

## Re-membering in the Congregation as a source for the *New Creation*

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The eschatology of entire, divinely delivered sanctification was an image that Wesley held on to as the fulfillment of a future hope. This future event, however, was not the driving force of his ecclesiology. In his ministry, we see clearly his drive to bring restoration and salvation here and now and to develop disciples who would share in the work of reconciliation. There was, in a sense, a gradual realization of the New Creation in the shared work of the church and the Holy Spirit through preaching, teaching, and other ministries that addressed physical, emotional, and social brokenness. Wesley attempted to develop a corporate embodiment of what he termed “primitive Christianity.” His approach, while remaining firmly rooted in the “orthodox” theology of the Church of England, was formed by a remembering of the original direction and activities of the Early Church.

In this paper, I shall explore the power of corporate remembering in the local congregation as the basic unit of the redemptive work of God. As the founding pastor of a new and fast-growing United Methodist church, and a teacher in church development and renewal at the denominational level, I approach the question primarily in terms of pastoral leadership and revitalized discipleship, rather than as sociological inquiry or methodological reformulation. “New Creation” in this context involves, at minimum, a reconnection with corporate memory and identity, both biblical and denominational. Specifically for Methodist congregations, it involves re-examination and, to the degree appropriate, a recovery of identity and purpose as lived out in the ministry of the early Methodist movement. *The corporate remembering is not a simple restatement of the past; it is a New Creation in that it requires interaction between the current life of the church and its historical and spiritual heritage to create a renewed and culturally relevant expression of its original identity.* This reconnection through corporate remembering can facilitate the development of the energy and motivation needed for individual congregations to engage effectively the changed communities in which they exist. It also encourages the renewal of theologically and historically grounded connectionalism in place of a mere structural connectionalism.

This paper will demonstrate the importance of shared memory and identity for the effective development of churches as purposeful discipleship formation systems. It is based on research with more than a dozen congregations of various sizes and the participation of hundreds of individuals in a group process of theological and historical self-discovery. This research also has been incorporated into a multi-session book and DVD resource called *ReConnecting* that uses the technology of digital video editing

along with historical reflection, storytelling, journaling, and group dialogue to guide a process-oriented experience of congregational renewal.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Problem: Maintenance Mode**

Throughout the Methodist Church many congregations are experiencing serious decline. Church membership is aging and the numbers are falling. Members in these churches are concerned about the future, not only of the churches they dearly love, but also of their children and grandchildren whom they dearly love and who are staying away from the church in large numbers. In the midst of this state of decline and worry, the long-time faithful members of these churches are at a loss as to what to do to reverse the trend.

Part of the problem has to do with the stage of development at which the institution of the church finds itself. Institutional analysts call this stage Maintenance Mode. The term “maintenance mode” has long been a “buzz word” in industry settings and has made its way into discussions about the state of ministry in churches. The term refers to an identifiable phase in the process of institutional development. The development or creation of any organization or industry is usually in response to a particular set of historical conditions and perceived market needs. In response to these factors, a vision is developed and energy is focused to address the particular challenge or need existing in the market. This combination of vision and energy is the originating motivation that leads to an active response to the situation present in the market. If the exercise of this energy is successful in meeting the requirements of the market needs, some structure and organization becomes necessary to sustain the activities created by the original motivation. Energy is required to maintain the structure and organization of the institution being created. This is a natural process in any successful institution. Management and maintenance are necessary activities for the continued healthy functioning of any structure or institution. For the purpose of the institution to continue to be effectively fulfilled, however, the original motivation must be kept as the driving force in an ongoing dynamic tension with the changing needs of the surrounding market. Maintenance mode occurs when the energy is moved from the original motivation as the driving force to the task of sustaining the structure of the institution that has been created. What is needed is an infusion of the original motivation and vision that drove the movement in its beginnings.

Martin Saarinen, in encountering this theory of institutional development, has created a helpful analysis of the development of the lifecycle of a congregation.<sup>2</sup> Particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Weber, *ReConnecting – a guide for the renewal of our Wesleyan congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, fall 2002).

insightful to the contemporary situation of the church is his statement about the different voices that emerge during the process of decline.

In this view, the most important task of conservatism is to propagate in the congregation from stage to stage and age to age the sense of vision, excitement, and mission that originally called the congregation into being. This kind of conservatism may welcome new realities and protest against the calcification of the old order. There is another voice of protest, however, which emanates from idolatizing the past or, put in another way, when historicizing and historicism are one in the same. Still another voice of protest emerges from the realization that the congregation, in order to be faithful and to serve the forces of life which called it into being, must modify or change its methods of operation and, perhaps, its statement of mission. Lacking a sense of continuity with congregational origins, still another voice of protest issues out of a sense of relevance and significance which has relevance only in the vicissitudes of changing conditions. The voice which prevails in the crisis of each stage of development announces the succeeding stage into which the congregation will move.<sup>3</sup>

We can hear each of these voices speaking out from various dimensions of the Methodist church. Some would seek to cling to the past in an attempt to avoid the realities of change. Some would seek renewal in methodological change. Some would abandon all systems and models already in place in favor of a new model for a new day. Saarinen's model names in systemic form the forces in each stage of decline that create attitudes within congregations, causing them to lose hope and lose sight of their identity and mission.

These experiences are evident across the face of mainline Protestantism in America. According to research by Donald Miller,

Church attendance peaked in the 1950s, when 49 percent of the U.S. population indicated that they had attended religious service in the last seven days. Beginning in the early 1960s, attendance slowly declined until it bottomed out at 40 percent in the 1970s, and it has remained at approximately this level until the present.<sup>4</sup>

This decline, I contend, to a great extent is due to the lack of connection with the original motivation of the church, the failure to maintain connection to the changes in the surrounding community and the redirection of energy to the maintenance of the institution's structures and programs.

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<sup>2</sup>Martin F. Saarinen, *The Lifecycle of a Congregation* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup>Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 17.

## Issues for Leadership and Ecclesiology

Great direction for the task of the leader is found in the words in the closing section of *The Lifecycle of a Congregation*.

The primary intervention for a congregation in decline is two-fold. First, the congregation needs to reconstruct its corporate memory concerning those people, places, times, and events which stand out as being significant (for whatever reason), to recapture the dynamisms of agony and ecstasy, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain which they contained, to see the holdover effect of those events, and to sense the story being lived out in its historical narrative. Second, the congregation needs to touch base again with its setting. What mandates for ministry are inherent in the demographic and other changes in the congregation and community—whether anticipated or already occurring? Together a reawakened sense of those forces which had previously breathed life into that congregation and community may combine to produce the condition whereby the congregation can continue to participate in the representation of Christ in that place in some new way.<sup>5</sup>

The activity of corporate remembering is an activity of calling forth and articulating the important and formational stories of congregational or denominational origin so that the body can gain a shared sense of “*our past*.” Corporate remembering does more than attuning the body with the former “glory days” of the activity of the church; it brings about a *New Creation* at the fresh intersection of memory, identity, passion, and brokenness. What is required of a leader in this context is the ability to connect the congregations with the roots of their heritage, beyond their individual locations to their roots in the origin of the movement called Methodist and to engage people in reflection on the ways in which these roots inform their present context and the changes that are happening around them.

When Wesley was faced with a church in maintenance mode, he found energy in the original motivation of “Primitive Christianity.” The Methodist church in the early years of the twenty-first century is likewise finding itself in a maintenance mode. I propose that renewal can be found, in part, by seeking energy from the memory of the early Methodist movement and the corporate identity found there. A crucial issue for the church is the development of a common memory of past purpose or historical setting and shared identity out of which will emerge *New Creation*.

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<sup>5</sup>Saarinen, *Lifecycle*, 22,23.

## The ReConnecting Project

Our situation is similar to that of Wesley's day. We, too, are encountering a church in maintenance mode. We, too, have an institution that is declining in membership and effectiveness. While the mission of the church is being carried out in various degrees in different congregations, many congregations seem to exist primarily for those who are already inside and any participation in missional activity is vicarious, through often-resented apportioned funding. There are many indications that the church is at the stage of its institutional development wherein it needs an infusion of the original motivation and mission of the church and the motivation of its founders. We (the church) are in need of the vision of what we were and are to be (then and now) as well as an awakening to the reality of our current situation.

In order to address this dynamic of maintenance and renewal in the churches of the Louisiana Conference, I developed a resource that can be used in a congregation of any size to facilitate a connection to a shared memory of origins and a careful examination of current setting. The resource, called "*ReConnecting*," is a group process designed to assist the church at the basic congregational level to call forth and to articulate corporate memory. The tool was a designed to engage congregations in a multidimensional, experiential process of learning. It was designed to provide an experience of reconnection with the history, heritage, vision, practices, and spiritual vitality of the early Methodist movement. Through video sessions, reading, journaling, and group discussion, participants are connected to current reality and corporate memory. In this project, I sought to address this problem by attempting to create an instrument or tool that might be broadly disseminated and could be used in churches in a variety of settings regardless of the leadership present in the group.

I selected a combination of multiple means of communication for two reasons, one having to do with the diversity of learning methods and the second with the nature of transformational learning as experiential. First, I knew that I was trying to communicate with an audience whose members learned in different ways. In other words, had I selected a single method of communication, I would have *de facto* decided that I was not going to communicate with those who did not learn in that way. Second, because people engage the information on multiple levels, their experience is richer, more memorable, and more likely to have transformational and therefore lasting effect. When multiple

layers of communication are used simultaneously, the internal processing of the communication interacts and creates something larger than the sum of its parts. Living in Louisiana, I would liken this to cooking and eating gumbo. If I wanted my guests to experience gumbo, I would not offer them simply a plate of tomatoes, then onions, then oysters, then crab, then shrimp, then green pepper, then okra. If I did, they would be consuming the ingredients of the gumbo separately, but they would not grasp the experience of the gumbo and delight in the unique flavor that comes only from the interaction of the ingredients consumed simultaneously.

The model created was a video and journaling based group process of seven sessions. Included in the model are the following:

- 1) Video Tour Guide - a video journey to some of the historical sites important in the development of the early Methodist movement: Epworth, Oxford, Bristol, and London.
- 2) Story Telling – stories of the events, challenges, failures, successes, and experiences of Wesley and the Early Methodists.
- 3) Digital Image Manipulation and Period Costumes – nonlinear digital video editing techniques utilized to recreate and integrate scenes from the above stories into the video journey.
- 4) Video Visits – a view of churches operating out of what has been termed the “new paradigm” model of ministry which is actually a contemporary appropriation of the model Wesley recovered from the Book of Acts: cultural relevance, small groups, and lay ministries.
- 5) Video Interviews – interviews with theologians and church leaders addressing critical issues facing the church.
- 6) Old Words – scripture and the writings of Wesley in the form of daily journal readings.
- 7) Journaling – the practice of reflective journaling and critical self-examination.
- 8) Christian Conferencing – participants sharing their thoughts with one another in discussion groups during the weekly group sessions.
- 9) Music, Worship, and Prayer – musical resources provided for times of centering prayer and worship.

These elements attempt to effect transformation in the lives of the members of congregations stuck in decline, worried, wondering what to do, resistant to change and clinging to their current model of ministry as a rock in the midst of a storm.

A couple from the church, my wife, and I formed a team and went to England to film. As we went from London to Oxford to Bristol to Epworth, and so on, I felt a sense of adventure in developing a closer connection with the past. The journey to England with the purpose of remembering and translating the stories of our Wesleyan heritage kindled in me a living sense of connection to the heritage that had already been mine. I had read the history and I had been to the historic locations before. They had been an important part of my spiritual formation, but something was different this time.

Touching the past rekindled my own childhood spiritual experiences and memories of visiting these locations, but the creative task of telling the stories caused me to feel as if I were walking with that “*great cloud of witnesses*” in Hebrews, along with those who have since then entered into their presence. As I walked, they were saying,

“*Remember....*” Video from the trip was combined with interviews with various church leaders and theologians from across the church to create the core of the communication device.<sup>6</sup>

Listening to the stories at the center of our tradition extended the roots of my experience into a time before my existence, and that experience has deepened my passion for and appreciation of our purpose and mission. Helping those in our congregations to access these stories of tradition can have a profound effect. The effects have been extended to many of the members of my congregation as well as to several congregations across Louisiana. By adding the dimension of tradition and history to the corporate identity and memory of our congregation, we witnessed some exciting developments.

### **The New Room in Bristol and Shreveport**

At Grace Community UMC (the congregation I serve) over three hundred people signed up to participate in the seven-week experience of ReConnecting. As the participants watched video sessions, read from Wesley’s words and the scriptures, and shared their reflections together, things began to happen. I listened to conversations as the

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<sup>6</sup> I have included a transcription of the video that describes the process and the content of ReConnecting in an appendix at the end of the paper.

weeks passed. During the fourth week of the study, the group was exploring Wesley's outreach center in Bristol which was a building designed to house various activities of ministry such as a soup kitchen for the poor, a medical clinic, a meeting place for people to learn job skills, and a training center for ministry leaders. The ministry in the Bristol area was birthed from a remembering of what Wesley called Primitive Christianity, not tied solely to a particular location. Wesley preached and developed ministries throughout the area. Although the ministry was mobile, the Methodists did construct a facility to house some of its ministry activities. The building in Bristol was called the "New Room." The New Room was a multi-purpose facility. The building was an example of a ministry station designed not for the performance of rites of a representational understanding of the task of ministry but for engaging the world in the process of divine reconciliation and transformation. In this situation, the building was shaped by the intersection of the needs of the people and the requirements of carrying out that ministry. So often, ministry is shaped by the style of the building rather than theological identity and purpose.

One of the ReConnecting groups included a realtor. She was usually very quiet and seemed somewhat reserved. After the session she called and told me what she was thinking. She had been thinking about the origins of the church and about our church's growing need for more space. She'd been praying about ways that we could be in ministry with those in the community, much like the approach at the New Room in Bristol. She was aware of an old hotel downtown that had been available for quite some time, and she thought that it might meet the needs for more space and community outreach. So we went to look at a hotel. More people became interested, and soon there was a entire group discussing more space and an outreach center. After several tours, discussions with architects and the EPA, we ruled out the old hotel (too much asbestos), but the story of the New Room had given birth to an idea.

We became aware that a church in a "high need" part of town was closing because most of the 25 people who remained were seventy or older, no longer lived in the neighborhood, and just couldn't keep it going any more. We realized that everyone else was looking to get out of the neighborhood, and we were looking for a way to get into the area. We began discussions with the Conference, and we were given the church building to use as a center for ministries such as a soup kitchen for the poor, a medical clinic, a meeting place for people to learn job skills, and a training center for ministry leaders. Several of us gathered in the chancel area of the old church building to consider what God might do there. We prayed. I read the passage about the bones coming to life. We

looked around and listened for God's dream in that place. Before long, people from the congregation flocked to the facility to clean and prepare it for its rebirth in ministry.

In the first summer of its existence, the new facility became the home of a theatre troupe made up of youth from four different groups: the Juvenile Department of Corrections, a residential facility for homeless families, the African American congregation with whom we are in partnership, and the congregation I serve. The participants spent the summer with mentors, leaders, and artists, learning and working together to share their own stories and to produce a play entitled "This Is Who I Am." Our director of Missions and Community Involvement, developed and directed the production. Through participation in the event, the youth began to see beyond traditional boundaries that had separated them. They built bridges of understanding that will serve them well as they grow to become leaders. The new facility also made way for the birth of a free medical clinic, helping to heal people, body and soul. A place that had been struggling to hold on was reborn to foster the development of creativity, redemption, and healing. The name of the facility is *The New Room*, named after the first Methodist building ever built. Why? Because our identity has been colored by an understanding of who we have been and the roots of tradition from which we spring.

The corporate remembering has provided the congregation with a depth that was not present previously because we were a congregation that had only a few years of experience and history together. Now, instead of being a congregation that shares a common memory that stretches back only a few years, we know the Wesley stories as if they were our own. We share the understanding of being Christians in a time of great social change. We understand our purpose to reach out beyond the walls and touch lives being missed by the standard ways of doing church. We are fortified by the courage of our Methodist ancestors as we face stepping out into new forms of ministry and new areas of need. "If our Methodist ancestors did it, then we can, too." New energy and unity came from imagining the stories of our heritage.

### **ReConnecting in a traditional setting**

Most new churches started in the past twenty-five years, and motivated in part by distrust of ineffective bureaucracies, have made a conscious claim of avoiding seemingly tired traditions that are drawn from aging denominations. However, drawing leadership energy from the stories and experiences of our respective traditions is a workable transformation that is appropriate to many settings. This process of ReConnecting found

another powerful response when used in a very old, historic center-city church in rural Louisiana. The pastor saw the struggle and the tension between those who declared themselves as the keepers of tradition and those who wanted to reach out in new ways to the changing culture around them. The pastor saw the tension between the groups that was sapping the energy from the leaders and from his ministry. In order to help the church refocus so they could move forward in ministry, it was necessary to provide the members of the congregation with a shared experience that would reframe their situation and give them a new perspective on their task. The pastor knew how important tradition is to this congregation, and he also knew that surrounding them, as in the days of Wesley, were large numbers of people who were not being reached. He understood that being faithful to Wesleyan tradition meant reaching out beyond the walls and forms of the church to touch people where they were.

We provided the video and the workbook for the study, and the leadership set out to draw as many people as possible at the center-city church into a shared memory. They decided to focus on this one experience as the priority for the congregation. Through newsletter articles, announcements, and sermons, the congregation was informed about and encouraged to participate in the journey. Groups were offered at a variety of times to provide maximum accessibility for members of the congregation with diverse and busy schedules. Over 150 people signed up and participated in the experience.

Later the church shared the following results:

- Eight new individuals/couples signed up for small group leader training.
- Six participants formed a task group to develop a new series of adult education opportunities to accompany the new worship service.
- Twenty participants expressed interest in participating in the new educational opportunities.
- A visioning taskforce was established to discern vision and direction for the church.
- Fifteen participants requested a program to help them understand ministry according to spiritual gifts.
- Eighteen participants registered for Disciple Bible Study.
- Twenty-two participants registered for a spiritual growth group.

- A group was formed to facilitate developing ministries that would reach more effectively beyond the walls of the church.
- Interest was expressed in exploring the possibility of developing a second site for the church to enable more people to be reached and the church to grow in ministry, mission, and members.

Many popular leadership books hold that tradition is a negative force, binding the leader to the past in addictive and unhealthy practices. Sometimes individuals do have an unhealthy attraction to the past. Sometimes personal self-interest is cloaked by defending the tradition. At times, traditional practices stand in the way of innovation. However, it is neither the past nor the tradition that is inherently faulty. Rather it is more likely that interpersonal conflict is framing the perspective of past, present, and future in the wrong way. Missional vision, direction, and energy are found in the primal stories of our respective traditions, because they provide indispensable energy for the rebirthing of mission. Adding tradition to the canvas brought forth renewed energy and has engendered a rebirth of passion that launched the movement into ministry from the very beginning. Becoming a slave to the forms of tradition can stagnate organization and stifle visionary leaders. Corporate remembering as a path to the awakening of new creation will change the future of a congregation’s ministry.

### **Treasuring the past, but not storing up our treasures there**

Some leaders of new model churches with whom I have had conversations regarding tradition and change are frustrated with the resistance and at times even the hostility of members of more traditional churches towards the development of new models. Some are frustrated by the slowness of change. Some are even ready to jettison the traditional and embark on a whole new beginning, “after all,” they infer, “isn’t that what Wesley did?” My answer to them is, “No, that is not what Wesley did.” Wesley was a loyal priest of the Church of England until the day he died. The necessity of meeting the needs of those in America forced him to perform an ordination which would place him outside the *acceptable practices* of the Anglican church; however, he remained a loyal priest of the church and an advocate for the church’s doctrine and tradition throughout his life.

I have been involved in the planting of a rapidly growing new congregation, using music and communication styles more attuned to the language of the contemporary culture while striving to maintain theological and historical integrity. This experience has shown me the importance and effectiveness of the development of new forms of ministry designed to meet the needs of new people groups. I understand and have experienced the capacity for new models of ministry to reach large numbers of people, but abandoning

the traditional would be tragically wrong, practically and ethically. It would be wrong practically because there is such a richness and wealth of knowledge, experience, wisdom, and stability in our tradition. It would be wrong ethically to abandon those who have provided the foundation, walls, and roof of the spiritual house in which we have been reared just because they are slow to change or are holding tightly to models of worship that for them are filled with meaning, memory, and emotional attachment. New models are needed to reach the vast numbers of people for whom those models are not attractive yet while we seek to invite newer generations, we should be careful not to alienate the older generations.

Our task as we live through the dawning of the new millennium is to remember the words of the psalmist who wrote, “One generation shall tell another of the mighty acts of God.” This communication goes both ways. Those who are older share their wisdom with those who are young. Those who know the Story will pass along that Story to those who have yet to hear. There are times when it is out of the mouths of babes that God’s message comes, and there are times in which a little child shall lead them. What is required is the development of an attitude of mutual acceptance and a way for us to share our common identity even if we do not share a common attachment to the forms of ministry. Invoking an embodied corporate memory of the original mission and direction of the early Methodist movement is one important path beyond maintenance and decline, towards the development of the New Creation. *Corporate remembering, then, for the Methodist Church is not a simple restatement of the past; it is a New Creation in that it requires interaction between the current life of the church and its historical and spiritual heritage to create a renewed and culturally relevant expression of its original identity. The development of new tools and processes to evoke this corporate memory are crucial to the area of ecclesiology and discipleship.*

## Appendix

### Text of the Introductory Video

Change is as natural as the seasons and as constant as an ever-flowing river. It affects us on every level of our lives, even in our lives of faith. From time to time, the people of God find themselves in a time of “spiritual winter.” Yet, something always happens to stir the life in them again. As they awaken in this new spiritual spring, they find something calling them back to life, back to center, back to faithfulness.

In the book of Chronicles there is a story about a time of reconnection for renewal. Over the years, the people of God had drifted away from their closeness with God. Under the new king, Hezekiah, there began a restoration of the Temple building. While the workers were cleaning out the temple, they accidentally came across a copy of the book of the Law, which had been lost for many years. (*Images of scroll, Temple, and hands unrolling a scroll by torch light*)

It was the finding of the Book of the Law that opened their eyes to the need for reform. The king called together all of the people so they could hear anew the old, old story of what God had done in their lives and God’s hope for their life as a people. They listened. They heard, and they responded. What resulted was a powerful time of rebirth and renewal. It was as if, through hearing anew of the story of God, the rain came to the dry places in their life of faith, and the winter changed to spring.

“**ReConnecting**” is a seven-week video and journaling based process designed to facilitate a journey of exploration and discovery into a deeper connectedness with our Wesleyan **heritage, vision, spirituality, leadership**.

Over the course of the seven weeks, those who participate will look first-hand at some of the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the church. Together we will take a video journey to England in order to remember the stories of our origins. Through video sessions and daily readings, we will visit with outstanding theologians, church leaders, and congregations. Through journaling, prayer, and group discussion, we will establish those connections within our hearts and groups as well.

The themes of the video sessions will be:

#### **Session One: “Where in the World are we: Getting our Bearings”**

We will look at life as a constant process of change, and explore some of the major changes taking place in the world around us, and the way in which those changes offer us both great challenge as well as great opportunity.

#### **Session Two: “Coming Home: Rediscovering the Roots of the Methodist Movement”**

We will have an opportunity to step into the past, into the formative experiences of John Wesley, the movement's founder, and the life events that launched him into the passionate, purposeful, and visionary ministry that continues today.

### **Session Three: “Going Deep: Discovering the Roots of Authentic Spirituality”**

There is a deep hunger for spiritual experience in the lives of people throughout society, yet many do not feel a real connection to the power and presence of God. In this session, we will look at some of the barriers to the development of a vital spiritual life, and get direction from contemporary spiritual leaders and theologians as well as from spiritual experiences of Wesley himself.

### **Session Four: “Outside the Gates: Getting to Know the Cultures in our Context”**

There is increasing diversity in our society and the world around us. The presence of racial, ethnic, cultural and generational differences is expanding exponentially, and the developments are, in most cases just outside the walls of the church. If we are to be faithful to the message of Jesus and the life of Wesley, who said “The world is my parish,” then we need to get to know those who are yet to be reached, and develop an attitude of acceptance and invitation rather than isolation. This session will help us begin that process.

### **Session Five: “Clear Expectations: We All Play a Part”**

Through an exploration of the Ministry at the New Room in Bristol, we will learn how to assess our churches process of discipleship formation as well as some effective methods for discovering people’s gifts for ministry and how to deploy those gifts in the service of the church. In this way we get a fresh understanding of the ancient notion of the priesthood of all believers.

### **Session Six: “The Emerging Church: Uncovering our Ancient Future”**

When Wesley moved out into the world to reach people in new and seemingly controversial and unconventional ways, people inside the church and called him radical. Many closed their pulpits to him, and yet his ministry was shaped by his understanding of the practices of the Primitive Church recorded in the book of Acts. Wesley was re-appropriating the practices of the Early Church for the contemporary people of his day. All over the country and even around the world we are currently witnessing the emergence of new and renewed churches that are successfully reaching into the surrounding contemporary culture, touching people for Christ and helping them become transformed as disciples. In this session we will explore some of these churches and see how their methods are not new, but rather an awakening of the old Wesleyan model, which comes directly from the book of Acts - culturally relevant worship, small groups, and lay ministries.

### **Session Seven: “Let’s Roll: Living out the Vision in the Our Congregation”**

In the concluding session we will attempt to integrate some of what we have discovered on our journey, and explore how we might integrate these discoveries in to the life of our own congregations. We will be assisted by some of America’s foremost church leaders and thinkers who have traveled this road before. As they answer the question, “Where do we go from here?” we will be given some concrete and practical advice and tools with which we can begin to assess our current life and ministry, and with passion, creativity and faithfulness, begin the next step of the journey towards renewal.

Through “*ReConnecting*,” we will share in journey through the current landscape of the church in the midst of this rapidly changing world. We will be looking at where we came from, what the original vision was for the church, where we are now, and where we might go in the time to come. It is my prayer that through this study, individuals and congregations will gain a rekindled sense of vision and connection with God, and that, like the people who looked again upon the words of the book of the law and were motivated to a powerful renewal, we will experience that renewal as well.