

1 **Wonder, Love, and Praise**
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3 **Sharing a Vision of the Church**
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6 **Preface**
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8 The United Methodist Committee on Faith and Order was established by General
9 Conference action in 2008 as “a visible expression of the commitment of The United Methodist
10 Church to carry on informed theological reflection for the current time in dynamic continuity
11 with the historic Christian faith, our common heritage as Christians grounded in the apostolic
12 witness, and our distinctive Wesleyan heritage.” Among its responsibilities is “to prepare and
13 provide resources and study materials to the General Church upon request from the General
14 Conference, Council of Bishops, or Connectional Table.”¹

15 No sooner was the committee organized than it received a request from the Council of
16 Bishops to prepare a new theological study document on ecclesiology—that is, on a theological
17 understanding of the church itself. The present document is submitted in response to that request.
18 It is intended to assist all of us in The United Methodist Church in gaining a clearer, more
19 comprehensive vision of the reality of the church, and to place our life and work as United
20 Methodists within the context of that vision. It engages with our Wesleyan heritage, with the
21 common Christian tradition rooted in the scriptural witness, and with the contemporary
22 ecumenical discussion.

23 It is the hope of our committee that, after a period of study, conversation, and reflection
24 leading to whatever corrections and other improvements might be found needful, this present

¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), p. 681 (§1908).

document might take a place alongside such official theological statements of the church as *By Water and the Spirit* and *This Holy Mystery*. These documents have set a good precedent in relating United Methodist teaching to the growing ecumenical convergence on the topics with which they deal—respectively, Baptism and Holy Communion—and we have aimed for a similar constructive synthesis here.

Introduction

United Methodists are in need of a new vision today: not just a new view—which might be just the latest rationale for the latest operational program—but a new capacity to see and apprehend what “church” is all about. With our fellow Christians everywhere, we witness a rapidly changing church, both within our denomination and within the larger Christian movement around the world. Migration, immigration, and the push and pull of globalizing forces are reconfiguring the face of Christianity, as well as the larger religious make-up of the human family. Old customs and certainties are being challenged and a yet-unclear future beckons. United Methodists, too, wish to enter into that future with joy, resilience, grace, and hope.

Yet, many factors seem to be conspiring to create in us moods and dispositions of quite another sort. In places where United Methodism finds itself numbered among mainline (or “old-line”) Protestant denominations, the “narrative of decline” has held us in its sway, often with encouragement from adherents of avowedly rival forms of (or, in some cases, substitutes for) Christianity—some of which may not in fact be in the best of health themselves. At the same time, surveys indicate that a growing proportion of populations in some regions of former Christian dominance claim no religious affiliation at all. Some identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” while others are more secularist in orientation; but many in either of these

48 camps view the Christian churches in general as havens for prejudice, hypocrisy, and fear, which
49 have outlived whatever positive purpose they may once have had.² Growing awareness of
50 instances of sexual misconduct and other sorts of malfeasance on the part of pastors and other
51 church leaders across the denominational spectrum—and of the frequent complicity of church
52 authorities in facilitating, hiding, and excusing such conduct—has not enhanced public trust in
53 the institutional church.

54 To some extent, these are all issues for the church around the world; but in different parts
55 of the world—in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania—there are also distinctive
56 challenges linked to distinctive religious, political, and cultural contexts. Some of these have to
57 do with the civil government and polity of the country or region concerned, and the way that
58 churches or religions (or particular churches or religions) are regarded and treated by the state.
59 Some have to do with the religious history and religious demographics of the context, and with
60 the way the church is perceived against that background.

61 The dramatic recent growth of The United Methodist Church in parts of Africa and Asia,
62 and the increasing visibility and involvement of United Methodists from other countries in its
63 leadership, are gradually bringing United Methodists in the United States to a greater (if belated)
64 awareness that theirs is, if not a “global” or “worldwide” church, at least not simply an American
65 denomination. This reality brings a number of new factors into play. It challenges the adequacy
66 of a polity that has been essentially U.S.-centric, taking for granted a basic, normative national
67 identity for the denomination. It greatly expands the range of cultural differences to be found
68 within the church, and the range of issues that the church faces in carrying out its mission. At

² “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, October 9, 2012, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

these and other points, our common self-understanding as a church has lagged behind the pace of change in our actual situation. Wherever we United Methodists find ourselves, we need fresh vision, and a broadening of horizons.

It is a happy concurrence that, as our reflection as a Committee on Faith and Order got underway, the broader Faith and Order movement—through the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches—released its new long-awaited study, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* in 2013.³ Like the earlier landmark ecumenical document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982), this one aims to represent the extent to which long-separated Christian communities are finding common ground in their understanding and practice.

Some may wonder why the appearance of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* should be viewed as a “happy concurrence.” Why should United Methodists engage this ecumenical document in our own search for a new ecclesiological vision? What is at stake in the conversation?

A response to these questions might begin with a reminder that the search for Christian unity is misunderstood if it is taken to mean only a painstaking process of inter-church diplomacy among experts aimed at reconciling the doctrines and polities of separate denominations, important as that dedicated work may be. Even less is it an exercise in nostalgia, trying to recover power, place, and prestige in society now long gone. *At its heart, the search for Christian unity is nothing other than a search for the reality of the church itself—and it is a search in which all of us are involved.* It is a prayerful quest to realize the unity for which Jesus

³ Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2014), downloadable at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>. It is also available there in French, German, Spanish, Korean, Finnish, and Italian versions.

89 prays when, in the gospel according to John, he asks the Father that those to whom “eternal life”
90 is given “may all be one . . . that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that
91 they may become completely one . . .” (John 17:20-23 NRSV). Mission and unity are
92 inextricably connected. The recent ecumenical document *Together towards Life* aptly warns:
93 “The lack of full and real unity in mission still harms the authenticity and credibility of the
94 fulfillment of God’s mission in this world.”⁴ At stake, then, in the search for Christian unity is
95 the integrity of the mission of the body of Christ as a whole. At stake, by implication, is the
96 integrity of our United Methodist mission as part of the church universal.

97 It would be unwise to act as if that unity were already fully known within each separate
98 “church,” so that the only remaining task is to bring them together. In a Christian movement now
99 present on all continents, taking form in hundreds of languages and cultures, we stand in
100 desperate need of new models for grasping and living—within this very diversity—the genuine
101 unity for which Jesus prayed.

102 It may be no accident that the “ecumenical winter” of recent years has seen not only a
103 cooling of interest in overcoming divisions among the churches, but also a troubling increase in
104 divisions *within* some churches, sometimes leading to new separations. The two may be closely
105 related. As we reflect on the ways we ourselves have dealt with our disagreements and with one
106 another in recent years in The United Methodist Church, we may have to confess that spirits
107 have been at work among us that are other than the Spirit of Christ. Our readiness at times to
108 label other members of the body as the agents of those alien spirits, rather than to examine our

⁴ *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes—with a Practical Guide*, edited by Jooseop Keum (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), p. 23; the text is available electronically at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes>.

own hearts, is *prima facie* evidence of that fact. To engage in prayerful reflection upon the nature and mission of the church, seeking to share a common vision, may therefore be a needful exercise in repentance and reorientation, leading, we may hope, to newness of life. As *Towards a Common Vision* reminds us, the unity we seek as Christians is a unity to be realized, not a unity to be either assumed or imposed. It is a gift from God, and one that continually transforms those who receive it.

Not surprisingly, the eminent Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls predicted that the great issues facing the body of Christ in the twenty-first century will be *ecumenical* issues—namely, how “African and Indian and Chinese and Korean and North American and European Christians can together make real the life of the body of Christ.”⁵ Thus, to ask “ecumenical” questions about Christian unity-in-diversity is by the nature of the case to ask “missional” questions. Indeed, such questions take us to the heart of the matter in our struggle as United Methodists to discern our ecclesiological identity and witness today: How might United Methodists characterize our particular role within the “Church Universal”? What is our niche in the ecclesial ecology? What insights might our deep attention to the ecumenical discussion generate for dealing more constructively and effectively with the vexing issues surrounding “legitimate diversity,” both as they affect our own life and mission in The United Methodist Church and in our ongoing relations with other Christian communities? How might a new vision of the reality of the church help us toward a better ordering of our common life? How might it lead us into more constructive relationships with persons of other religious faiths and traditions, as well as with those who identify with none?

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, “From Christendom to World Christianity,” in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Orbis, 2002), 69.

130 In confronting these questions, a conversation with *The Church: Towards a Common*
131 *Vision* has much to offer—and United Methodists would be wise to drink deeply from this
132 wisdom, as we have in the past. The fact that this ecumenical text is the product of a sustained
133 global effort involving Christians from many different traditions, cultures, and circumstances
134 may enable it to speak to our United Methodist situation in ways that will generate new
135 possibilities.

136 Given the participation of members of The United Methodist Church and its predecessor
137 bodies, along with members of other churches in the Methodist family, at every stage of the
138 crafting of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, we should not be surprised that the leading
139 themes and affirmations of this document resonate strongly with our own particular heritage. At
140 the same time, by grounding its account of the church in a vision that is often more implicit than
141 explicit in our own tradition, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* may assist us in bringing
142 our ecclesiology to more coherent expression. As United Methodists, we have a considerable
143 store of affirmations concerning the church, drawn from resources throughout the broader
144 Christian tradition and found in our hymnody and liturgy as well as in official statements of
145 doctrine and polity. However, these affirmations and references tend to remain scattered and
146 isolated from one another.⁶ Our ongoing encounter with a wide range of ecumenical partners is
147 leading us to a deeper and more empowering understanding both of what we have in common
148 and of our distinctive vocation as “part of the Church Universal.” For all these reasons, *The*

⁶ A resource paper of the Committee on Faith and Order prepared by Russell E. Richey has gathered and organized many of these references, showing their range and value as resources for contemporary thinking: *United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching On the Nature, Mission, and Faithfulness of the Church*, available at http://www.gbhem.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/DOM_Nature_Mission_Faithfulness_of_Church.pdf.

Church: Towards a Common Vision will be an important conversation partner in our effort to formulate a United Methodist ecclesial vision in the pages that follow.

I. Our Approach to an Understanding of the Church

The communities of Christian faith that came together in 1968 to create The United Methodist Church shared some distinctive convictions that, insofar as it is true to its origins, continue to energize and guide its life and witness. Among these are the convictions that the saving love of God is meant for all people, not just for a favored few; that it is a transformative love; and that it is a community-creating love.

The saving love of God is meant for all people: “God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). John Wesley’s comment on this statement in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* emphasizes the “everyone”: *all* of humankind is included in this desire—“Not a part only, much less the smallest part.” He also notes another implication of the statement: “They are not compelled.”⁷ The grace of God extended to all does not override human freedom, but activates it, so that our salvation, while entirely a gift, involves our free participation. These two points about the universality of God’s saving love are repeated throughout his writing and embodied in his ministry. They were essential to Wesley’s understanding of the gospel, and to the power of the movement he inspired. They remain a vital part of United Methodist affirmation.

The saving love of God is transformative: To use the language familiar to Wesley and his contemporaries, as God’s grace is accepted in faith, it brings both “justification,” the restoration of a right relationship with God, and “sanctification,” the renewal of our very being. There is a

⁷ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1950), p. 775.

new birth. The love of God *for* us becomes the love of God *in* us. In the words of the apostle Paul, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1), and being “called to freedom,” we are to “live by the Spirit,” which means living by the love of God that empowers us to put aside “the works of the flesh” and to bear “the fruit of the Spirit . . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:13,16,19,22). A hallmark of John Wesley’s preaching, and of the preaching and testimony of the people called Methodist through the years, is that such an experienced, here-and-now transformation of human life by the power of the Holy Spirit is real.

The saving love of God creates community: The transformation just described is by its very nature a transformation of our relationships with others. It is through others that we experience the love of God; it is with others that the pattern of new life that God gives is both learned and lived out. Much of the language in the New Testament descriptive of the church originates in the early Christian experience of the community-forming power of the Spirit. The church does not come into being because isolated individuals experience God’s saving love and then take the initiative to seek out other individuals with whom to form a group. The church comes into being because the Spirit of God leads us into community—perhaps with persons with whom we would least expect to associate—as the very matrix of our salvation. That Spirit-formed community becomes the context within which we enter into the new life God offers us, and it is a community whose reach is constantly being extended as its members, in the power of the Spirit, offer the gift of community to others, and likewise receive it from them. In that very Spirit, Wesley and those in connection with him found themselves moving beyond the established norms of churchly behavior, and challenging the church, by their own example, to enact more fully God’s gift of community. Thus the term “connection” took on new resonances

of meaning, as what Wesley called “social holiness”—the growth in love and in the other fruits of the Spirit that is possible only in community—was realized in new situations and settings. This willingness to transgress boundaries of convention, class, and culture in pursuit of God’s gift of community, notes United Methodist historian Russell Richey, illumines connectionalism’s essentially missional character. From the beginning, connectionalism stood in service of mission, tuning every aspect of Methodist communal life—from structure to polity to discipline—to an “evangelizing and reforming” purpose.⁸ Connectionalism, affirms the United Methodist mission document *Grace upon Grace*, “expresses our missional life. . . . [It is United Methodism’s] means of discovering mission and supporting mission; in this bonding we seek to understand and enact our life of service.”⁹

Together, these convictions shape our United Methodist understanding of what it is to be the church. The ways they have come to expression in our history account in part for our particular ways of being the church, within the larger Body of Christ.

The United Methodist Church traces its origins to certain movements of Christian renewal and revitalization within the established churches of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Methodism, or the Wesleyan Revival, was the most prominent and durable of a number of such movements in eighteenth-century Britain. Its leader, John Wesley, was an ordained minister in the Church of England. His aim was not to create a new church, separate from the Church of England, but to help that church toward a recovery of its spiritual vitality and

⁸ Russell E. Richey, with Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology In Ecclesial Practice* (Abingdon, 2005), 31-32.

⁹ *Grace Upon Grace: The Mission Statement of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1990), 36. A link to an electronic version of this document may be found on the blog site UM & Global, <http://www.umglobal.org/>.

its mission. He and the early Methodists adopted some unconventional ways to bring the gospel of Christ to many sorts of people who were not being reached, or were not being reached effectively, by the established church. Wesley's own practice of traveling to where the people were and preaching—in an open field, if necessary—wherever and whenever a group of hearers could be gathered, his commissioning and training of lay preachers to do likewise, and the organization of those hearers who were receiving the gospel into small groups for mutual support and growth in grace, led to the emergence of a “connection” of people across Britain and Ireland that eventually (and only after Wesley's death) took on the full identity of a distinct manifestation of the Christian church.

Meanwhile on the continent of Europe another movement known as Pietism had been underway within the churches of the Protestant Reformation. Like Wesley and his people, the Pietists were intent upon realizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and upon the spread of the gospel. Like the Methodists, they included in their mission efforts to improve the conditions of life among the poor and vulnerable, to support popular education and the dissemination of knowledge, and to be a Christian presence where such a presence had not yet been known. In fact, a significant influence on John Wesley's life and thought was his acquaintance with representatives of this movement, with whom he engaged at various points in his life. He and the Pietists had their differences, but they also recognized a deep kinship.

Participants in both the Methodist movement and varieties of Pietism (which would help to shape the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association) made their way to North America, where they encountered each other as well as some other awakening movements within the Christian churches already present there. They continued their efforts in this new context. There was occasional interaction between Methodists and some of the Pietist leaders and people, and

there were some attempts—though none succeeded, in those days—to unify the movements. Both Methodists and Pietists struggled with their relationships to the churches from which they came, and both movements, under the pressure of circumstances, eventually found themselves taking the form of distinct churches. For the most part, it was not doctrinal differences but practical circumstances that led to their making that transition. In the case of the Methodists, the aftermath of the American Revolution was decisive in that it severed the ties with the Church of England (however tenuous they may have already been) that Wesley and his assistants had always hoped to maintain.

As they took on a churchly identity, the movements bore witness in various ways to the radical aims and effect of God's grace. Whether or not the African American preachers, Harry Hosier and Richard Allen, attended the organizing "Christmas Conference" of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland in 1784, the church undertook there to continue its mission of ministering zealously to both slaves and freed persons of African descent, as well as to all others within reach. The initial publication of its *Doctrine and Discipline* (the precursor of today's *Book of Discipline*) courageously mandated its adherents to the freeing of any slaves held. The 1784 conference also prefigured in a symbolic way the new churches' eventual ministry across numerous ethnic and linguistic boundaries: William Otterbein—pastor of Baltimore's Evangelical Reformed Church (which helped to host the conference) and later leader of the United Brethren denomination—participated along with the Anglican Thomas Coke in the ordination of Francis Asbury. Later on, Jacob Albright worshiped with the Methodists before leading other German-speaking converts in forming the Evangelical Association.

There has followed a complex and often ambiguous history of accomplishments and failures, growth and loss, separations and unions, over the past two centuries and more—a very

human history, in which (as its participants would want to testify) God has been steadily at work both within and despite human plans, decisions, and actions. The American Methodists' early commitment to the elimination of slavery was soon compromised, and the ensuing tensions led to several Sunderings of the denomination in the years prior to the American Civil War. Although these Sunderings were partially (and imperfectly) mended many years later, their legacy continues into our own time. A heritage of racism and related difficulties around culture and social class has affected our common life and our efforts at mission in both overt and subtle ways throughout our history, even as our core convictions have offered a constant challenge to overcome it. The United Methodist Church is an heir to, and itself a part of, this history, with its burden and its promise.

Like its predecessors, The United Methodist Church continues to reflect on its identity and calling as church. Originating in movements that became denominations more or less by default—and that were instrumental in the development of the modern “denomination” as a distinctive form of Christian association—the two churches that were joined in 1968 brought with them a strong awareness of the provisionality and problematic character of any such denominational arrangements, and perhaps especially of the failure of our separate denominations to enact the fullness of community to which God summons us. At its founding, accordingly, The United Methodist Church committed itself to the ongoing quest for Christian unity—a quest to which members of its predecessor bodies had long given significant leadership. The preamble to its new constitution declared that “[t]he Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.” Article V (now Article VI) of Division One of the Constitution described the new body as “part of the Church Universal,” affirmed that “the Lord of the Church is calling Christians everywhere to strive

toward unity,” and committed The United Methodist Church to “seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life.”¹⁰ The formation of the new church was to be understood not as an end in itself but rather as a relatively modest step on the way to fuller visible unity among Christians.

Later, in the revised statement on “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task” adopted in 1988, these commitments were renewed and given some further elaboration:

With other Christians, we declare the essential oneness of the church in Christ Jesus. This rich heritage of shared Christian belief finds expression in our hymnody and liturgies. Our unity is affirmed in the historic creeds as we confess one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. It is also experienced in joint ventures of ministry and in various forms of ecumenical cooperation.

Nourished by common roots of this shared Christian heritage, the branches of Christ's church have developed diverse traditions that enlarge our store of shared understandings. Our avowed ecumenical commitment as United Methodists is to gather our own doctrinal emphases into the larger Christian unity, there to be made more meaningful in a richer whole.

If we are to offer our best gifts to the common Christian treasury, we must make a deliberate effort as a church to strive for critical self-understanding. It is

¹⁰ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1968 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1968), pp. 16-18. (With slight alterations in typography, these statements were retained in the 2012 *Book of Discipline*. An amendment adopted in 2012 and ratified subsequently has made explicit a crucial commitment, namely, a sharing in Christ's prayer for the unity of the church. The line now reads “. . . and therefore it will pray, seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life.”)

as Christians involved in ecumenical partnership that we embrace and examine
our distinctive heritage.¹¹

The hope that many Christians had, half a century ago, for steady progress in Christian
unity was soon challenged by new developments both within the churches and in the societies of
which they are a part. Faced with a host of social changes, varying in character from one region
to another but including such phenomena as increasing religious pluralism, the social
transformations brought by new technologies, and changes in the role of religion in society, the
churches engaged in the ecumenical quest have sometimes allowed anxiety about their own
institutional survival to dampen their interest in that quest. The temptation is to become more
inwardly-focused, and perhaps to regard our ecumenical partners as competitors in a diminishing
religious marketplace.

Still, in the midst of what some have called an “ecumenical winter,” there have been
notable achievements. Bilateral and multilateral dialogues have advanced our mutual
understanding and have sometimes led to new formal relationships between The United
Methodist Church and other bodies. A particularly important precedent for *The Church: Towards
a Common Vision* is the earlier Faith and Order convergence text, *Baptism, Eucharist, and
Ministry* (1982),¹² likewise the product of years of ecumenical work at various levels. Principles

¹¹ “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), p. 48 (¶102).

¹² Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982). Downloadable at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>. Like the new text on the church, this document—“*BEM*” for short—involved significant participation by United Methodists and members of other Wesleyan and Methodist communities in its preparation. After its publication, an official United Methodist

and insights from that text came to inform our church's subsequent official study documents on Baptism and Holy Communion,¹³ the subjects of its first two chapters.

No similar study document has been offered so far on the subject of its third chapter: "Ministry." That chapter points toward a substantial amount of convergence among Christian traditions on various aspects of ministry and ministerial ordering. Still, it has been widely felt that this chapter was not as rich in constructive possibilities—perhaps not quite as receptive to the variety of understandings and practices among the churches, and to what might be learned from them—as the first two. There are probably a number of reasons for this perception, as well as for the slowness of the churches to find much common ground in this area. It may be that further progress toward "a mutually recognized ministry" awaits (among other things) a fuller common apprehension of the ecclesial context of ministry. If so, *Towards a Common Vision* may have a key role to play in that learning process.

The United Methodist Church may (and does) affirm itself to be truly the church, but it also acknowledges that is not the whole church. We have things to contribute to a wider common Christian understanding of the church, and we also have things to learn: things to learn about other Christians and churches, and things to learn from them about ourselves. As we

response to it was offered under the auspices of the Council of Bishops, and another—reflecting a specific European context and set of concerns—was submitted by the Central Conference for Central and Southern Europe. See *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, vol. II, Faith and Order Paper 132, edited by Max Thurian (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), pp. 177-199, 200-209.

¹³ "By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism" (1996) and "This Holy Mystery" (2004), in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), pp. 922-942 and 942-991. The full texts are available online at <http://www.gbod.org/resources/by-water-and-the-spirit-full-text> and <http://www.gbod.org/resources/this-holy-mystery-a-united-methodist-understanding-of-holy-communion1>.

undertake to realize a new ecclesial vision for The United Methodist Church, we are committed to doing this work, as we have in the past, in an ecumenical context.

II. A New Vision for The United Methodist Church

The three convictions described above provide a promising guide to the main elements of such a vision. We begin with the affirmation that the church is first of all not our creation, but God's. It is, of course, a reality that our participation helps to shape, but it originates in the self-gift to us of the triune God. *The saving love of God creates community.* From this point, we move second to consider the implications for the life of the church that *the saving love of God is meant for all people*, and third to a consideration of what it is to affirm and realize that *the saving love of God is transformative.*

The Church as a Gift of the Triune God

The saving love of God creates community. In the classic creeds, the church is mentioned immediately after the Holy Spirit. In the Apostles' Creed they are affirmed literally in the same breath: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church" In the more widely used Nicene Creed,¹⁴ "We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church" comes just after the profession of faith in the Holy Spirit, who is described as "the Lord, the giver of life." Evidently, in the judgment of the makers of the creeds and of those who have affirmed their faith with them through the centuries, the church has something to do with the Spirit's giving of life. As the

¹⁴ Technically the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the expanded version of the creed of the Council of Nicea (325) adopted by the Council of Constantinople (381) and commonly known thereafter as the Nicene Creed. For the texts of both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed, see UMH 880-882.

early Christian writer Irenaeus of Lyon declared succinctly: “Where the church is, there also is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the church and all grace.”¹⁵

One luminous sentence in the first paragraph of *Towards a Common Vision* speaks to this point, and at the same time provides a key to the understanding of the church that the document as a whole presents: “Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing” (1, p. 5).¹⁶

It is *communion* that the Spirit gives, and that animates—or we might say, creates—the church. In the Greek of the New Testament, the term is *koinonia*: a word that is properly translated in a variety of ways depending on context and usage, including “communion,” “sharing,” participation,” “partaking,” “fellowship,” and “community.” The “communion of the Holy Spirit” of 2 Cor. 13:13, the “sharing in the body of Christ” of 1 Cor. 10:16, the “becom[ing] participants of the divine nature” of 2 Peter 1:4, all involve this reality of *koinonia*.¹⁷ The “gift by which the church lives” is simply the love of God poured out for us, decisively in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, a love in which we are invited to share. The life of the church is a

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III, 24, 1, cited in Boris Bobrinskoy, *Le mystère de l'Église: Cours de théologie dogmatique* (Paris: Cerf, 2003), p. 14.

¹⁶ In parenthetical references to passages in *Towards a Common Vision*, the paragraph number will be given, followed by the page number of the printed English version. The paragraphs are numbered consecutively throughout the text's four chapters and conclusion.

¹⁷ “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of [note: or “and the sharing in”] the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:13 NRSV). “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16 NRSV). “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4 NRSV). Further passages are cited in the brief discussion of the term *koinonia* to be found in paragraph 13 (p. 10) of *Towards a Common Vision*.

371 sharing in the life of the Triune God, and the mission of the church is to communicate that
 372 possibility to a world in need: to serve as “sign and servant” (25, p. 15) of God’s saving presence
 373 to the world. The invocation of the Holy Spirit in the “Great Thanksgiving” at Holy Communion
 374 makes these connections well:

375 Pour out your Holy Spirit on us, gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and
 376 wine.

377 Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world
 378 the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

379 By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry
 380 to all the world¹⁸

381 Aspects of our own Wesleyan heritage resonate deeply with this affirmation of the
 382 centrality of *koinonia* to the life and mission of the church. When John Wesley, in a late sermon
 383 on “The New Creation,” wished to portray the final goal of human life—the end for which we
 384 are created, and to which we are to be restored through Christ—he used these words: “And to
 385 crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant
 386 communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment
 387 of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!”¹⁹ For Wesley, and for his followers, we
 388 are given a foretaste of this goal, and more than a foretaste, here and now. Salvation is “a

¹⁸ “Word and Table: Service I,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 10.

¹⁹ John Wesley, “The New Creation,” *Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 510.

present thing,” Wesley declared; the term rightly embraces “the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory.”²⁰ Human beings are “created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and to enjoy [their] Creator to all eternity.”²¹ Wesley’s understanding of our “fallen” state involves the distortion or loss of those capacities for knowledge, love, and joy—in short, for communion with God and with one another—and salvation involves their recovery and their eventual fulfillment in glory, when (as his brother Charles memorably wrote) we are to be “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”²² The history of salvation is, as *Towards a Common Vision* puts it, “the dynamic history of God’s restoration of *koinonia*” (1, p. 5). To the extent that these Wesleyan themes still inform our witness, hymnody, and common life, we have ample reason to make our own the affirmation that communion is indeed “the gift by which the church lives,” and the gift that it is called to offer the world.

We might want to say, then, that, theologically understood, the church is not an association of like-minded individuals serving purposes they may have devised for themselves. Instead, it is a community established by God, grounded in the very life of God, an aspect of the new creation.

We might want to say that, but we should not; at least, we should not stop there. It is an oversimplification. It is correct in what it affirms about the ultimate source of the church’s reality and about what truly sustains it as a manifestation of *koinonia*. But it is mistaken in what

²⁰ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” *Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 156.

²¹ John Wesley, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” *Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 397. In a wonderful line from one of Charles Wesley’s hymns, we are “ordained to be / transcripts of the Trinity” (“Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* [Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989], #346).

²² “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, #384.

it implicitly denies. The truth—the theological truth, even—is that the church is indeed *also* a very human community, an association of often all too like-minded individuals, and that it does also serve human purposes quite distinct from, and sometimes counter to, the purposes of God.

This, too, is recognized in the very first chapter of *Towards a Common Vision*, and throughout the text. To say that “the Church is both a divine and a human reality” (23, p. 14) is to say that alongside our awareness that the church is a gift of the Triune God, “the creature of God’s Word and of the Holy Spirit,”²³ we must place an equally clear awareness of what its human reality implies. We must, in our theology itself, come to terms with the human uses of the church.

Like other religious traditions and communities, Christian churches serve a variety of human needs and purposes, in ways that vary a great deal from one place and time to another. They commonly serve human needs for order, coherence, stability, belief-reinforcement, companionship, ethical guidance, and so forth. They are affected at every point by the typical ways human beings interact with each other in the satisfaction of those needs. They are also put to use in the service of other interests on the part of adherents and “outsiders” alike, for example, by being made to serve particular political and economic ends. No one acquainted with the history of the Christian churches from the earliest centuries onward can fail to acknowledge this complex intertwining of human needs, desires, ambitions, and fears in that history. Sometimes it is much easier to recognize those elements in the life of the church in some other place and time than in one’s own.

²³ *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 9, p. 13. This paper was, as its subtitle indicates, a precursor to the 2013 text: “a stage on the way to a common statement.”

Some of these common human uses are clearly consistent with the church's own mission as sign and servant of *koinonia*. In such cases, we might say that God's purpose and human purposes are aligned, in the meeting of genuine human need and in the service of the well-being of God's creation. In other cases, the human use may be in direct conflict with the divine purpose—as, for instance, when the church is serving, whether unwittingly or deliberately, as the instrument of an ideology of national, racial, ethnic, or gender superiority. *Towards a Common Vision* cites one variety of this misuse: “At times, the cultural and religious heritage of those to whom the Gospel was proclaimed was not given the respect it deserved, as when those engaging in evangelization were complicit in imperialistic colonization, which pillaged and even exterminated peoples unable to defend themselves from more powerful invading nations” (6, p. 7). In recent years, The United Methodist Church has been brought to a new awareness that its own history is not free of involvements in events of this sort, much as we may prefer to recall happier stories.²⁴ To edit out those parts of an account of our past (and present) that do not reflect so well on us is to deceive ourselves as well as others, and leaves us ill-equipped for the careful discernment that our calling requires. In this discernment, the vision of the gift of *koinonia* which is God's will for the church in all times and places is a vital point of reference.

Community of Salvation and Community as Sign

The saving love of God is meant for all people. The Bible does not set forth one normative model or understanding of the church. There is no blueprint in the New Testament to be followed. However, Scripture does offer abundant resources for our thinking about the ways

²⁴ Resolution 3323, “Healing Relationships with Indigenous Persons,” and a number of acts of remembrance and repentance which have been undertaken in connection with it, are hopeful signs of this new awareness. See *Book of Resolutions 2012*, pp. 419-420.

God works to establish or restore communion with and among humankind. Some of these scriptural images and concepts have had influential roles in the history of Christian thought and practice, though the weight given to particular leading images has varied from one time and place to another. Others have received relatively little attention. Three of the more prominent ones—“people of God,” “body of Christ,” “temple of the Holy Spirit”—have been frequently cited and explored in contemporary ecumenical discussion, partly because of the ways their differences provoke our thinking. Together, they help to make the point that *koinonia* is the gift of the Triune God, and also that our realization of and response to that gift may take different forms. We have a standing invitation to explore the richness and variety of images, metaphors, and ideas that the biblical writers used to portray the character of the new community God is creating.

One more prosaic term that, in company with such images as the three just mentioned, may offer a promising approach to the range of meanings of “church” and the many forms it can take is the one most frequently used in the New Testament to designate the Christian community: *ekklesia*. Usually rendered as “church” in English translations of the New Testament,²⁵ it is “community” (*Gemeinde*) in Luther’s German New Testament, while in Latin-derived languages it retains something of the Latin transliteration, *ecclesia*, as in the French *église*, Spanish *iglesia*, or Italian *chiesa*. In New Testament times and for some centuries before, *ekklesia* was a common Greek term for an assembly or gathering, such as the meeting of voting citizens in a Greek city-state. It is also the word normally used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew

²⁵ “Church” actually comes from another Greek word, *kyriake*, “belonging to the Lord,” which was never used in the New Testament to refer to the Christian community. This usage arose later, and eventually made its way into English. Some early English translations, notably that of William Tyndale, rendered *ekklesia* as “congregation” rather than as “church”—an option that the royal instructions to the translators of the King James Version explicitly ruled out.

scriptures, the Septuagint, to translate the Hebrew term *qahal*, likewise a generic term for assembly or gathering—a religious meeting, for instance, or an armed array ready for battle. One of the more durable uses of *qahal/ekklesia*, in early Christian as well as Jewish memory, was in connection with the assembly of the people at Sinai at the giving of the Torah (“the day of the assembly,” Deuteronomy 18:16) and with the anticipation of an ultimate joyous and redemptive gathering of all the people of God, as described for instance in Isaiah 25:6-9. *Ekklesia*, then, in the mind of a writer such as Paul, had a useful range. It could refer to a particular local community of Christians, or collectively to the sum of such local communities, or to the whole people of God in all times and places (the “Church universal,” as it is sometimes called).

Both “assembly” and “gathering,” along with “convocation,” “congregation,” and some other terms that have been employed at different times to render *ekklesia*, have some interesting flexibility: they can refer to an action or process (coming together, being brought together), or to the group that is formed, or to the members of that group whether or not they happen to be assembled at the moment. Still, Luther—anticipating a number of present-day interpreters—probably had it right: the best contemporary equivalent for *ekklesia* in a Christian context may well be “community.” This is particularly convincing if we keep in mind the close connections between the theme of gathering (*ekklesia*) and the theme of communion (*koinonia*).²⁶ Among human beings, communion takes the form of community.

Ekklesia has an additional connotation for the particular strands of Protestant tradition which have shaped United Methodism. Among the standards of doctrine of The United

²⁶ Helpful reflections on the usages of *ekklesia* may be found in Paula Gooder, “In Search of the Early ‘Church’: The New Testament and the Development of Christian Communities,” *Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, edited by Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 9-27, and in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 21-48.

Methodist Church are the Articles of Religion brought into the union by The Methodist Church and the Confession of Faith brought into it by the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Each contains an article on the Church, along with other material relevant to the subject. The two principal articles are these:

First, from the Articles of Religion, Article XIII—Of the Church:

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

And from the Confession of Faith, Article V—The Church:

We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.

The first definition, from the Methodist Articles, is essentially a reproduction of the corresponding article (XIX) in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1563), based in turn upon Article VII of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530). It identifies the church (*ecclesia*, in the Latin version of the Anglican and Lutheran texts) as a “congregation of faithful men” (“and women,” we might add to be true to the sense today, or we might render *coetus*

fidelium more literally as “congregation of the faithful”), assembled by and for Word and Sacrament. Although some classical Protestant doctrines of the church derive from this basic affirmation the conclusion that there are two essential “marks” of the church—authentic proclamation of the Word, and proper administration of the Sacraments—others identify three such marks: in addition to Word and Sacrament, there is the mark of faithfulness itself, or discipleship, or discipline, or of a common life ordered by the promises of God. It is this latter scheme that, from the Protestant side, enters into our ecumenical understandings of the triadic or triune shape of the church’s life and mission.

The second definition, reflecting the Evangelical United Brethren heritage, contains basic elements of the first, but enriches it in several ways. (As with the “faithful men” of the first definition, we would today want to say that the Word is preached “by women and men divinely called” or “by persons divinely called.” The latter phrase is used when an abridgement of this article is incorporated into the definition of the local church in *Book of Discipline 2012*, ¶201). It makes more explicit the element of faithful response—the third “mark”—with such terms as “redemptive fellowship” and with reference to the church’s mission, and it also includes the adjectives from the Nicene Creed identifying the church as “one, holy, apostolic and catholic.”

A noteworthy feature of the first-quoted article—and, by implication, of the second, which builds upon it—is that it offers a definition of the *visible* church. A distinction between the “visible church” and the “invisible church” was common at the time of the Protestant Reformation, with roots going back much farther. As conventionally understood, the visible church was an actual community, a local congregation of professing Christians or a larger body incorporating many local congregations, who hear and affirm the Word rightly preached, partake of the sacraments, and support the church’s ministry. The invisible church was understood to be

the totality of persons who are actually saved, or on their way to salvation. This company is “invisible” in the sense that no one but God knows with certainty who is included in it. It was commonly assumed (and often asserted by theologians and preachers) that with a few exceptions the members of the invisible church, the truly saved, were also professing Christians, members of the visible church; but that the visible church also contains (to use John Calvin’s words) “a very large mixture of hypocrites, who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance.”²⁷

The perspective of many Christians and of many Christian communities on this matter has shifted in more recent years. *Towards a Common Vision* (25, p. 15) represents widespread, though not unanimous, convergence here among the churches involved in the ecumenical movement:

Since God wills all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4), Christians acknowledge that God reaches out to those who are not explicit members of the Church, in ways that may not be immediately evident to human eyes. While respecting the elements of truth and goodness that can be found in other religions and among those with no religion, the mission of the Church remains that of inviting, through witness and testimony, all men and women to come to know and love Christ Jesus.

What such a statement allows is the possibility that persons who are not “explicit members” of the church may yet be, in some sense, members of the church, participants in the

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1962), volume 2, p. 288 (IV, 1, 7).

one *ekklesia* of God, sharers in the communion God offers. Note that the statement does not suggest that all persons are, in fact, responding to the love of God in such a way, nor does it imply that those who do so respond are therefore “really Christians” without knowing it. It does, however, imply that God’s *koinonia* may be encountered in other forms and other places. If God is reaching out to those beyond our Christian communities in ways hidden to us, and if they are responding to God’s love in positive ways, then perhaps we need a more expansive concept of “church” than we have been accustomed to using. (As Irenaeus said long ago, “where the Spirit of God is, there is the church and all grace.”) The church, in the sense of the one *ekklesia* of God, the community of salvation, is not coextensive with the churches that we know. Those churches that we know participate in that larger *ekklesia* (however imperfectly), but their distinctive task is to be the explicit sign and servant of God’s salvific self-giving to humankind—to be, as some traditions would find it natural to say, a sacrament—through their worship of God, their care and nurture of those who come to faith through their witness, and their service to God’s reconciling and redemptive purpose.

The churches carry on this work entrusted to them more or less well. In the apt words of the Westminster Confession, the church “hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible” in those communities that call themselves churches.²⁸

John Wesley lamented the fact that many professing Christians of his day seemed at best to have “the form of godliness, but not the power thereof” (cf. 2 Tim 3:5), not because God had decreed their exclusion from salvation, but because they were refusing to use the grace they were given by the God who “wants all people to be saved” (I Tim 2:4). At the same time, Wesley was unwilling to believe that the multitudes of people who were *not* professing Christians—for

²⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.4.

577 example, the large numbers of the poor in England who were alienated from the church and felt
 578 excluded by it, or the millions around the world who had never heard the Gospel—were utterly
 579 deprived of God’s grace on that account, for reasons beyond their control. On the contrary, he
 580 was convinced that Christ died for all, that the guilt of “inbeing sin” that may have been incurred
 581 through the fall of our first parents had been cancelled for all, and that grace was available to
 582 all.²⁹ A lesson we might learn from Wesley is that we need, on the one hand, to exercise a
 583 realistically self-critical capacity when it comes to the quality of our own life and witness as
 584 Christians and Christian communities, to be alert to the dangers of self-deception and aware of
 585 our own permanent need for repentance and renewal; and, on the other hand, to be open to the
 586 presence of God in our neighbors, including our non-Christian neighbors, and open to the love of

²⁹ “I have no authority from the Word of God ‘to judge those that are without’ [the Christian dispensation]. No do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to him that made them, and who is ‘the Father of the spirits of all flesh’; who is the God of the heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made. . . . [I]f the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of his Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused.” “On living without God,” *Sermons IV*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), pp. 174-175. In his comment on Acts 10:34-35—“Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality. But in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’”—in his *Notes on the New Testament*, Wesley wrote: “But in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness - He that, first, reverences God, as great, wise, good, the cause, end, and governor of all things; and secondly, from this awful regard to him, not only avoids all known evil, but endeavours, according to the best light he has, to do all things well; is accepted of him - Through Christ, though he knows him not. The assertion is express, and admits of no exception. He is in the favour of God, whether enjoying his written word and ordinances or not. Nevertheless the addition of these is an unspeakable blessing to those who were before in some measure accepted. Otherwise God would never have sent an angel from heaven to direct Cornelius to St. Peter.”

God that may come to us through them. Such a stance is, in fact, reflected in United Methodist teaching concerning our relations to those of other religious traditions.³⁰

Speaking of the Christian church as a whole—in ecumenical writings, this is normally “the Church” with a capital “C”—*Towards a Common Vision* offers a helpful brief account (in 22, pp. 13-14) of ecumenical convergence on how the four Nicene “marks” cited in our Confession of Faith may be understood. “The Church is one because God is one (cf. John 17:11, 1 Tim. 2:5). . . . The Church is holy because God is holy (cf. Is. 6:3; Lev. 11:44-45).” The Church is catholic because God intends it for all people, the whole world. The Church is apostolic because of its origins in witnesses sent (an apostle is “one who is sent”) by the Triune God and its call “to be ever faithful to those apostolic origins.” In each case, the text notes that our actual performance falls short: again, the divine reality of the Church is “sometimes more, sometimes less visible” in its human reality.

“Legitimate diversity in the life of communion is a gift from the Lord” (28, p. 16). No reference to “the Church” in the singular should be taken to imply that differences have no place in the Christian community. The fact that the Triune God is the source of our communion should be enough to remind us that it is a dynamic, relational unity, not a monolithic uniformity, that is to be sought. The gifts of the Spirit differ in character (1 Cor. 12:4-7) and are exercised in different ways for the common good. Also, human beings and their cultures differ from one another in manifold ways, and these differences enrich our *koinonia*. Particular actual churches—local congregations, historical Christian traditions and their various strands and organizational groupings—have their own ways of being church. They are free to differ, and to some extent they must differ, in order to relate to the situations in which they find themselves

³⁰ Cf. “Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships,” *Book of Resolutions 2012*, pp. 269-279.

and in order to realize their particular gifts. “Legitimate diversity is compromised whenever Christians consider their own cultural expressions of the Gospel as the only authentic ones, to be imposed upon Christians of other cultures” (28, p. 16).

How legitimate diversity may be distinguished from illegitimate diversity is a question still seeking a clear answer in an ecumenical context, as *Towards a Common Vision* acknowledges (30, pp. 16-17). An abstract principle may be agreed upon, such as that illegitimate diversity is that which undermines the unity of the church; but a formula of this sort is readily susceptible to misuse. In a comment on the issue, the text ponders what may be needed:

Though all churches have their own procedures for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate diversity, it is clear that two things are lacking: (a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognized structures as are needed to use these effectively. All churches seek to follow the will of the Lord yet they continue to disagree on some aspects of faith and order and, moreover, on whether such disagreements are Church-divisive or, instead, part of legitimate diversity. We invite the churches to consider: what positive steps can be taken to make common discernment possible?

As the text implicitly acknowledges later on (63, p. 35), its statement here that “all churches have their own procedures for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate diversity” may not be entirely accurate. There would seem to be divided judgments *within* a number of the churches at present on this very point—that is, as to whether or not a particular difference in doctrine or practice constitutes legitimate diversity—and no workable means of resolving the question. In

such a situation, the same things may be needed that the text finds lacking in the ecumenical context: “(a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognized structures as are needed to use these effectively.” A church that finds itself in these circumstances may need to ask itself the same question this text poses to the churches together: What positive steps can be taken to make common discernment possible? In tackling that question, each church may be helped by entering into the ecumenical conversation on this subject, becoming acquainted with the approaches other churches have taken to discerning the limits of diversity, learning from their experience, and re-examining its own approach in that light. We will return to this question at a later point.

Faith, Hope, and Love

The saving love of God is transformative. The character and direction of that transformation is well summarized in the familiar Pauline triad, “faith, hope, and love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). John Wesley and our Methodist traditions would certainly echo Paul’s affirmation that “the greatest of these is love.” But neither Wesley nor we would want to neglect the other two elements of the triad. All three are vital, and intimately interrelated. There is a triadic—or, better put, a Trinitarian—character to the life that God gives us in community, and for that reason there is a triadic or Trinitarian character to the way the church manifests God’s love in the world.

It is no surprise, then, that throughout the chapters of *Towards a Common Vision* there occur triadic descriptions of what the church is called to be and do. For example, in a brief exposition of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 and of corresponding passages elsewhere in the Gospels, the text states that in order to carry out Jesus’ mandate, the church was

to be “a community of witness, . . . a community of worship, . . . [and] a community of discipleship” (2, p. 6). Throughout its history, it goes on to observe, the church has been engaged in “proclaiming in word and deed the good news of salvation in Christ, celebrating the sacraments, especially the eucharist, and forming Christian communities” (5, p. 7). Again, “[t]he Holy Spirit nourishes and enlivens the body of Christ through the living voice of the preached Gospel, through sacramental communion, especially in the Eucharist, and through ministries of service” (16, p. 11). Quoting from an earlier ecumenical study, it affirms that the church “reveals Christ to the world by proclaiming the Gospel, by celebrating the sacraments, . . . and by manifesting the newness of life given by him, thus anticipating the Kingdom already present in him” (58, p. 33). And the Conclusion of the text (67, p. 39) declares:

The unity of the body of Christ consists in the gift of *koinonia* or communion that God graciously bestows upon human beings. There is a growing consensus that *koinonia*, as communion with the Holy Trinity, is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission).

In its exploration of the image of the church as the people of God, the text relates this triadic structure in the life and mission of the church explicitly to the classic doctrine of the “threefold office” of Christ as prophet, priest, and king: “The whole people of God is called to be a prophetic people, bearing witness to God’s word; a priestly people, offering the sacrifice of a life lived in discipleship; and a royal people, serving as instruments for the establishment of God’s reign.” For emphasis, it adds: “All members of the church share in this vocation” (19, p. 12).

This would seem to be an important point of ecumenical convergence. There is a parallel in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* which describes the laity as “all the faithful . . . who by baptism are incorporated into Christ, are constituted the people of God, who have been made sharers in their own way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ and play their part in carrying out the mission of the whole Christian people in the church and in the world.”³¹ A similar approach is taken in Orthodox ecclesiology, and can be found in a growing number of ecumenical documents. For example, the International Commission on Methodist-Catholic Dialogue stated in its Brighton report (2001): “Because Christ’s followers are incorporated into him through baptism, they share in his priestly, prophetic and royal office, together as a communion and individually each in their own way.”³²

From a United Methodist standpoint, these connections could be carried further, enriching our understanding of the nature and calling of the church as *koinonia*. John Wesley urged the early Methodists to proclaim Christ “in all his offices.”³³ The reference was to the

³¹ In *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), pp. 48-49.

³² “Speaking the Truth in Love,” §§35-36, cited in *Synthesis: Together to Holiness, Forty Years of Methodist and Roman Catholic Dialogue*, ed. Michael E. Putney and Geoffrey Wainwright (n.p., [2010], §73.

³³ Wesley declares, “We are not ourselves clear before God, unless we proclaim him in all his offices. To preach Christ, as a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, is to preach him, not only as our great High Priest, ‘taken from among men, and ordained for men, in things pertaining to God;’ as such, ‘reconciling us to God by his blood,’ and ‘ever living to make intercession for us;’ — but likewise as the Prophet of the Lord, ‘who of God is made unto us wisdom,’ who, by his word and his Spirit, is with us always, ‘guiding us into all truth;’ — yea, and as remaining a King for ever; as giving laws to all whom he has bought with his blood; as restoring those to the image of God, whom he had first re-instated in his favour; as reigning in all believing hearts until he has ‘subdued all things to himself,’ — until he hath utterly cast out all sin, and brought in everlasting righteousness” (“The Law Established Through Faith, Discourse II,” *Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp. 37-38). See further from the “Large Minutes” of 1745: “Q. 19. What is the best

doctrines of the three offices (or threefold office, *munus triplex*) of Christ, as priest, prophet, and king. In the Hebrew scriptures, the role or work of the Messiah (the Christ, the anointed one) is pictured in a variety of ways, with these three commonly judged to be the most prominent. Found in early Christian writings, the idea that Jesus fulfills these three roles together comes into our United Methodist heritage more directly both from Wesley (with Anglican theology and John Calvin in the background) and from the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) which was an important part of the doctrinal heritage of the Evangelical United Brethren.

The threefold office seemed to have particular resonance for Wesley, as it matched up with his understanding of salvation—of what we are saved *from* and of what we are saved *to*. If we are meant “to know, to love, and to enjoy [our] Creator to all eternity,”³⁴ and if in our present problematic state—a state of misery, as Wesley says—we are unable rightly to exercise those capacities for knowledge, love, and happiness, then what we need is nothing less than a regeneration of those capacities. We need to be set free from our bondage to ignorance, lovelessness, and hopelessness (or from our captivity to lies and distortions, from misguided loves and misplaced hopes). We need to be born again, and nourished in a new life in “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21 KJV). This is the possibility that Christ brings to us, and that the Holy Spirit actuates in us. Wesley wanted his preachers and his people to keep that comprehensive vision in mind, and not to settle for reductionist, “one-office”

general method of preaching? A. To invite, to convince, to offer Christ, to build up; and to do this in some measure in every sermon. The most effectual way of preaching Christ is to preach him in all his offices; and to declare his law as well as his Gospel, both to believers and unbelievers.” A further short exposition of the three offices (and our need of them) is to be found in Wesley’s note on Matthew 1:16 in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*.

³⁴John Wesley, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” *Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 397.

accounts of salvation. The realization of the *koinonia* for which we are created, and of which the church is to be both sign and servant, involves being freed from those conditions (both external and internal) that make us miserable, and entering into the harmony of knowledge, love, and joy with the Triune God and with all creation.

Towards a Common Vision testifies to a convergence among the churches on the point that to proclaim Christ in all his offices is not just the work of preachers. It is the work of the whole church, the calling of the whole people of God, personally and corporately; it is the general ministry of all Christians. For their part, United Methodists have acknowledged this fact and its implications in a number of ways—for example, in affirming that the critical and constructive theological reflection that this work requires is likewise a task and responsibility of the whole church, to be undertaken both individually and communally: “As United Methodists, we have an obligation to bear a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the Church’s life and witness. To fulfill this obligation, we reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance, striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time.”³⁵

Although it informs and shapes the life and mission of the whole people of God—or, perhaps, *because* it does so—this threefold pattern also informs and shapes the ordained ministry. “[F]rom earliest times,” *Towards a Common Vision* observes, “some believers were chosen under the guidance of the Spirit and given specific authority and responsibility. Ordained ministers ‘assemble and build up the Body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of

³⁵ “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), pp. 79-80 (§105).

God, by celebrating the sacraments and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry” (19, p. 12).³⁶

Accordingly, The United Methodist Church at its uniting conference in 1968 adopted an account of the ordained ministry which describes it as a “specialized ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order.”³⁷ This new formulation, which does not appear in the official depictions of ordained ministry in either of the predecessor denominations, reflected the influence of contemporary ecumenical conversation as well as the established patterns of a number of other Christian communities. The account set down in the 1968 *Book of Discipline* corresponds closely to that just quoted from *Towards a Common Vision*:

Ordination is the rite of the Church by which some are entrusted with the authority to be ministers of Word, Sacrament, and Order:

1. To be ordained to the ministry of the Word is to be authorized to preach and teach the Word of God.

2. To be ordained to the ministry of Sacrament is to be authorized to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

3. To be ordained to the ministry of Order is to be authorized to equip the laity for ministry, to exercise pastoral oversight, and to administer the Discipline of the Church.³⁸

³⁶ The internal quotation is from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, section on Ministry, § 13.

³⁷ *Book of Discipline* 1968, ¶302 (p. 107).

³⁸ *Book of Discipline* 1968, ¶309 (pp. 109-10).

747 It should be said that this commonly-recognized triadic pattern in the church's ministry is
748 something distinct from the "threefold ministry" of ordained deacons, presbyters, and bishops in
749 historic succession that is claimed by some Christian communities, and that *BEM* proposed to the
750 serious consideration of all the churches in their quest for visible unity. The churches' responses
751 to *BEM* indicated that we are far from any convergence on this point, and that it may be unwise
752 to link the mutual recognition of ministries to any agreement on this or any other particular
753 arrangement of ministerial offices or system of governance. The approach to the issue in
754 *Towards a Common Vision* reflects this situation. In *BEM*, the "burden of proof" seemed to be
755 placed on the churches that do not follow the threefold-ministry pattern: they "need to ask
756 themselves whether the threefold pattern as developed does not have a powerful claim to be
757 accepted by them."³⁹ In light of responses received to this challenge, in *Towards a Common*
758 *Vision* the question is posed more equitably. "[W]e are led to ask if the churches can achieve a
759 consensus as to whether or not the threefold ministry is part of God's will for the church in its
760 realization of the unity which God wills" (47, p. 27).

761 This is a complex issue, and one that deserves fuller treatment in another context. It
762 continues to be seriously pursued in a variety of ecumenical dialogues and relationships in which
763 United Methodists and other members of the Methodist and Wesleyan traditions are involved.
764 There is strong agreement among the churches on other key points concerning authority and
765 leadership in the church, for example, that virtually all churches include in their structure some
766 provision for a ministry of general oversight (*episcopé*, literally "oversight" or "supervision"),
767 and that all ministerial leadership in the church is to be exercised "in a personal, collegial, and

³⁹ *BEM*, Ministry section, §25 (p. 25).

communal way.”⁴⁰ Further exploration of the character of leadership in the church may lead to new understandings of its form, not presently envisioned.

In The United Methodist Church, although we have deacons, elders (presbyters), and bishops, we do not have a “threefold ministry” in the sense in which that term is used in other traditions or in the ecumenical discussion. We ordain deacons and elders; we do not ordain bishops, who are elected from among the elders to exercise a special supervisory role.⁴¹ Further, we do not at present practice “sequential ordination,” in which a person to be ordained as an elder must first be ordained as a deacon. In the early years of The United Methodist Church, as in The Methodist Church prior to the union, sequential ordination was the practice: the ordained diaconate was conceived as a step toward ordination as elder, roughly coinciding with one’s probationary membership in an annual conference. An elder was given “full authority for the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order,”⁴² and there was no separate parallel formulation for the ministry of the deacon, which was seen essentially as a involving a limited authority to participate in the same activities.

The idea of a “permanent diaconate,” that is, of deacons who would be ordained to that office not as a stage on the way to ordination as elders but rather in order to exercise a distinctive regular ministry as deacons, was gaining traction in a number of churches already at the time The United Methodist Church was formed. (“Permanent deacon” and “transitional deacon,” though common terms in this discussion, are technically misnomers, since in a pattern of sequential

⁴⁰ BEM, section on Ministry, §26 (pp. 25-26). The language is echoed in *Towards a Common Vision*, 52 (p. 29).

⁴¹ *Book of Discipline 2012*, ¶402 (p. 315).

⁴² *Book of Discipline 1968*, ¶313 (p. 110).

ordination elders do not cease being deacons.) A permanent diaconate, open to married as well as single men (but, like the priesthood, open only to men) was authorized by the Second Vatican Council and introduced in different parts of the Roman Catholic Church in the following decade. The Anglican Communion and several other church bodies established a permanent or “vocational” diaconate around the same time. After a number of experiments over the years (including the unordained office of Diaconal Minister), The United Methodist Church established a permanent ordained diaconate in 1996, and at the same time abolished the practice of sequential ordination. In our current polity, prospective deacons and prospective elders are on separate “tracks,” and the language indicating the character of the ministry to which each is ordained—in the case of a deacon, a ministry of “Word, Service, Justice, and Compassion,” and in the case of an elder, a ministry of “Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service”—is intended to indicate that although there may be common areas of responsibility there are also distinct areas in each that the other does not share.⁴³

Because this structure for the ordering of ministry is relatively new—as is the accompanying innovation establishing an “Order” of Deacons and an “Order” of Elders as collegial bodies composed of all those ordained to those respective offices—how these arrangements will fare in the long run remains to be seen. The picture is complicated by the fact that United Methodism also features a number of recognized ministerial offices and roles that do not require ordination, some of which involve the principal activities normally associated with the ordained offices—a situation that gives rise to much perplexity both within and beyond the

⁴³ *Book of Discipline* 2012, ¶¶329.1 (p. 332). How effectively the wording indicates such a distinction is open to question.

church.⁴⁴ Further reflection upon the ecumenical discussion, and continued consultation with a wide range of our ecumenical partners, will be vital to any responsible progress on these seemingly perennial issues. We have significant insight and testimony from our own experience to offer in the ecumenical forum, such as that coming from our readiness to adapt to new situations and our firm and irrevocable commitment to the full participation of women in ministerial leadership in all its forms. But there can be no doubt that we also have things to learn from the experience of others. We may find, among other things, that a reaffirmation and exploration of the triadic pattern of “Word, Sacrament, and Order” in the development of a fuller constructive theology of ministry would have advantages both ecumenically and in the life of our own community.

III. Vision and Practice

In this concluding section, we are taking under more direct consideration three questions that were raised in our opening pages and have been accompanying us at least in the background all along.

First, how might we characterize the particular role of The United Methodist Church within the “Church Universal”? What is its niche in the ecclesial ecology? Second, what insights might our participation in the ecumenical discussion generate to help us deal more constructively and effectively with the vexing issues surrounding “legitimate diversity,” both as they affect our own life and mission in The United Methodist Church and in our ongoing

⁴⁴ On this whole subject, see *Book of Discipline 2012*, ¶¶266-370, John E. Harnish, *The Orders of Ministry in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), and Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), chapter 7.

relations with other Christian communities? Third, how might a renewed ecclesial vision inform our deliberations about our polity—that is, about how we structure our common life in the service of our mission?

United Methodism and the Church Universal

There are dangers in any attempt to place ourselves in relation to other churches, or to describe our own distinctiveness. We may overestimate our distinctiveness, especially if we regard the distinctive features as advantages or virtues. We may overestimate the extent to which the distinctive characteristics we claim are actually to be found among us. The image we have of ourselves may bear little resemblance to what others might tell us about ourselves. “To see ourselves as others see us,” H. Richard Niebuhr remarked, “or to have others communicate to us what they see when they regard our lives from the outside is to have a moral experience.”⁴⁵ At considerable risk, then, we will suggest three main elements, out of many that might be mentioned, that may be markers of United Methodist identity.⁴⁶ They are, at the least, aspirational features: things that—judging from the importance we assign to them in principle—we would like to be known by. They are marks that we profess to value. Although all three are certainly rooted in our common heritage with other Wesleyan and Methodist communities—that is, in those distinctive convictions of this heritage that were mentioned at the beginning of this paper—they represent the character of United Methodism as a particular ecclesial form and

⁴⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 62.

⁴⁶ For a rich and thoughtful treatment of characteristic features of the Methodist traditions more generally, related in an imaginative way to the “four notes” of the Nicene Creed, see Russell E. Richey (with Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence), *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

expression of that common heritage. Their prominence in United Methodist discourse makes them a good starting point for our reflection.

One of these features has to do with *the scope of grace*, in two senses. These senses correspond, in a way, with the first two of those three distinctive convictions of our heritage. One sense is our Wesleyan conviction—by no means exclusive to Wesleyans, but definitely claimed by this tradition—that God’s love extends to all of God’s creatures, and not just to some. The line from 1 Timothy 2:4 cited previously could be a United Methodist motto: The God revealed in Christ “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” God’s grace is available to all, in equal measure. Among other things, this accounts for the emphasis placed in The United Methodist Church upon full inclusivity in membership and ministry, so that the church might be a faithful sign of the scope of God’s grace. Needless to say, our practice has sometimes fallen short of our aspirations.

The second sense in which the scope of grace is a distinctive theme has to do not with its extent or reach, but with its aim or effect. It is the affirmation that as God’s grace is received in the freedom that it creates, it is transformative. It leads, as Wesley said, to a “real change” within the recipient. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Being born anew, receiving faith “filled with the energy of love” (as Wesley would render Galatians 5:6), having “God’s love . . . poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5)—these were for the early Methodists, and have been for their spiritual descendants, vivid experiential realities, leading to new personal and social consequences as that love is absorbed in personal renewal and expressed not only in direct and explicit witness to the Gospel but also in community-building (*koinonia* activity, we might say) in a great variety of ways, from personal relationships to the founding of hospitals and universities, from the outreach ministries of local

870 congregations to participation in large-scale efforts for social amelioration and reform. The
871 impetus in the United Methodist heritage, as stated, for example, in many paragraphs of the
872 Social Principles and in occasional resolutions of the General Conference, is to create and
873 support institutions and practices that (in our admittedly limited judgment at any particular time)
874 foster human well-being, and to challenge those that do not.

875 In one of John Wesley's own short descriptions of the scope of God's grace in this
876 second sense, he wrote:

877 By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from
878 hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the
879 soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the
880 renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in
881 justice, mercy, and truth. This implies all holy and heavenly tempers, and by
882 consequence all holiness of conversation.⁴⁷

883 United Methodism aims to embrace the entire range of this concern. At times the inward
884 cleansing and renewal of the heart is emphasized, and at times it is the effort to work out what
885 many have taken to be the broader implications of "holiness of conversation"—the promotion of
886 "justice, mercy, and truth" throughout the social order—that receives more attention. Such
887 differences of emphasis are appropriate when geared to the needs of the particular situations in

⁴⁷ John Wesley, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I* (1745), in *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, edited by Gerald R. Cragg, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 11 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p 106. "Conversation" in Wesley's time and usage meant something like "social interaction," one's conduct toward and relationships with others.

which we find ourselves. But we are at our best when we realize the close relationship between the two, and at something less than our best when we play them off against each other.

A second marker of United Methodist identity—related to the third distinctive conviction of our heritage, dealing with the community-forming intent of the love of God—goes by the name of “*connectionalism*.” “Conciliarity” is a related (though not synonymous) term in the ecumenical discussion, and other aspects of the treatment of the topics of order and authority in *Towards a Common Vision* draw attention to things we United Methodists might associate with connectionalism. Our “itinerant” ministry, the superintendency (bishops and district superintendents), and the system of conferences are intended as instruments of connectionalism. All three are intended to foster an ethos and practice of mutual support and mutual accountability, of shared oversight (here, it is pertinent to note that one sense of *episcopé* mentioned in *Towards a Common Vision* is “coordination”), and of the strengthening of all by the gifts of all. It is always an open question how well our current structures and polity actually serve the connectional relationship and way of working that we seek, and each of the three elements just mentioned are currently under some scrutiny in that regard. The underlying principle, however, connects us with some of the deepest insights of ancient Christian tradition regarding the sustaining of communion in and among Christian communities.

The ongoing debates in our church about the proper shape and expression of our connectional structure and polity are often denounced as unseemly exercises in political maneuvering and power mongering. While too often on the mark, such criticism obscures a deeper struggle. If, as noted earlier, connectionalism and mission are inextricably linked, then at stake in these debates is nothing less than the vitality of our distinctive connectional form of church as an aspiring global body.

The third mark of United Methodist identity to be offered is closely related to the first two, and might be seen as an implication of them. It is a commitment to *theological reflection* as the task of the whole church. The presence in the *Book of Discipline* not only of doctrinal standards, but also of a statement on “our theological task,” indicates the importance of this commitment. Note that theological reflection does not *replace* standards of doctrine; we need and affirm both.

The theological task, though related to the Church’s doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling “to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.”⁴⁸

By their very character and content, our doctrinal standards not only permit but require the sort of responsible, thoughtful critical engagement that “Our Theological Task” describes. Our theological work must be “both critical and constructive,” “both individual and communal,” “contextual and incarnational,” and “essentially practical.”⁴⁹ To have given such attention and affirmation to the church’s ongoing theological task is truly a hallmark of The United Methodist Church. It will stand us in good stead as we seek to embody our connectional covenant with theological creativity, flexibility, and dexterity in increasingly diverse contexts around the world. As with the first two features mentioned, it is an area in which our principled commitments serve both to judge and to guide our practice.

⁴⁸ *Book of Discipline 2012*, ¶105 (p. 78).

⁴⁹ *Book of Discipline 2012*, ¶105 (pp. 79-80).

Diversity and Conflict

These three features, taken together, and enriched by ecumenical wisdom, might point toward a way to address our current difficulties over conflict in the church.

It should be said that our problem is not conflict. Our problem is in the way we sometimes deal with conflict. We would do well to remember at the outset that conflict is a “given” in the church. It is to be expected. Disagreements creating conflict may arise over (to use the Wesleyan language) “what to teach, how to teach, and what to do.”⁵⁰ Embedded in and accompanying these disagreements may be other, sometimes hidden or unacknowledged, difficulties also leading to tensions: antagonisms stemming from the complex histories and relationships of the persons and groups involved, differences over political or cultural values, struggles over the possession and uses of power, and so forth. Different sources and varieties of conflict may be interrelated in any given instance. Given the variety of the human uses of the church, it sometimes happens that conflict over one issue is promoted or exploited by individuals or groups as a means of accomplishing some other aim, or in order to satisfy other needs. Conflict is as complex as it is common.⁵¹

⁵⁰This frequently-quoted formula stems from the agenda and minutes of the first Methodist conference in London in 1744: “After some time spent in prayer, the design of our meeting was proposed, namely to consider: (1) What to teach, (2) How to teach, and (3) What to do, how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice.” (From Wesley’s first published version of the minutes, dated 1749, in *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, edited by Henry D. Rack, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 10 [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011], p. 778.)

⁵¹A useful brief definition of conflict is this one offered by the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution: “Conflicts are disagreements that lead to tension within, and between, people.” Bjarne Vestergaard, Erik Helvard and Aase Rieck Sørensen, *Conflict Resolution—Working with Conflicts* (Frederiksberg, Denmark: Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution, 2010), p. 1, available at http://lnu.se/polopoly_fs/1.105781!2011%20DCCR_BASIC%20MATERIAL.pdf.

A church without conflict is very likely to be a church that is failing to be the church. Recall that it is God who brings us to the church, or who brings the church to us, creating church in our midst by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are brought together in the first instance by grace, and not because we share the same views, customs, cultural practices, or even moral values. (Again, keeping in mind the human uses of the church, we might say that to the extent that we come together *because* we share the same views, values, social standing, and so forth, we may not be realizing the more radical gift of *koinonia* in the Spirit.) Through our encounters with others in Christian community, we may of course come to share a good deal, gradually. Minds may be changed—perhaps most productively when it is not a case of one party winning an argument over others, but rather of their being led through their experience together to a greater understanding than any of them previously possessed. We may discover or come to agreement on a number of things. But overcoming or erasing differences is not necessarily the best outcome. Some differences are part of the good diversity of creation, the diversity that is “a gift from the Lord” and should be honored as such.

Furthermore, some differences within the church aid the church in its mission to a diverse world. At present, the churches are faced with situations they have never faced before. New technologies give rise to previously unimagined possibilities; new knowledge changes our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live. When the church is confronted with a new situation and is pondering its best response, it is well to have a wide range of experience and perspectives at hand. To understand and respect one another’s differences and the ways in which they contribute to the church’s fulfillment of its mission is itself a mode of sharing, and something like the ecumenical pattern of “convergence,” in which differences are

held in the midst of a deeper and richer unity, is a hoped-for experience also among members of a local congregation or other form of *ekklesia* as well.

In such cases, differences do not threaten the unity God intends, but instead enhance it. At the same time, some of our more serious conflict is generated by differing responses to these developments, as we are “striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time.” There are instances of conflict in which different people have incompatible or opposing judgments on some matter that they take to be vital to the church’s own identity and mission, and in which a resolution seems beyond our capability. When a conflict can be resolved through discussion or negotiation, through a process in which all involved are treated with respect, the whole event can be a powerful witness to the gospel. As the church, we are not called to avoid conflict, nor to banish it, but rather to deal with it redemptively.

When a resolution does not seem possible, what are our options?

An earlier ecumenical statement, informing the understanding expressed in *Towards a Common Vision*, affirms: “The purpose of the church is to unite people with Christ in the power of the Spirit, to manifest communion in prayer and action and thus to point to the fullness of communion with God, humanity and the whole creation in the glory of the kingdom.”⁵² Perhaps in this light we should not move too readily toward a democratic resolution of our deeper differences, at least as that is commonly understood.

One important consideration in this connection is that we may not yet be in a position to render a responsible judgment on the matter at hand. We may not know all that we need to know. We may not have adequate conceptual resources. We may not have the spiritual maturity

⁵² “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia, Gift and Calling,” Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Canberra, 1991, in *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, edited by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 124.

to see what we need to see. We may not even have posed our questions rightly. We may, in short, need to gain some intellectual and emotional humility, and to cultivate some dispositions that would permit wisdom to grow.

Features of our United Methodist heritage might encourage us to ponder this possibility. In John Wesley's sermon, "Catholic Spirit," we find this sober acknowledgement:

It is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding that several men will be of several minds, in religion as well as in common life. So it has been from the beginning of the world, and so it will be 'till the restitution of all things.'

Nay farther: although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true is the same thing as not to hold it) yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions taken together are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*—to be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity. This therefore, he is sensible, is his own case. He knows in the general that he himself is mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes he does not, perhaps cannot, know.⁵³

We can be sure that we are mistaken in some of what we think we know. What contribution might this awareness make to our approach to a situation of conflict?

Another passage from John Wesley's writings offers further insight on this score. It is in the Preface to his "standard sermons":

⁵³ John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," *Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp.83-84.

1011 9. Are you persuaded you see more clearly than me? It is not unlikely that you
1012 may. Then treat me as you would desire to be treated yourself upon a change of
1013 circumstances. Point me out a better way than I have yet known. Show me it is so
1014 by plain proof of Scripture. And if I linger in the path I have been accustomed to
1015 tread, and am therefore unwilling to leave, labour with me a little, take me by the
1016 hand, and lead me as I am able to bear. But be not displeased if I entreat you not
1017 to beat me down in order to quicken my pace. I can go but feebly and slowly at
1018 best—then, I should not be able to go at all. May I not request of you, farther, not
1019 to give me hard names in order to bring me into the right way? Suppose I was
1020 ever so much in the wrong, I doubt this would not set me right. Rather it would
1021 make me run so much the farther from you—and so get more and more out of the
1022 way.

1023 10. Nay, perhaps, if you are angry so shall I be too, and then there will be small
1024 hopes of finding the truth. If once anger arise, *eute kapnos* (as Homer somewhere
1025 expresses it), this smoke will so dim the eyes of my soul that I shall be able to see
1026 nothing clearly. For God's sake, if it be possible to avoid it let us not provoke one
1027 another to wrath. Let us not kindle in each other this fire of hell, much less blow it
1028 up into a flame. If we could discern truth by that dreadful light, would it not be
1029 loss rather than gain? For how far is love, even with many wrong opinions, to be
1030 preferred before truth itself without love? We may die without the knowledge of
1031 many truths and yet be carried into Abraham's bosom. But if we die without love,
1032 what will knowledge avail? Just as much as it avails the devil and his angels!

1033 The God of love forbid we should ever make the trial! May he prepare us for the
1034 knowledge of all truth, by filling our hearts with all his love, and with all joy and
1035 peace in believing.⁵⁴

1036 What does such a plea require of us, or offer to us, when it comes to our handling of
1037 conflict?

1038 Wesley is speaking here of the sort of situation in which we may become vulnerable to a
1039 spirit of fear, and thus of hostility and divisiveness; a spirit destructive of the communion that is
1040 God's will for us. In the grip of such a spirit, we tend to seek certainty and safety by separating
1041 ourselves from the apparent sources of our uneasiness. Rather than move toward them in the
1042 hope of understanding and of being understood, we move away, and construct an image of them
1043 that will justify our rejection of them. And we attempt to rally others to our cause. We may use
1044 a rhetoric of polarization in this attempt: if we can persuade others that there are two (and only
1045 two) "sides," diametrically opposed and irreconcilable, and if we can succeed in depicting these
1046 two sides in such a way that only one of them represents truth, justice, and morality, then we are
1047 well on our way to causing the separation which (we vainly hope) will give us peace.

1048 In face of this temptation to yield to fear and hostility, one thing we may do to resist it is
1049 not to succumb to the familiar rhetoric of polarization, but to recognize it (whether in our own
1050 discourse, or in that of others), to refuse it, and to counter it constructively. But undergirding
1051 whatever we do should be an abiding confidence that God's intention is to gather up all things
1052 together in Christ (Ephesians 1:10), and an earnest prayer not to stand in the way of the
1053 fulfillment of that intention.

⁵⁴ John Wesley, "The Preface" to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, volume 1 (1746), in *Sermons I*, edited by Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 107. The Greek for "like a puff of smoke" has been transliterated here.

Ecclesial Vision and Polity

Theologically speaking, a church's polity is an aspect of "order," in the triad "Word, Sacrament, and Order" discussed earlier. It has to do with the way the church orders its own life responsibly so as to fulfill its calling. Order, as embodied and lived out in our polity as well as in all its other forms, is inseparable from Word and Sacrament: it is guided (and judged) by the living Word, and it is sustained and continually renewed by the grace of God's sacramental presence.

The way the church orders its own life is itself an aspect of its witness to the world. When its polity enables and manifests an openness to the community-forming power of the Holy Spirit, when it serves the church's mandate "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) with such power and clarity as to bring to humankind a new understanding of the possibilities for fruitful life together, then it has fulfilled its purpose.

In this, as in much else, it is probably safe to say that we in The United Methodist Church have not yet arrived at the goal (cf. Philippians 3:12). There are, however, resources within our own tradition that might bring us closer to that goal, if we were to make wise use of them.

In a study published in 1998, two political scientists observed that, because of its broad socio-economic and cultural makeup, United Methodism in the United States often tends to mirror the range of values and stances on issues of its surrounding society, rather than offering a clear and unified witness to that society.⁵⁵ But they noted that this same breadth of

⁵⁵ John C. Green and James L. Guth, "United Methodists and American Culture: A Statistical Portrait," *The People(s) Called Methodist: Forms and Reforms of Their Life*, edited by William B. Lawrence, Dennis M. Campbell, and Russell E. Richey (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 27-52. See especially the introduction and conclusion of the essay, pp. 27-28 and 49-50, from which the quotations here have been taken.

representation of differing views on matters of common concern also gives United Methodism a “potential to both contain diverse social stands and knit together gaps within the social fabric,” and ventured to suggest that the exercise of this potential might constitute this church’s “distinctive contribution” to public life. They went on to propose that the realization of this promise would require the church to improve its “policy-making procedures,” so as “to encourage the development of genuine agreement rather than simply the expression of competing points of view. . . . Methodists must realize that consensus does not emerge from diversity by magic, and that it requires great institutional and personal commitment to achieve.”

These political scientists’ observations and suggestions express, in non-theological language, some important features of the situation we are in and the task before us as a church in the realm of polity. The substantial growth and diversification of The United Methodist Church across the world since the publication of their study only makes the situation and the task more urgent and compelling.

The preceding section, on “diversity and conflict,” offered a sampling of some of the Wesleyan resources available to us that have to do with the sort of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity that we need if we are to be properly disposed toward the issues that we face and toward one another as we face them. Much more could be said, and needs to be said, in that connection, but the relevance of these resources to questions of polity is clear. We need forms of polity that are consistent with our core convictions: that is, forms that honor the radically inclusive scope of God’s saving grace, forms that recognize and build upon the transformative character of that grace, and forms that will serve, rather than subvert, the growth of genuine community. In that regard, a specifically polity-related Wesleyan concept deserves further attention: the concept of Christian conference.

1097 “Conference,” in this usage, refers first of all neither to a meeting nor to those involved in
 1098 such a meeting—the two senses that may appear to us most obvious in United Methodist usage
 1099 today—but rather to a practice that Christians are to be engaged in. In one instance,⁵⁶ John
 1100 Wesley referred to Christian conference as an “instituted means of grace,” that is, as a practice
 1101 incumbent upon Christians and meant to foster our growth in “holiness of heart and life.” It is
 1102 one of the ways God helps us to help one another toward maturity in faith, hope, and love. It
 1103 involves elements of prayerful, honest self-examination, of “speaking the truth in love” to one
 1104 another, of mutual accountability and support, and of careful deliberation as to how we are to
 1105 conduct ourselves in the future. The practice of Christian conference goes on under many forms,
 1106 including one-on-one conversations between Christians, small group meetings of various kinds
 1107 and for various purposes, and even larger events such as those gatherings officially designated
 1108 as “Conferences” in United Methodist parlance. Ideally, the practice of Christian conference is to
 1109 some degree an aspect of virtually every encounter in the church, though in its more thorough
 1110 and intense forms it is best conducted within a more limited range of well-thought-out
 1111 circumstances and venues. As the minutes testify, Wesley’s relatively small regular conferences
 1112 with his preachers included strong elements of the practice, although its normal structured
 1113 settings within the early Methodist movement were the meetings of “classes” and “bands” within
 1114 the local Methodist societies. Much the same might be said of the situation in early North
 1115 American Methodism.

⁵⁶See the “Large Minutes” of 1763, in *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, edited by Henry D. Rack, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), pp. 855-858. The 1782 hymn by John Fawcett, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (UMH 557) expresses some of what “conference” is about, for example, “We share each other’s woes, our mutual burdens bear”

How we might better avail ourselves of this means of grace in the church of the twenty-first century, and particularly in our deliberations around polity, is an open question, and one that deserves serious consideration.

The church is a gift of the Triune God. It is also a very human community and institution. Both aspects of its reality need to be kept firmly in mind in all of our deliberations and actions. We give thanks for the Church Universal, and for The United Methodist Church as a particular part of that body with its own calling to fulfill as a sign and servant of God's saving love for humankind, witnessing to and fostering the life of wonder, love, and praise that is the proper vocation of every human being. But we also do well to remember that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels."

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ 2 Cor 4:6-7 KJV.