications followed divisions. Consider some of these unification movements:

- 1836 – the Wesleyan Methodist Association, merging the Protestant Methodists and the Wesleyan Methodists.
- 1857 – the United Methodist Free Church, merging the Reformers (a mix of break-away groups) and the Wesleyan Methodist Association.
- 1907 – the United Methodist Church, merging the United Wesleyan Free Church, the Bible Christian Church, and the Methodist New Connexion.

²⁵ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008, ¶128, p. 90.*
• 1932 – the Methodist Church of Great Britain, merging the United Methodist Church, the Primitive Methodist Church, and the “mother” Wesleyan Methodist Church. This new body forged a polity that blended traditional Wesleyan polity with more democratic and lay-involving polities of other Methodist movements.

Placing these unification movements alongside the separation movements named above, one can see shifting emphases. The earliest tendency in the Methodist movement was to be expansive for the sake of spreading scriptural holiness across the land. This led to numerous societies, class meetings, and chapels, bearing somewhat diverse forms for diverse peoples in diverse places. The tendency in the next generation, especially the years after John Wesley’s death, was to tighten the boundaries for the sake of identity, as in the ruling against camp meetings and consequent formation of a separate Primitive Methodist Church. The tendency in later generations has been to build toward unity for the sake of common life and witness, as in the formation of the United Methodist Free Church, The United Methodist Church, and The Methodist Church of Great Britain.

The rhythm between accents on boundaries and identity on the one hand, and inclusiveness and uniting on the other, has continued, but the shifts are too complex to be identified as pendulum swings. Boundaries are accentuated when a movement is unsure of its place in a larger society and when people within the movement are competing for power. Inclusiveness is accentuated when necessary for the survival of a community or for peaceful co-existence among diverse communities. Both boundaries and inclusiveness have social functions as well as ideological content. This means that re-inventing church unity requires complex social analysis alongside inclusiveness ideals. What boundaries and what inclusiveness are fitting for the mission of the church, and what boundaries and what inclusiveness are expressive of the church’s or leaders’ need for status and power? When a church seeks to be unified, these questions are critical.

As in the early British Methodist movement, predecessors of The United Methodist Church have seen many unification movements, as outlined by Russell E. Richey. I turn now to the kind of accent on unity that followed the last formal union in 1968. The new accent arises from issues of inclusiveness (or the lack thereof) within the body. One can see the yearning for inclusiveness in the themes of General Conferences. In 1996, the theme of General Conference

was “In Essentials Unity, in Non-Essentials Liberty, in All Things Charity.” In 2000, the theme was “We Who Are Many Are One Body.” If we take Hobbs-bawm’s view, the tradition of unity must have already been broken or we would not have had two General Conferences in a row that made a thematic case for unity. Indeed, much disension did exist in the denomination, often coming to focus on contested issues such as abortion and homosexuality. The same General Conferences were scenes of protest and displays of grief regarding the denomination’s decisions on these matters, while some people celebrated the so-called finality of the church’s decisions on the conflictual issues.

Many of the divisions came to a climax in 2004 when a spokesman for the Confessing Movement urged that the Western Jurisdiction exit the denomination and form itself into a new one. Here we see a clear plea for boundaries and an invitation to division. The Western Jurisdiction delegates prepared a response but, due to technical difficulties, never were able to deliver it to the floor of General Conference. Instead, a small group of people who identified themselves as the large middle of the UMC offered a declaration of unity, which was presented and adopted overwhelmingly on the floor, greeted with tears, embraces, and singing. The 2004 General Conference closed with a sense of catharsis and unity achieved, if only for a moment. This led the way for the 2008 theme—“A Future with Hope”—which seemingly sought to move forward beyond the threats of division.

Anticipating the Future

How do we anticipate the future in such a tradition, pulled between boundaries and unity, pulled by many ethnic, regional, gender, and perspectival groups, which seek to pull the tradition and community to their various centers of gravity? I propose three actions that are urgent for our denomination.

Shared Mission

The surest way to build a community is for people to work together on a shared mission, which may revolve around a problem, such as the devastations of slavery or malaria, or an eschatological vision, such as peace in the Middle East or a world marked by love and respect for the sanctity of every being. People can disagree on many things, but remain in community with one another if they have a shared mission. Working toward such shared mission is best done collaboratively. Consider the diverse committee that collaborated in General Conference 1992 to form the vision of Shalom Zones. While that committee
deliberated, the entire General Conference engaged in a 24-hour fast, saving food money to fund whatever initiative emerged from the committee’s and conference’s deliberations. Here we see a dramatic and immediate example of collaborative visioning. Typically collaboration takes much longer, but it is usually rewarded by broad commitment to the mission that is chosen.

Worship and Celebration

At the heart of Christian life is worship—giving service to God. Coming together to celebrate in formal worship or in festivals of the Christian year or simply in parties of the local community can renew and regenerate a community and its sense of unity. When the UMC focuses its primary attention on unity through agreement, it is focusing on the cognitive, reasoning dimensions of faith. Other dimensions of faith—joy and pain in God’s creation, the experience of God’s grace, and the tugs of God’s leading—are set aside. If we are to be unified, we will need to practice our faith together in all of its richness. In so doing, we will be increasingly able to acknowledge our differences without mandating against one group or another.

Sharing and Wrestling with Difference

Also important to building up the community of faith is honest sharing and wrestling with difference. The bishops and others know this when they encourage holy conferencing. Holy conferencing is not a decoration or a pietistic overlay. It is an invitation to open ourselves to one another in the most honest, respectful, sometimes joyful, sometimes painful, and always loving ways possible. Such sharing will often involve wrestling, and will always take courage. It is counter-cultural, working against the dominant forms of human engagement in most of the world. On the other hand, it is a wrestling that can and will bless us. We have seen evidence of this in Jacob’s wrestling with the angel and in our United Methodist general and annual conferences when people have been willing to give themselves to it. Difference is itself a blessing, but we can only receive the blessing when we see God within it, as Jacob saw God in the stranger with whom he wrestled.

Conclusion

The future is open. What can we anticipate? Who knows? What can we hope for? We can hope that God is there in the future already, pulling us toward
God’s own New Creation. I have named hopes and practices for the future. Are these the hopes and practices that God calls from us? We will discern that together, trusting—always trusting—that God will transform, redeem, guide, and sustain us as we move boldly into God’s future.

About the Author

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