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Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Holiness of Heart and Life as Precursor to Interfaith Dialogue

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The Wesleyan emphasis on doctrine and discipline under the guidance of the Holy Spirit prepares Christians for genuine interfaith conversation and witness. The paper argues that when congregations expect, encourage, and equip members to grow in holiness of heart and life they prepare them for Christ-like encounters with their neighbors who practice other religions, or no religion.

Introduction

The 21st century is a post-modern, multi-cultural, multi-religious world. It is a world characterized by globalization and diversity. The global economy is a world marked by migration in which people leave home and travel around the world in the hope of making a better life for themselves and their families. This explains why the family that lives across the street from me is from Pakistan and my next-door neighbor is Honduran. At least three different languages are spoken in the neighborhood. This is a world foreign to the one I was born into.

I was born in the middle of the 20th century into an American culture that was assumed to be “Christian.” And to be Christian was essential to being American. The Church held a place of prominence and honor in daily life and popular culture. Everyone spoke English and saw little reason to learn a second language. Born into a Methodist family, I was baptized as an infant. The church I grew up in saw little need for intentional Christian formation because it was assumed the culture in which we lived would work in concert with the church to form good citizens who, as a matter of course, would be Christians.

The world I grew up in was the last gasps of Christendom. While there are vestiges of it today, Christendom is no longer the dominant paradigm of Western culture. The Church continues to have a place in the cultural conversation, but it is no longer a dominant voice. It is one voice among many.¹ This is revealed by the growing number of communities that annually provide public space to display religious and non-religious displays during the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas.² On December 24, 2011 National Public Radio reported a story from Leesburg, Virginia about how each December the local county courthouse traditionally hosted a Nativity scene. The display was provided by local Christian congregations. However, the practice was challenged in court by local non-Christian residents as being a violation of the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The court agreed and instructed the county to allow other, non-religious displays alongside the traditional Nativity. The NPR story tells how county officials decided to resolve the issue. They provided ten plots around the courthouse square for holiday displays. Most were claimed by local atheist groups and included a diverse array of displays intended to mock religious symbols.

What happened in Leesburg, Virginia is repeated across the country. While Christianity remains the majority religion in the United States, it is no longer the dominant influence in popular culture or thinking it once was. Christianity in North America is living on the fumes of a Christendom that ran out of fuel decades ago. Many Christian leaders understand this new reality. They tend to lead independent, non-denominational churches. Unfortunately, the so-called “Mainline”³ denominations continue to operate out of a Christendom paradigm. They do so

¹ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 10-11

² See <http://www.npr.org/2011/12/24/144151483/secular-opponents-of-holiday-displays-get-creative>

³ These are historically American Protestant denominations that were dominant players in US culture and politics during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Denominations typically identified as “Mainline” are The United Methodist Church, The Episcopal Church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), The Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, and Reformed Church in America.

at their peril. To do so leaves the church ill equipped to communicate and live the gospel of Jesus Christ in today's post-Christendom, post-modern, multi-religious culture.

Typical United Methodist congregations leave their members ill equipped to communicate and live the gospel of Jesus Christ in contemporary culture because they discount the importance of holiness of heart and life. Christendom thinking assumes that Christianity continues to be the dominant voice and influence in popular culture. It even goes so far as to claim the United States is a "Christian" nation. It logically follows that holiness is equated with good citizenship. Being a good, loyal citizen of the nation is the definition of a Christian. The Church, State, and Culture are all partners in forming the character of the people.⁴

The problem with such Christendom thinking is that it denies the significant cultural shifts that have occurred and will continue. It is also contrary to the nature of holiness found in Scripture that John Wesley and the early Methodists understood very well. Wesley defined holiness as being cleansed from sin, 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit', and by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus, the being so 'renewed in the image of our mind' as to be 'perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect'.⁵ To be "holy" is to be set apart, to be different. Striving to "have the mind of Christ" sets Christians apart from the world. More specifically, holiness is marked by who and how Christians love. Wesley believed holiness is a life-long journey. It is a process of intentional growth that involves the formation of "holy tempers:" love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Galatians 5:22-23). The eventual outcome of striving toward holiness is becoming fully the person God created you to be, in the image of Christ. Christians who intentionally and persistently practice and pursue holiness become more and more like Jesus.

Wesley anticipated the state in which The United Methodist Church finds itself today in the opening paragraph of his "Thoughts Upon Methodism" written in 1786:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.⁶

In its pursuit of cultural relevance and drive to attract people into membership the denomination has intentionally set aside "the doctrine, spirit, and discipline" Wesley regarded as essential to Methodist identity and mission. The importance of doctrine, spirit, and discipline are downplayed for fear that United Methodists may be perceived as being in any way exclusive.

⁴ Stone, 118-119.

⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 17, "The Circumcision of the Heart," § I.1, in *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 1 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976--), 402-403.

⁶ John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Methodism* (1786), ¶ 1, in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert Davies, vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976--), 527.

United Methodist congregations, with their emphasis on inclusiveness and openness, tend to conflate holiness with citizenship.⁷ This means the body politic is the primary subject of Christian love rather than the triune God. God remains an important presence, but is secondary to “open doors, open hearts, and open minds.” An important virtue fostered by United Methodist congregations, therefore, is a virtue they frequently name “social holiness.”⁸ At the heart of this virtue is inclusiveness of all people at all levels of the church and society. It also includes the struggle for social and economic justice. Much emphasis is placed on the importance of human agency in “building the kingdom of God.” The church is understood to be God’s agent given the task and responsibility for building the kingdom of God. The end result of equating holiness with citizenship is a people whose lives reflect the very best values of the surrounding culture.

This leads to a culture of self-preoccupation. David Lowes Watson astutely describes the North American church:

Instead of places where people come to be formed as Christian disciples, congregations then become places where people are primarily concerned with being helped and blessed. Instead of finding how they can serve the risen Christ in the world, proclaiming and living out the coming reign of God, they begin to look for ways in which they themselves can be enriched by God’s love and peace and justice. And even when they do make a serious attempt to form themselves into Christian disciples, they will tend to focus on the development of personal spiritual growth to the neglect of helping Jesus Christ with the unfinished task of preparing the world for God’s coming *shalom*.⁹

Watson argues that The United Methodist Church is thoroughly *enculturated*. By this he means the church is a reflection of the culture in which it resides. “Instead of presenting the world with the gospel, the church adjusts the gospel to whatever the world finds important.”¹⁰ Hence, marketing and consumerism are dominant influences both inside and outside the church. Church pastors and staff are regarded as providers of religious goods and services. Church members are the chief consumers who go to the church expecting to be served.

⁷ The denominational marketing campaign known for the catch phrase, “Open Doors, Open Hearts, Open Minds: The People of The United Methodist Church” is a prime example of equating inclusiveness with holiness. The United Methodist Church, therefore, is no different than any public institution (school, library, or civic organization).

⁸ Wesley’s use of the phrase, “social holiness”, is broader than the way it is commonly used today. For Wesley social holiness means both that Christianity is necessarily a relational religion requiring participation in Christian community. Secondly, social holiness expands the relational nature of Christian faith beyond the Christian community and into the world. He describes his meaning in the preface to a Collection of Psalms and Hymns published in 1739: “Holy solitaries” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. “Faith working by love” is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. “This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;” and that we manifest our love “by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith.” And in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren, not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be “zealous of good works.” He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. “My Father,” will he say, “worketh hitherto, and I work.” And at all possible opportunities he is, like his Master, “going about doing good.”

⁹ David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Congregational leaders are guided by what Juan Luis Segundo calls the General Rule of Pastoral Prudence, “The absolute minimum in obligations in order to keep the maximum number of people.”¹¹ Pastors who are now required to report attendance and membership figures every Monday morning are unlikely to challenge this market-driven, consumer culture.

Therefore, United Methodist congregations are populated by people John Wesley regarded to be “almost Christian.”¹² They are outwardly Christian, participating in worship and church programs and activities, doing good works in the church and community, and are generally good, decent, responsible citizens. However, their Christianity is often only skin deep. Their religious beliefs are more akin to what Kenda Creasy Dean calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) than orthodox Christianity. The guiding beliefs of MTDism are:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.¹³

MTD is the result of decades of downplaying what Wesley regarded as essential Christian doctrine and discipline. Congregations de-emphasize doctrine in order to present themselves as being inclusive, open to all, and welcoming to people of no faith and non-Christian religions. The United Methodist Church’s recent marketing tag line, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors: the People of The United Methodist Church” is a prime example. It implies that United Methodist congregations are open to all expressions of faith, all ideas, and all people. The slogan intentionally downplays the denomination’s historic identity in Jesus Christ and his mission. It deliberately sets Jesus aside in order to convince the world that openness and inclusiveness are the UMC most important values.

As admirable as inclusiveness is, it results in people with little or no understanding of basic Christian doctrine or discipline. This renders them to be poor conversation partners with their Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Mormon, Unitarian, or atheist co-workers, neighbors, and friends.

To illustrate my point, I share an encounter I had a few years ago in a United Methodist congregation in Nashville, Tennessee. My wife and I were part of an adult Sunday School class. During the course of conversation Jim told the class about a new friend he met at his place of

¹¹ Ibid, 28.

¹² This is a reference to Sermon 2: “The Almost Christian”, in which Wesley asserts the difference between an “almost Christian” and an “altogether Christian” is whole-hearted faith in Christ crucified and risen. This faith compels the altogether Christian to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love those whom God loves, even their enemies and the enemies of God. Such faith is described by Charles Wesley as “Active faith that lives within, Conquers earth, and hell, and sin, Sanctifies, and makes us whole, Forms the Savior in the soul.”

¹³ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What The Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

work. His new friend is Muslim. Jim told us about how his Muslim co-worker shared with him the basic Islamic beliefs and practices. Jim shared how inspired he was with his new friends deeply held faith. He went on to tell us he is particularly drawn to his friend's discipline of prayer five times a day. Jim concluded by wistfully telling the class that he wished Christians had such a discipline we could practice.

I took the opportunity to tell Jim that Christians have an ancient tradition of daily prayer known as the Daily Office. John and Charles Wesley practiced a discipline of prayer at least three times a day: morning, evening, and night. They encouraged Methodists to join them in the same practice. In addition, Methodists had the tradition of weekly small group (classes) and society meetings that included prayer, praise, Scripture reading, teaching, and accountability for discipleship. All of this was new to Jim and everyone else in the class.

Jim was baptized into The United Methodist Church as an infant and confirmed as a youth. He was active in his UMYF group during high school and graduated from a United Methodist affiliated college. Today he is an active member, and leader, in the same congregation in which he grew up. Jim had no knowledge or experience of Wesleyan discipleship, in spite of his life-long affiliation with The United Methodist Church.

I am highlighting his story because, in my experience working with numerous United Methodist congregations, districts, and annual conferences in my work as Director of Wesleyan Leadership for the General Board of Discipleship, Jim is a typical church member. He is a good, decent, hard-working man who does his best to make a positive contribution to his church and to the community. Jim is highly intelligent and articulate when talking about his work, sports that interest him, and politics. But ask him to discuss his faith or to explain basic Christian doctrine, he becomes speechless. Jim knows he believes in God and Jesus is his personal Savior. But he is not able to go much further. Jim has been taught that being a Christian means being nice to others in this life and going to heaven when you die. Largely because his Christian faith was formed in a "Mainline" congregation holiness is not part of his vocabulary. In fact, he is repelled by the word because he associates it with fundamentalism and people he perceives to be judgmental and "holier-than-thou."

In this paper I argue that a life steeped in Christian faith and the practices that lead to holiness of heart and life is a pre-requisite for honest, faithful dialog and relationship with people of non-Christian religious traditions and people who profess no faith. I am part of a denomination that publically declares itself to be a people of "Open hearts, Open doors, Open minds." At the same time it has forsaken its historic pursuit of holiness of heart and life, the very same holiness that enables hearts, doors, and minds to be truly open to others. For interfaith dialog to be a conversation participants must be deeply rooted in their respective traditions. Otherwise, the dialog becomes a monologue. When people like Jim, whose faith has been formed much more by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism than orthodox Christianity, encounter a co-worker who is a practicing, devout Muslim, Jim is not equipped to engage in genuine interfaith dialogue. Jim is very proud of having an open heart and open mind, but he has very little to offer his Muslim friend who has questions about Christian faith and practices.

Genuine communication requires self-knowledge

Genuine communication begins when participants know themselves. Self-knowledge enables people to know their abilities, weaknesses, and limitations. When self-knowledge is lacking self-deception is likely to take over. Any subsequent efforts at communication will then be shaded by pride. Pride leads inevitably to self-righteousness, defensiveness, grandiosity, patronizing, proselytizing, or worse. These behaviors seldom contribute to honest, fruitful dialog. They are much more likely to result in monolog that leaves the participants feeling defensive and angry.

With regard to inter-religious dialog self-knowledge has at least two essential meanings. First, persons must know themselves. "Mindfulness" is a way of describing self-knowledge:

Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. When you're mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience.¹⁴

Mindfulness enables a person to be present to himself or herself, to others, and to their surroundings. Such persons are comfortable in their own skin. Mindfulness allows persons to listen to others and be open to hearing ideas and beliefs that differ from their own without getting defensive. It also equips persons to honestly share their beliefs with others with humility and grace.

Secondly, within a context of religious and inter-faith dialog, self-knowledge implies participants have working understanding of the essential doctrines, practices, and history of their faith tradition. They are grounded in the Scriptures of their tradition. This is to say that persons need to be practitioners of their own tradition. They also know that theirs is not the only expression of their religion. For example, Christians in the United Methodist tradition understand that Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Pentecostals are other equally valid expressions of Christianity.

John Wesley provides some help in understanding the character of self-knowledge. He equated self knowledge with repentance:

And first, repent, that is, know yourselves. This is the first repentance, previous to faith, even conviction, or self-knowledge. Awake, then, thou that sleepest. Know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art. Know that corruption of thy inmost nature, whereby thou are very far gone from original righteousness, whereby 'the flesh lusteth' always 'contrary to the Spirit', through that 'carnal mind which is enmity against God', which 'is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be'. Know that thou art corrupted in every power, in every faculty of thy soul, that thou art totally corrupted in every one of these, all the foundations being out of course. The eyes of thine understanding are darkened, so that they cannot discern God or the things of God. The clouds of ignorance and error rest upon thee, and cover thee with the shadow of death.

¹⁴ Psychology Today web site: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mindfulness>

Thou knowest nothing yet as thou oughtest to know, neither God, nor the world, nor thyself. Thy will is no longer the will of God, but is utterly perverse and distorted, averse from all good, from all which God loves, and prone to all evil, to every abomination which God hateth. Thy affections are alienated from God, and scattered abroad over the earth. All thy passions, both thy desires and aversions, thy joys and sorrows, thy hopes and fears, are out of frame, are either undue in their degree, or placed on undue objects. So that there is no soundness in thy soul, but 'from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot' (to use the strong expression of the prophet) there are only 'wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores'.¹⁵

According to Wesley, prior to repentance a person is deluded into believing he or she is something that he or she is not. They are alienated from God and ignorant of the things of God. Their mind and heart are blind to their true condition of ignorance and self-centeredness. Without repentance a person cannot know themselves nor God. Repentance is the beginning of knowing the true self, which is the beginning of holiness. It opens the mind and heart to the light of God that reveals the damage caused by sin. Repentance turns the heart and mind away from the self-deception of sin and towards the truth and life of God. Mindfulness begins when the heart and mind are turned away from self and turned towards God.

Repentance also opens the mind and heart to the truth and life of God revealed in Scripture and tradition. It enables persons to begin to know, understand, and live the doctrine and discipline of Christian faith. As they learn, practice, and grow in faith Christians become confident practitioners who can humbly enter into relationship with their neighbors who practice other religions, or no religion at all.

Persons who lack repentance live in a world of illusion. This world is represented best in contemporary western culture that discounts the very idea of sin. People in the west do not recognize sin in themselves because they are bombarded by messages in media, and the church, that they are essentially good. If people believe they are good then repentance becomes irrelevant. Faith in Christ is reduced to belief and intellectual assent to a creed or certain doctrines.

This means many people who regard themselves to be Christian in "Mainline" congregations lack self-knowledge. They misunderstand sin because it is seldom taught or preached. Sin is often equated with mistakes or character flaws. It is rarely acknowledged to be an innate, "inbred" brokenness of the soul that denies God and distorts all of life and human community, including the church. Therefore, they deny the reality of sin and their own sinfulness.

Some years ago I was part of an adult Sunday School class in a typical United Methodist Congregation. During the course of conversation about the Scripture lesson for the day I made what I thought was a simple statement of truth: "We are all sinners." I did not expect the class to erupt in anger and indignation. Everyone took personal offense at my remark. It did not help when I responded to the angry gazes directed at me by saying, "I'm including myself when I say

¹⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 7, "The Way to the Kingdom", §II.1, in *Works*, 1:225-226.

that we are all sinners. No one is immune from the human condition that alienates us all from God.” Every person in the room agreed the doctrine of original sin was mistaken. They agreed that labeling people as “sinners” demeans them and damages their self-esteem. The consensus of the class was that sin is not really that big of a problem. They believed that sin was nothing more than bad habits that can be changed through a little will power. When I challenged their thinking by asking, “If sin is not really a problem then why did Jesus suffer the humiliation of death by crucifixion?” the room was silent.

Reflecting on my experiences as a pastor and, for the past fourteen years, an active member of various United Methodist congregations, I am convinced the vast majority of church members are ill equipped to engage in real dialog with their neighbors, friends, and co-workers who practice other religions, or no religion. Without conviction of sin and earnest repentance they cannot know the God revealed in Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ and the witness of the early Church. We should not be surprised, therefore, when Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the dominant theology expressed by the majority of members in mainline denominations, such as The United Methodist Church.

The god of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is like “a butler or therapist, someone who meets our needs when summoned or who listens nonjudgmentally and helps [people] feel good about themselves.”¹⁶ The job of a butler or therapist is to serve, not to be served. They are chosen by us according to our own criteria, which reflect our character. We could say this god is created in the image of the people. Therefore, sin is re-defined as flawed character traits and bad habits that can be overcome by a little self-discipline. The god of MTD does not ask for nor require repentance.

Repentance requires awareness of sin and sinfulness. Persons must first hear the gospel proclaimed and experience Christ in a community in which the gospel is taught and practiced. The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Romans 10:14-17, NRSV).

This is why the church’s ministry of teaching, preaching, and practicing the gospel of Christ is essential to the formation of a culture of holiness. Christ must be at the center of the congregation. When Christ is the center discipleship follows. When Christ is supplanted by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism holiness is replaced by niceness. Repentance, and subsequent self-knowledge and faith in Christ necessary for Christian witness, are short-circuited.

¹⁶ Dean, 17.

Practicing holiness of heart and life increases self-knowledge and knowledge of Jesus Christ

Holiness is a synonym for “perfection,” “perfect love,” and “sanctification.” John Wesley defined it as follows:

The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by pure love.¹⁷

and

It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love 'rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks'.¹⁸

Holiness is the result of the cross-shaped life described by Jesus when he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The cross Jesus’ followers are to take up is obedience to his commands to love (Matthew 22:37-40). Love¹⁹ is the beginning and end of Christian faith.

John Wesley described the process of forming holiness of heart and life in Sermon 92: “On Zeal”

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers; - longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance; and if any other were comprised in “the mind which was in Christ Jesus.” In an exterior circle are all the *works of mercy*, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers- by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed *works of piety* - reading and hearing the word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord’s supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers,

¹⁷ Steven W. Manskar, *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley’s ‘A Plain Account of Christian Perfection’*, (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2004), 41.

¹⁸ Wesley, Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §I.9, in *Sermons II*, 2:160.

¹⁹ When Wesley uses the word “love” he means that love described by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. He summarizes the character of this love in Sermon 149: “On Love,”

“Now, what is it to love God but to delight in him, to rejoice in his will, to desire continually to please him, to seek and find our happiness in him, and to thirst day and night for a fuller enjoyment of him?

As to the measure of this love, our Lord hath clearly told us, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.’ Not that we are to love or delight in none but him. For he hath commanded us not only to love our neighbour—that is, all men—as ourselves; to desire and pursue their happiness as sincerely and steadily as our own; but also to love many of his creatures in the strictest sense—to delight in them, to enjoy them—only in such a manner and measure as we know and feel not to indispose but to prepare us for the enjoyment of him. Thus, then, we are called to love God with all our heart.”

and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one body, the church, dispersed all over the earth - a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.²⁰

Love is formed in congregations centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is the way of life shaped by habits and attitudes Wesley called “holy tempers” and the Apostle Paul named “fruit of the Spirit:” love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23a). These characteristics are the fruit of a life of obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ in a community devoted to following Christ in the world.

The love that is formed in the heart by following Jesus in the world is described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

John Wesley describes this love in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*:

God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is continually crying, 'Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth whom I desire besides thee.' My God and my all! 'Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.'

He is therefore happy in God; yea, always happy, as having in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life, and overflowing his soul with peace and joy. Perfect love having now cast out fear, he rejoices evermore. Yea, his joy is full, and all his bones cry out, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten me again unto a living hope of an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, reserved in heaven for me.' ...

"And loving God, he 'loves his neighbor as himself;' he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea, and the enemies of God. And if it be not in his power to 'do good to them that hate' him, yet he ceases not to 'pray for them,' though they spurn his love, and still 'despitefully use him, and persecute him.'

"For he is 'pure in heart.' Love has purified his heart from envy, malice, wrath, and every unkind temper. It has cleansed him from pride, whereof 'only cometh contention;' and he hath now 'put on bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering.' And indeed all possible ground for contention, on his part, is cut off. For none can take from him what he desires, seeing he 'loves not the world, nor any of the things of the world;' but 'all his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name.'²¹

²⁰ Wesley, Sermon 92, “On Zeal,” §II.5, in *Sermons III*, 3:313.

²¹ Manskar, 15-16.

Love, for Wesley, is much more than feeling deep attraction to and affection for God and the things of God. It is a reordering of the affections and tempers away from pleasing the self and the world and towards pleasing only God. For Wesley, and the Apostle Paul, love is active. It compels specific behavior that is pleasing to God. Paul describes the behavior derived from love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. In other words, persons who profess to love God practice patience, kindness, humility, justice, truth-telling, peace-making, hope, and endurance.

The life of active love is exemplified by obedience to Jesus' teachings summarized in Matthew 22:37-40

“ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Obedience to Jesus is shaped by these two great commandments: love God and love those whom God loves. Wesley believed God provided the means to follow Christ in his way of love by learning and practicing “works of piety” and “works of mercy.” The works of piety are the practices of worship and devotion God provides, and modeled by Jesus, that draw us to God and keep us in his company. The works of mercy are those practices of compassion and justice that enable people to enact their love for God in the world by loving the world that God loves (John 3:16).

Wesley regarded the works of mercy and works of piety to be "means of grace." He defined means of grace as being "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."²² Means of grace are basic practices that open the heart and mind to God and the ways of God in individuals and communities. They are intended to help people live out the relationship they seek with God and with those whom God loves.

The means of grace are very much like the habits couples practice to nurture their relationship with one another. Just as couples spend time together in conversation and sharing their lives with one another, Christians must spend time with God in prayer, worship, sacrament, Scripture, and service in the world God loves. We become what we love. Love forms habits that shape our life and character into the life and character of the beloved. This love that, in the words of Charles Wesley, “forms the savior in the soul,”²³ equips Christians to engage in fruitful, Christ-like dialog with non-Christian neighbors, friends, co-workers, classmates, and strangers.

Wesley describes how Methodists are to interact with God and their neighbors in the General Rules:

First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind ...²⁴

²² Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace" §II.1, *Works*, 1:381.

²³ Wesley, #507.3 in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists*, in *Works*, 7:698.

²⁴ Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” § 4, in *Works*, 9:70

A goal of love of God is forming and nurturing relationships with the neighbor. In inter-faith dialog we do no harm and make on-going relationship possible when we listen rather than debate with the neighbor who professes a non-Christian faith or no faith at all. Listening excludes proselytizing. Christians seeking to build relationships of mutual respect will not denigrate other religious traditions, reduce any religious tradition to caricature, expect any individual to speak for an entire faith tradition, or objectify any person.

Secondly, by doing good, by being, in every kind, merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible, to all men;—to their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison;—to their souls, by instructing reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with ... By running with patience the race that is set before them, "denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily;" submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should "say all manner of evil of them falsely for the Lord's sake."²⁵

Love seeks the well-being of the neighbor. Therefore, Christians will extend hospitality to persons of other religious traditions. They will be made to feel welcomed in our homes and places of worship. We will do all in our power to accommodate their physical and ritual needs when they are in our homes or churches. As followers of Jesus Christ, we will treat our guests as friends and persons of sacred worth created in the image of God. We will acknowledge all that we hold in common:

- Practice of compassion
- Service to others
- Practicing moral precepts and virtues
- Training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice
- Attention to diet and exercise
- Fasting and abstinence
- The use of music and chanting and sacred symbols
- Practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment
- Pilgrimage
- Study of scriptural texts
- Formation of community
- Humility, gratitude, and a sense of humor
- Prayer is communion with God, whether it is regarded as personal, impersonal, or beyond them both.²⁶

The goal in dialog is building mutual trust and relationships for common mission. Christians are not to set out to convert non-Christians. Rather, they are to represent Christ to their non-Christian neighbor. Of course, in the course of conversation the gospel of Christ will be proclaimed in

²⁵ Ibid., § 5, 9:72

²⁶ "Principles and Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue", www.cccm.ca/Stage/.../Principles_and_Guidelines_for_Interfaith.doc (International Movement of Catholic Students, 2008), 5-6.

word and deed. Any conversion that may occur is the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians, as representatives and reflections of Christ, must not impede the Spirit's work.

Persons who strive toward holiness of heart and life join with others to serve the world that God loves. Loving your neighbor as yourself means Christians join with Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, pagan, atheist, and agnostic neighbors who are willing to serve with and improve life for people who are poor, sick, oppressed, voiceless and marginalized by the world.²⁷

Thirdly, by attending upon all the ordinances of God. Such are:

The public worship of God;
The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded;
The Supper of the Lord;
Family and private prayer;
Searching the Scriptures; and
Fasting, or abstinence.²⁸

Disciplined practice of the works of piety (also known as “the instituted means of grace”) listed in the third General Rule make practice of the first two Rules possible in personal and congregational witness in the world. They are practices that connect persons to God and his grace that transforms the heart, mind, and soul. The transformed heart is open to God and to those whom God loves. Grace re-orders the affections and helps persons to understand that God’s love is not limited to Christians and the Church. The triune God is Lord of the Universe and all that is in it. Those who confess and practice love of this God are compelled by love to love those whom God loves. The writer of 1 John expresses this quite plainly:

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.²⁹

The works of piety connect persons to the grace that opens the heart, hands, eyes, and ears to all people, of all religious traditions and of no faith. When the heart is opened to grace and our affections and tempers are re-formed and re-aligned with Christ we realize that our non-Christian neighbor is our sister and brother. Disciples of Jesus Christ must love their neighbors as themselves because their Lord and Savior loves them.

Loving others means accepting them as they are, befriending, and providing hospitality to them. Loving as Christ loves means that Christians live as channels of his grace for all people. The works of piety “forms the Savior in the soul” and equip Christians to be fully present to their neighbors in love, compassion, and justice.

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments.
Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his

²⁷ Mark 3:31-35

²⁸ Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” § 6, in *Works*, 9:73.

²⁹ 1 John 4:19-21, NRSV

commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked.”³⁰

The General Rules are a rule of life for Christians in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition. It is “a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal and human community, helping to form us into the persons God intends us to be.”³¹ The aim of this rule is to form persons whose lives reflect the life of Jesus in the world. They are guided by the power of the Holy Spirit to “walk just as he walked.” When they encounter persons of other religions, or no religion, their witness is characterized by incarnate love described by John Wesley:

And while he thus always exercises his love to God, by praying without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks, this commandment is written in his heart, "That he who loveth God, love his brother also." And he accordingly loves his neighbour as himself; he loves every man as his own soul. His heart is full of love to all mankind, to every child of "the Father of the spirits of all flesh." That a man is not personally known to him, is no bar to his love; no, nor that he is known to be such as he approves not, that he repays hatred for his good-will. For he "loves his enemies;" yea, and the enemies of God, "the evil and the unthankful." And if it be not in his power to "do good to them that hate him," yet he ceases not to pray for them, though they continue to spurn his love, and still "despitefully use him and persecute him.”³²

Witnesses to Jesus Christ in the World

Jesus told his disciples

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”³³

Like salt, Christians are to improve life in the world. Their witness to Jesus Christ in the world strives to improve the quality of life for all people in their neighborhood, town, city, state, and nation. John Wesley describes the “salty” Christians:

³⁰ 1 John 2:3-6

³¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 138.

³² Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” ¶ 9, in *Works*, 9:37-38.

³³ Matthew 5:13-16

Indeed, were we wholly to separate ourselves from sinners, how could we possibly answer that character which our Lord gives us in these very words: 'Ye (Christians, ye that are lowly, serious and meek; ye that hunger after righteousness, that love God and man, that do good to all, and therefore suffer evil: Ye) are the salt of the earth.' It is your very nature to season whatever is round about you. It is the nature of the divine savour which is in you to spread to whatsoever you touch; to diffuse itself on every side, to all those among whom you are. This is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others; that every holy temper, and word, and work of yours, may have an influence on them also. By this means a check will in some measure be given to the corruption which is in the world; and a small part, at least, saved from the general infection, and rendered holy and pure before God.³⁴

Christians are "the light of the world." They reveal the world as it is and as it will be. Their witness reveals the places and people where Christ and his kingdom are present today. Holiness reveals the mission of Christ in, with, and for the world. It is the light of God's love for the world that draws the world to Christ and his gospel of the reign of God. John Wesley describes the meaning of Christians living as the "light of the world:"

'Ye' Christians 'are the light of the world,' with regard both to your tempers and actions. Your holiness makes you as conspicuous as the sun in the midst of heaven. As ye cannot go out of the world, so neither can ye stay in it without appearing to all mankind. Ye may not flee from men, and while ye are among them it is impossible to hide your lowliness and meekness and those other dispositions whereby ye aspire to be perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. Love cannot be hid any more than light; and least of all when it shines forth in action, when ye exercise yourselves in the labour of love, in beneficence of every kind. As well may men think to hide a city as to hide a Christian: yea, as well may they conceal a city set upon a hill as a holy, zealous, active lover of God and man.³⁵

Light requires energy. The energy is the Holy Spirit working in the lives of persons witnessing to Jesus Christ in the world and following his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion (the means of grace). The light of Christ shines through the lives of persons who are formed by communities that intentionally initiate members into the life and mission of the triune God and provide the means for ongoing support and accountability for mission-shaped discipleship. Such community is described by Charles Wesley in Hymn #507 written for the Love Feast:

Let us join ('tis God commands),
Let us join our hearts and hands;
Help to gain our calling's hope,
Build we each the other up.
God his blessing shall dispense,

³⁴ Wesley, Sermon 24, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Fourth," § I.7, *Works*, 1:536-7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:539-540.

God shall crown his ordinance,
Meet in his appointed ways,
Nourish us with social grace.

Let us then as brethren love,
Faithfully his gifts improve,
Carry on the earnest strife,
Walk in holiness of life.
Still forget the things behind,
Follow Christ in heart and mind;
Toward the mark unwearied press,
Seize the crown of righteousness!

Plead we thus for faith alone,
Faith which by our works is shown;
God it is who justifies,
Only faith the grace applies,
Active faith that lives within,
Conquers earth, and hell, and sin,
Sanctifies, and makes us whole,
Forms the Saviour in the soul.

Let us for this faith contend,
Sure salvation is its end;
Heaven already is begun,
Everlasting life is won.
Only let us persevere
Till we see our Lord appear;
Never from the rock remove,
Saved by faith which works by love.³⁶

In the post-Christendom, post-modern, multi-cultural world of today congregations must be intentional about Christian formation. They must acknowledge that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the dominant theology and ethic of the church today. And that MTD undermines the church's mission to form disciples of Jesus Christ who participate with Christ and his mission in the world. MTD has gained its place in the church as the result of decades of neglect of essential Wesleyan doctrine, spirit, and discipline. Therefore, the church ineffectual in preparing its people to be faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ with their Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Bahai, atheist, agnostic, and pagan neighbors. Without a culture and expectation of holiness of heart and life, United Methodist congregations cannot be full participants in interfaith dialog or relationships.

³⁶ Wesley, #507 in *Works*, 7:698-9.

Elements of the Disciple-Making System

The Wesleyan way of making disciples of Jesus Christ is designed to form habits, attitudes, and character (holy tempers). At the heart of the process are relationships formed in community, a set of practices (the means of grace), and a system of mutual accountability and support. The goal is to form Christ-centered congregations that are sign and foretaste of the reign of God. These congregations help their members to learn and practice holy habits that form holiness of heart and life. They teach and interpret essential Christian doctrine, provide a community for the practices of Christian discipline, and help persons to grow in love of God and neighbor.

As sign-communities they point beyond themselves toward Christ and his reign. They also witness to Christ in the world and help the world to see where and how Christ is alive and working to “bring good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and bringing liberation to the oppressed.”³⁷

The basic elements of such a Wesleyan disciple-making system are:

1. Clear Expectations: The mission and ministry of the congregation are directed toward making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The congregation expects God will keep God’s baptismal promises and that God will act in, with, and through the people to prepare the world for God’s coming reign on earth as it is in heaven. In response to God’s amazing grace that members will, according to their ability, follow Jesus’ teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The congregation’s vision is to become a Christ-centered sign-community for the coming reign of God.

2. The congregation provides an intentional “disciple-making” system designed to provide the means for persons and the congregation to fully participate in the Baptismal Covenant and grow in holiness of heart and life:

- An interconnected, intentional system of small groups focused upon Christian formation is foundational. Because Christian formation is a relational process, congregational leaders must develop contexts for the baptized to obey Jesus’ command to “love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”³⁹ The congregation will provide groups that meet people where they are—seekers, new Christians, growing, and mature Christians—and help them to grow in holiness of heart and life. The small group system of early Methodist societies provides an excellent model.⁴⁰ Such a system is how the congregation will cooperate with the dynamic of grace that seeks to draw people to Christ, awaken them to who and whose they are, accept the gift of God’s love through

³⁷ Luke 4:18

³⁹ John 13:34-35, NRSV

⁴⁰ Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 95-116.

faith, and live and serve as daughters and sons of God who are channels of grace for the world.

- Worship that is sacramental and evangelical in which Christ in all of his offices (prophet, priest, and king) is proclaimed. By sacramental I mean worship that is directed toward the triune God and offers direct access to Jesus Christ, his very body and blood. The mystery, majesty, righteousness and justice of God are lifted up through prayer, Scripture, proclamation, ritual and sacraments. Evangelical means that worship conveys the good news of God given to the world in the person, life and work of Jesus Christ. This good news is conveyed through word, hymns, praise songs, sermons and ritual that invite congregational participation. Finally, the congregation worships the whole Christ in all his offices because Christ saves and redeems the whole person. Therefore, liturgy and proclamation must proclaim Christ as prophet, priest and king.⁴¹
- Every member participates in a curriculum for Christian initiation and formation. This is integral to the small group system discussed above. The “entry level” groups will focus on catechesis, similar to the early Methodist class meeting. The leaders for this catechetical process will be seasoned, responsible Christians who can be trusted with the care of souls. An essential element of the catechesis will be teaching and encouraging the practice of the means of grace: works of piety (prayer, Scripture, worship, the Lord’s Supper, fasting or abstinence) and works of mercy (feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, visiting prisoners, caring for the sick, peace-making, and witness to Jesus Christ in the world). The goal of catechesis is to form persons as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ who witness to him in the world and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Ministry in and with the local community and the world, especially with poor and marginalized people. This ministry both meets physical and material needs while also sharing the good news of God in Jesus Christ in ways that they receive it as good news. This acknowledges that Christians are commanded by Christ to do good to their bodies and to their souls.

3. Practice evangelism that is contextual and centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The congregation and its leaders understand that the practice of evangelism is a responsibility of all Christians. It is not a program delegated to “professionals.” The congregation understands that evangelism is witnessing to the good news of the coming reign of God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “To evangelize is one way of bearing witness to what God has done in Christ and is doing through the Holy Spirit today to convey the good news. One shares the message in both word and deed.”⁴² The evangelical task and responsibility is to share the good news of Christ in ways that it is received it as good news indeed and they desire a relationship with Jesus Christ, freedom from sin, and new life in the reign of God.

⁴¹ for more on the importance of this see John Deschner, *Wesley’s Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), 73-77.

⁴² Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor: A Theology of Witness & Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 15.

Conclusion

The early Methodist societies lead by John and Charles Wesley were a missional movement. Their mission was “Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”⁴³ They sought to be a movement of the Holy Spirit within the Church of England that would be outposts of the coming reign of God in Britain and America. For all their efforts the Methodists were held in low esteem by the leadership of their Church. They were regarded as troublemakers and an embarrassment. The secular and church press called the Methodists derogatory names, prominent among them, “enthusiasts.” In contemporary vernacular we would call such people religious fanatics, “Bible thumpers,” or “religious fanatics.” Those early Methodists were called names and embarrassed the church authorities because they expected God to do something big with them and with the Church. They believed that God would do what he promised in Scripture. They believed that Jesus meant what he said and that the Holy Spirit would empower and equip Christians to “walk just as he walked.”⁴⁴ The Methodists did not set out to become a separate church or “sect”, as Wesley clearly states. Rather, they set out to be agents of transformation and revival for their world and the church. The transformation they proclaimed and practiced is holiness.

Holiness is rarely part of the conversation or life of The United Methodist Church. We certainly hear the terms “social holiness” and “personal holiness” tossed about. But they are hollow and far removed from the meaning of the Wesley brothers and their followers. For example, when a typical United Methodist speaks of “social holiness” he or she typically refers to how a local congregation or agency is addressing a social issue such as violence, war, hunger, or homelessness. While these were certainly of great concern to John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists, such application of the term “social holiness” would be foreign to them. They understood the term to describe the social character of Christian faith and life; “Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.”⁴⁵ For Wesley, social holiness meant that Christian faith is deeply personal but it is not private. Christians are responsible for one another and for loving their neighbors as themselves. One of the problems we face in contemporary Methodism is individualism and the all too common belief that faith is private, a matter between “me and Jesus.” This makes for a rather distorted form of holiness. It puts great constraints on the congregation’s ministry of spiritual formation. It is also the reason why most congregations are driven by programs designed to interest individuals in learning about God, faith, and spiritual disciplines. The problem, however, is that the programs only reach the people who are interested and they are short-term, having little lasting impact on the congregation’s mission and no influence on the local context. This is one way the church reflects the individualistic, consumer culture of North America. Social and personal holiness become little more than simple options in a menu of interests and programs congregations offer to attract and keep members.

If The United Methodist Church has a future, it must once again become a

⁴³ Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and Others,” in *Works*, 10:845.

⁴⁴ 1 John 2:6

⁴⁵ Wesley, Sermon 24, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Fourth,” § 1, in *Works*, 1:533.

movement that lives to “reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.” We need a new Wesleyan movement within The United Methodist Church. Such a movement is resident in our DNA. We have the infrastructure needed in *The Book of Discipline*.

Of course, you will find part of our mDNA⁴⁶ in Part III, Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task (¶¶102-141). The mDNA needed for a Wesleyan movement within The United Methodist Church are found in our definition and meaning of membership and ¶¶ 215-221. Paragraph 215 provides the definition of membership in the local church. It describes the two categories discussed above: baptized and professing. Baptized members are persons who “have received Christian baptism in the local congregation or elsewhere.” Professing members are persons “who have come into membership by profession of faith.” The paragraph continues, “A baptized or professing member of any local United Methodist church is a member of the global United Methodist connection and a member of the church universal.” Therefore, both baptized and professing members are “full” members of the church. The difference between the two categories is that Baptized members are persons who have not made a public profession of Christian faith, either because they are not able (as in the case of infants or persons with mental disability) or who have been prevented from or chosen to abstain from actively supporting the church’s ministries by their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Professing members are baptized persons who “make known their desire to live their daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. They covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep vows which are a part of the order of confirmation and reception into the Church.”⁴⁷

Because The United Methodist Church is an *ecclesia* it cannot, nor should, it require or demand the high level of discipline developed by John and Charles Wesley for the members of the early Methodist societies. We have become one of the so-called “Mainline” denominations of the Protestant wing of the Church. Therefore, we must, as our recent marketing slogan suggests, present ourselves to the world with “open hearts, open minds, and open doors.” As this slogan suggests, the church must be open to accept and receive all people as they are. This is, after all, what Jesus did. In Mark 6:30-44 Jesus “saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things (Mark 6:34). After teaching the crowd he fed them, with the help of his disciples. The Baptized members are like the crowd that came to see and hear Jesus that day in Galilee. They come to him for a multitude of reasons and he accepts and receives them as they are, asking nothing of them. Only after teaching them does Jesus invite them to follow him. The majority of church

⁴⁶ This is shorthand developed by Alan Hirsch in his book *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. He writes in the book’s glossary: “I have appended the *m* to the letters DNA purely to differentiate it from the biological version—it simply means *missional*DNA. What DNA does for biological systems, mDNA does for ecclesial ones. … [W]ith this concept/metaphor I hope to explain why the presence of a simple, intrinsic, reproducible, central guiding mechanism is necessary for the reproduction and sustainability of genuine missional movements. As an organism holds together, and each cell understands its function in relation to its DNA, so the church in given contexts finds its reference point in its built-in mDNA (page 282).” My point here is that an essential element of United Methodist mDNA is our doctrine and discipline contained in Part 2 of *The Book of Discipline*. Other pieces are the Standard Sermons, Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament, and the inter-related system of small groups that developed in the early Methodist societies.

⁴⁷ See *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004*, ¶ 217, pages 136-137.

members will be with the crowd who comes to see and hear Jesus, but are not ready or willing to be his disciples; to follow him and live his way of life in the world.

The church has a responsibility to provide “the nurture that makes possible a comprehensive and life-long process of growing in grace;” toward becoming and living in the world as a Professing member and disciple of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ I argue above that congregations must develop a system of intentional Christian formation that will provide the instruction, support, and accountability needed to help professing members keep the promises made in the Baptismal Covenant and to grow in holiness of heart and life as disciples of Jesus Christ, and participating in his mission for the world. If there is to be a Wesleyan revival within the church, it will arise among the professing members. They are the people who will lead the church in reclaiming its Wesleyan mDNA.

The professing members of the church are supposed to be accountable for living out their baptismal covenant and participate in the church’s mission in the world. The local congregation may establish minimum standards for professing members, e.g. participation in a small group for support and accountability for practicing the means of grace, regular attendance in weekly worship and the Lord’s Supper, giving in proportion to income (the tithe being a standard goal), participation in service with poor and marginalized people beyond the congregation. Annual evaluation of living out these standards could be done at the end of the year within the small groups. Professing members may then reaffirm their covenant at an annual Covenant Renewal service held on the first Sunday of the year or on Baptism of the Lord Sunday during which all members are invited to reaffirm the baptismal covenant. Persons who are not able or are unwilling to meet the minimum standards of professing membership will voluntarily remove their names from the professing roll. They will remain baptized members of the church with the understanding that professing membership is always available to them when they are ready. The congregation and its pastoral leaders have a responsibility to nurture such members toward professing membership through Bible study, worship, and pastoral care.

When The United Methodist Church begins to take seriously the meaning of membership through an intentional system of Christian initiation, formation, support and accountability it will begin to rediscover its Wesleyan mDNA. For this to happen it must encourage and support a Wesleyan movement within the church among the professing members by developing a system of mutual support and accountability for following Jesus in the world. What I am proposing will require a significant shift in the culture of the church. Such a shift will, of course, take time and require committed, passionate, and gifted pastoral leadership at all levels of the denomination. I am convinced that Christ is calling us to reclaim our Wesleyan mDNA and to move toward becoming a missional, Christ-centered movement of the Holy Spirit.

In this paper I argue that Christians who engage in dialog with practitioners of other faith traditions must also be practitioners of their own tradition. They must know who, and whose, they are. I will be so bold as to say that Christians in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition should be able to answer the following questions from Wesley’s historic examination:

- Have you faith in Christ?

⁴⁸ Ibid., see ¶ 216, page 135-136.

- Are you going onto perfection?
- Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
- Are you earnestly striving after it?
- Do you know that General Rules of our church?
- Will you keep them?⁴⁹

Anyone who can answer affirmatively to these questions can be assumed to be a practicing Christian who may be equipped to participate in open and honest dialog and relationship with people of other faith traditions. As practitioners of holiness of heart and life they are equipped to present the gospel to their non-Christian friends, neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances. They will also likely be good conversation partners and open to work for the common good alongside their non-Christian neighbors.

An obstacle to developing a culture in which holiness thrives is the dominant paradigm that confuses study and programming with discipleship. Experience tells me that it is much easier to get United Methodists to study and discuss Christian theology and practice than it is to get them to actually practice what they learn. Discipleship is often presented as an option in a menu of church programs. It is seldom incorporated into the congregation's missional infrastructure.

A gather of active clergy from across my home annual conference in the Spring of 2012 illustrates my point. The purpose of the event was to hear from the bishop, director of connectional ministries, and one another ideas and strategies for navigating an uncertain future for The United Methodist Church. The conference director of connectional ministries gave a twenty minute presentation focused on the importance of the denominational mission statement:

“To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁵⁰

She then instructed everyone to discuss with the people seated at their table the definition of “disciples of Jesus Christ.” The goal of the thirty minute exercise was to get the clergy discussing with one another how they defined the word “disciple.” Each table was to write their definition on a piece of newsprint. After the allotted time had passed each table was invited to post their newsprint on the wall. We were then instructed to walk around the room to see the various definitions for “disciple.” The first thing that became disconcertingly clear to me was that there was no clear consensus in the room. In fact, there was genuine struggle for many of my clergy colleagues to craft a succinct, coherent definition of who a disciple is. Not a single piece of newsprint posted on the walls of that room contained Wesley’s definition given in “The Character of a Methodist”

A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;" one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength."⁵¹

⁴⁹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church-2012*, ¶336, 262.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ¶ 120, 91.

⁵¹ Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” ¶ 5, in *Works*, 9:35

And while he thus always exercises his love to God, by praying without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks, this commandment is written in his heart, "That he who loveth God, love his brother also." And he accordingly loves his neighbour as himself; he loves every man as his own soul. His heart is full of love to all mankind, to every child of "the Father of the spirits of all flesh."⁵²

I left the event at the end of the day wondering how the congregations of this annual conference can participate in the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world when their clergy leaders cannot agree on who a disciple is. While all of the pastors in that room had taken the required Methodist history and doctrine courses in seminary or the course of study, none could give John Wesley's very clear definition of who a Christian is.

One of the reasons for this reality is the many clergy have limited understanding of the nature of discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition. They have been taught in seminary about John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodist societies. They have studied, discussed, and written papers about Wesley's theology. And they have read the history of Methodism. But by no means all have ever actually put into practice Wesley's method of Christian formation. Few have participated in a class or band meeting. Fewer still have entertained the idea of introducing Wesley's method of catechesis and Christian practice into the life of a local congregation.

I suspect one reason for this unfortunate reality is that John Wesley and the early Methodist movement he and his brother led are required subjects of study. Seminary students read Wesley's sermons and books about his life and theology and Methodist history. They write papers on Wesley soteriology, Christology, ecclesiology, and anthropology. All this is well and good. Persons offering themselves for ordination in The United Methodist Church should be required to learn about the man who led the movement that became the church they hope to serve. Unfortunately, with very few exceptions, does the study of Wesley ever lead to practicing what he did.

United Methodist related seminaries are very good at teaching the "what" of Wesley and Methodism. The important missing piece is the "how." Pastors learn about Wesley but they are not taught the organization and practices that made him a great leader in discipleship. We need a renewed emphasis on teaching and the practice of the method of Methodism that is integral to the courses in the curriculum.⁵³

The class and band meetings were essential to the method of Methodism. The interrelated system of small groups formed people into disciples of Jesus Christ. Discipleship was shaped by a simple rule of life (the General Rules) and weekly accountability and support in the small

⁵² Ibid., ¶ 9, 37.

⁵³ Most United Methodist related schools of theology offer students various extracurricular opportunities to meet in small spiritual formation groups. These groups are certainly beneficial to the students personal spiritual development and learning. Only Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. requires student to enroll in student-led covenant discipleship groups during the first year of study. Students receive academic credit for their participation. However, even at Wesley, the practice of Wesleyan discipleship are not integral the pedagogy of the curriculum. We are not properly teaching Wesley unless the practices that were integral to the Methodist societies are incorporated into the pedagogy.

groups guided by a mature, seasoned leader in discipleship (class leader). Efforts to re-tradition this simple and effective system are routinely neglected by contemporary church leaders. For example, since 1986 the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church has provided resources and staff support for Covenant Discipleship groups and Class Leaders. The goal of this ministry is to help congregations re-tradition the class meeting and the office of class leader. Yet, these resources are routinely ignored by United Methodist schools of theology in their pedagogy and by episcopal leaders in their evaluation of their clergy.

If the mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, then why are proven and effective ministries, such as Covenant Discipleship, routinely ignored in favor of short-term studies about John Wesley, the Bible, and other topics. Have we confused the study of discipleship with discipleship itself? Have we confused studying about Wesley with being Wesleyan?

Holiness of heart and life are essential to Christian participation in genuine inter-faith dialog and relationship. The Wesleyan Methodist tradition offers a simple, Christ-centered way of helping people to know Christ and grow in love of God and neighbor. Why then do our schools of theology and episcopal leaders do a fine job of teaching about Wesley yet hesitate to train leaders in the basic practice of what Wesley did?