

THIRTEENTH OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES
PEMBROKE COLLEGE, OXFORD, ENGLAND
AUGUST 12–19, 2018

A Practical Theology of Church Publishing

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Abstract

Publishing is part of our Methodist heritage, going back to our founder, John Wesley. Our tradition heartily embraced publishing and our United Methodist *Discipline* enshrines it as a ministry of the church. As a result, church publishing in the Wesleyan tradition continues to grow out of our reflections about God and particular understandings of theological anthropology; therefore, it makes sense to consider a practical theology of publishing, especially given its central role in helping believers know God and live so that they yield the fruit of the Spirit, thereby connecting knowledge, vital piety, and Christian practice.

For Wesleyans, publishing helps serve the community of faith in terms of its intellectual commitments and priorities (head), passionate values (heart), and faithful practice (hands), because we understand that God, through grace, creates and redeems whole people. A theology of publishing is practical in terms of its boundaries and limits: how it speaks to work done by lay and clergy together; how it employs a hermeneutic of suspicion; and, because it is context-specific, how it reflects the messiness of our lived experience. Understanding publishing in theological terms helps us see it as ministry, which can help fulfill the *missio Dei* and encourage the church to understand that publishing professionals are leaders who practice servant leadership and seek to do justice in their relationships and business practices. To revive and

reform our church, we must have a clear practical theology of publishing as a ministry that can revitalize our commitment to the intellectual life of the church, so that, through publishing, Methodists can better broadcast the reconciling, redeeming, sustaining, healing, and saving love of God and more insistently proclaim that, by meeting God face-to-face by serving others, people can become more informed, thoughtful, and prophetic disciples of Jesus Christ.

Publishing: A Wesleyan Tradition

Publishing, editing, and writing have a long tradition in our Wesleyan heritage. We are all aware that John Wesley recorded his sermons, but he also wrote articles, pamphlets, hymns, and books, even as he freely “borrowed” from other authors. Wesley published religious works that he handpicked then edited, abridged, and otherwise fashioned to conform to his purposes. In 1750 Wesley published a collection of works, the title of which illustrates his intent: *A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which Have Been Publish'd in the English Tongue*.¹ While today editors would discourage such a lengthy title, given the limitations of metadata and readers’ patience, the title is at least descriptive, showing that Wesley was acutely focused on his audience, demonstrating a marketing savvy to which publishers still aspire.

Wesley was also the dominate editorial voice of *Arminian Magazine*,² first published January 1, 1778. Through the magazine, Wesley was able to freely express his thoughts and opinions. As David Hempton says:

¹ Brian Shetler, “Prophet and Profit: John Wesley, Publishing, and the *Arminian Magazine*,” *Methodist History* 53, no. 2 (January 2015), 85–100.

² Shetler, 85.

Indeed, one of the most striking features of Methodism is the extent to which Wesley tried to secure control over the discourse of the movement by remorselessly selecting, editing, publishing, and disseminating print. . . . Moreover, Wesley refused to allow his preachers to publish works independent of his control. He literally tried to supervise the entire spiritual literacy of his connection by establishing a sort of Wesleyan canon beyond which his followers were encouraged not to go.³

Whether using his prophetic or pastoral voice, publishing was part and parcel of Wesley's own approach to ministry and a part of his practical divinity. His and our purpose, still today, is to first beckon then inform and educate all those who walk the road to perfection.

In the United States, the Methodist Book Concern was founded in 1789 as the country's first religious publishing house. Later the Evangelical Association and United Brethren established publishing houses. Both houses published hymnals, *Disciplines*, newspapers, tracts, and magazines. Profits were typically designated to support retired and "worn out" preachers and their families.⁴

For Methodists the "book agents" were vital links in the connection. As Russell Richey reminds us, Methodists sought to make the connectional system work. To do this they talked about themselves and their ministry using the Book Concern, which was the first connectional, or what today might be called a general, agency.⁵ It can be said that through publishing,

³ Shetler, 85, quoting David Hampton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005), 58–59.

⁴ *The Book of Disciplines of The United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 15.

⁵ Russell E. Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009), 7.

Methodists worked out not only their identity but also their theology in public ways. Then, in the 1820s, Nathan Bangs assumed the role of book agent and gave American Methodism's its national voice. "Bangs transformed what had been essentially a distributing operation for British reprints and official denominational publications . . . into a full-fledged publishing house capable of its own printing and binding."⁶

For Methodism's founder and subsequent followers, it has never been enough to know *about* God, to possess facts about God—albeit book or "head" knowledge is important; the goal is to be in a relationship with God, "empowered by God's grace," which "works powerfully but not irresistibly, in matters of human life and salvation; thereby empowering our *responsibility*."⁷ Here publishing has a central role in helping believers seek to know God and live a life that yields the fruit of the Spirit, which means that Methodists seek knowledge but a particular type of knowledge that reflects both vital piety and Christian practice.

Formulation of the union of knowledge and vital piety was famously made by Charles Wesley in his hymn written for the opening of the Kingswood School. The hymn, entitled "A Prayer for Children,"⁸ was written to convey the school's education philosophy/theology. The

⁶ Russell E. Richey, *Extension Ministers: Mr. Wesley's True Heirs* (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2008), 50–51.

⁷ Randy Maddox, *Responsibility Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 55.

⁸ Charles Wesley, "A Prayer for Children," in *Hymns for Children*, #473, 1763.

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/hymn/jwg04/jwg0473.html>. See also:

<http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives/csbt/research-resources>.

Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
To whom we for our children cry;
The good desired and wanted most
Out of thy richest grace supply;
The sacred discipline be given,
To train and bring them up for heaven.

school was tasked with molding students into Christians, who could think and reason critically and have a firm grasp of essential facts and figures (presumably) while at the same time actively engage in disciplined practices (from the heart) that testify to their faith in God. In this hymn, Charles Wesley makes a theological statement and draws parallels between knowledge and vital piety, learning and holiness, and truth and love, presumably poetically equating knowledge, learning, truth and vital piety, holiness, and love—altogether yielding and valuing a whole life pleasing to God.

Answer on them the end of all
Our cares, and pains, and studies here;
On them, recovered from their fall,
Stamped with the humble character,
Raised by the nurture of the Lord,
To all their paradise restored.

Error and ignorance remove,
Their blindness both of heart and mind;
Give them the wisdom from above,
Spotless, and peaceable, and kind;
In knowledge pure their minds renew,
And store with thoughts divinely true.

Learning's redundant part and vain
Be all cut off, and cast aside,
But let them, Lord, the substance gain,
In every solid truth abide;
Swiftly acquire, and ne'er forego,
The knowledge fit for man to know.
Unite the pair so long disjoined,
Knowledge and vital piety:
Learning and holiness combined,
And truth and love, let all men see
In those whom up to thee we give,
Thine, wholly thine, to die and live.

Father, accept them through thy Son,
And ever by thy Spirit guide!
Thy wisdom in their lives be shown,
Thy name confessed and glorified;
Thy power and love diffused abroad,
Till all the earth is filled with God.

Wesleyans still interpret the union of knowledge and vital piety as joining the intellect with passionate, faithful practice when we speak of Methodism as a head and heart religion. For Methodists, being a Christian publisher is more than producing materials that get our beliefs right, although knowing what we believe and why we believe are essential. For Methodists, Christian publishing also means doing business in ways that glorify God and witness to God's power and grace. For Wesleyans, publishing is intended to be a midwife to the intellectual development of the mind through education and disciplined practices, which are marks of healthy and truly happy individuals.⁹

There can be no doubt that Methodists subscribe to the importance of learning and teaching through publishing books and other resources, and this stems from a specifically Wesleyan understanding of who God is and what a relationship with God looks like. Our practical theology “naturally” and easily gives rise to publishing ministries as part of our corporate witness in the world, while fulfilling the mandate to “spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land.” For Wesleyans books can serve to unite the intellect with passionate, faithful practice; because loving God—being in relationship with God—means we are “doers of the Word and not hearers only” (James 1:22, KJV). As God, through grace, creates and redeems whole people, so we love God with our complete selves (heart, soul, mind, and strength—Luke 10:27), including through our business and ministry relationships and practice.

Practical Theology and Method

⁹ See: John Wesley Sermon 95, “On the Education of Children,” accessed June 22, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-95-on-the-education-of-children/>.

The first section of this paper shows how our Methodist tradition used publishing as a ministry of the church and how our publishing continues to grow out of particular understandings of God and theological anthropology. But what paper about theology can do without a discussion about method? The following section briefly describes a method useful for the practical theology of a publishing ministry and why it is important.

Some Observations

Practical theology is gaining in popularity. Many theologians are jumping on the practical theology bandwagon in part because systemic theology is no longer in vogue. Even so, practical theology is often viewed as less rigorous (read less important) and, in many circles within the academy, marginal discipline—a condescending attitude but real nonetheless. A friend of mine who teaches practical theology at a major university told me that it slightly annoys her when her other theologian friends insist they are *also* practical theologians, especially considering their comments during faculty senate meetings when they vote to obstruct her students' dissertation proposals.

Second, while there seems to be a consensus that there is such a thing as practical theology, there is considerably less consensus about what it is.

Practical Theology Defined

For the sake of this paper, let me define practical theology this way: practical theology is a theology of ministry practices, which includes publishing. This definition is helpful, because

1. it is what most people think practical theology is anyway;
2. this designation presents itself clearly as a viable umbrella for all the so-called practical

disciplines.

3. the term "ministry practices" describes the work, including publishing, of both lay and clergy;
4. it often uses a hermeneutic of suspicion; and
5. in a postmodern world, practical theology underscores how ministries such as publishing reflect the messiness—the particularities—of life, which are socially located and must continually adapt in order to be relevant.

How does this definition of practical theology relate to publishing? First publishing is practical. It produces products that are, hopefully, sold in the marketplace. No publisher can publish everything, so its program needs to have defined limits and boundaries. GBHEM Publishing, for example, publishes only Methodist/Wesleyan authors.

Second, the work of church publishing is typically made up of both lay and clergy. It is not exclusively the domain of either, but in it both can share equally.

Third, publishing uses a hermeneutic of suspicion, which speaks to its context. Simply put, publications have to prove themselves and are suspect until they do. After all, publishing assumes that books/resources are produced for a market; and many publishing houses, even church-related publishing enterprises, are tasked with selling as many products as possible. One publisher I know was bound and determined not to publish a book project. The publisher knew the book wouldn't sell, but he was obliged to publish it anyway for reasons related to church politics. Wanting to be a good steward, he decided that he would spend as little money on it as he could. He thought that was only fair; because in his experience, no book like it had ever

succeeded—the business plan could not stand up to the analysis of comparable products. Needless to say, his sales expectations were low, and as a result the book was simply listed in the catalog—no fanfare heralded its publication. But that book sold and sold. It did not sell like the first Harry Potter book, which was initially rejected by multiple publishers, but it was an enormous success for that publisher; and the book spawned a series of other books, which made the publisher look very smart for publishing it in the first place.

This is the kind of story we love to hear and publishers love to tell. The point is, in the publishing world, you never really know what will sell and what won't. Some publishers equate marketing books to throwing spaghetti against the wall—publish enough and something is sure to stick. Other publishing executives insist that their acquisitions editors bring in only “big” books—typically written by big-name authors, as though predicting what will and won't sell is a science. Neither view is valid, because in the end, we are dealing with the whims and felt needs of people who spend their own money to buy books. With unpredictable market forces, publishers try to be careful, disciplined stewards of their staff, time, and finances; because there is nothing so sobering than to nervously watch underperforming sales numbers for a book you thought would succeed but did not.

Fourth, publishing is context specific and unpredictable, as market conditions continually change. We live in a commercial world dominated by giants like Amazon, a world where physical book shelves have been downsized or have already disappeared. Publishers make monumental efforts to help potential readers discover their books. With millions of books published every year, especially with the advent of self-publishing, it is harder for people to sift through the

sediment and reach bedrock. And, of course, ebooks present their own production and marketing challenges; although up to this point, they have not been as big a threat to the printed book as once feared. No doubt, as with all ministries, publishers need to be shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves (Matt 10:16, NIV).

So What?

What difference does it make that we think about a practical theology of publishing, let alone a practical theological method? First, having a practical theology of publishing helps us see publishing as a ministry of the church. The publishing of which I am a part is a ministry of a general agency of the church; I am the publisher for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM). Given this context, it just makes sense to have a systematic understanding of a publishing ministry within a broader theological context, so that our practices are in line with who we say we are as United Methodists.

An objective of GBHEM is to embody the historic mission of The United Methodist Church in higher education and to serve and lead as we advocate for the intellectual life of the church. Central to this is what might be called a “rigorously intellectual evangelical spirit.” John Wesley expected that the innate desire of the heart for repentance, once fulfilled through the saving mercy of Christ, would lead to a deeply informed and committed discipleship, with readings and instruction in the Bible and spiritual texts. It is well known that Wesley expected much of his preachers. In addition to the hardships of itinerant preaching, he expected them to read and study, dictating for them the intellectual course in which they would engage. This was done so that the preachers, as well as the laity, might understand the depths of Christian faith rooted

both in the heart and in the mind. GBHEM is tasked with tending and growing this intellectual tradition.

GBHEM's publishing ministry seeks to accomplish this important work in the present context by producing academic resources. These are especially designed for the constituencies of the agency, which include seminary and Course of Study students, scholars, and church leaders. GBHEM publishing provides GBHEM resources, Welsey's Foundery Books (academic books that are clearly and accessibly written by Methodist experts with an emphasis on church and ministry, while representing the rich diversity of the church), and New Room Books (reviewed academic monographs that deepen and broaden the scope of scholarship for its own sake in its diversity and contextual complexity).

Our program grows out of a conviction that books and the authors behind them serve God and can help us love God with our minds,¹⁰ and the church would be foolish not to pay attention to its best and brightest. Consequently, the GBHEM Publishing ministry is intentionally designed to produce books that engage, nurture, and advocate for the intellectual life of The United Methodist Church. We publish books that represent scholarship in service to the church, scholarship designed to deepen and broaden the scope of intellectual inquiry for its own sake.

Second, a practical theology of publishing helps us see religious publishing professionals as Christian leaders; how they conduct business is just as important as the products they acquire, contract, produce, and sell. This means that, like other church professionals, publishing professionals must be cognizant of how they treat the people they work for and with, and their

¹⁰ For this way of seeing, I'm indebted to Dr. Kim Cape.

business practices should also bear witness to the Christian faith. Publishing is all about relationships, and the kind of relationships publishers have must be consonant with our theological anthropology.

Changing the Culture of Leadership¹¹

It is no surprise to anyone that leadership in ministry is a perennial issue, and that there are different styles, trends, methods, and facts regarding leadership. The current thinking appears to indicate that the church is having a leadership crisis. Maybe so, but my field of research (pastoral care) suggests, that the church is always in a leadership crisis. It is also true that different times and cultural contexts call for different leadership strategies, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a practical theology of Christian leadership. And yet, we need leaders who are effective, who do not park their Christianity at the door when they enter their workplace, whether for profit or nonprofit organizations. Given our current cultural climate, we need to change the *culture* of leadership. The following outline indicates what this leadership culture might look like using publishing as a case in point.

Servant Leadership

The phrase *servant leader* has been around for over twenty-five years. In religious circles, we tend to believe servant leadership is the way leaders should always lead. Books on servant leadership exploded on the scene in the late nineties, for example *Jesus on Leadership: Timeless Wisdom on Servant Leadership* by Gene Wilke and Calvin Miller, and *Upside Down: The Paradox*

¹¹ What I'm about to say only may be applicable to my "church context," i.e., a nonprofit environment. However, having also worked in for-profit contexts, I do not think so.

of *Servant Leadership* by Stacy Rinehart. In 2003 best-selling author of *The One-Minute Manager*, Ken Blanchard, cowrote (with Phil Hodges) *The Servant Leader*. Blanchard was not the first person to target secular leaders but he was one of the most successful. More recently in 2017, Art Barter published *The Servant Leadership Journal: An 18-Week Journey to Transform You and Your Organization*. Then in March 2018, Ken Blanchard and Renee Broadwell published *Servant Leadership in Action: How You Can Achieve Great Relationships and Results*. Interestingly the book's contributors include familiar names such as Stephen Covey, Patrick Lencioni, John Maxwell, Dave Ramsey, and Laurie Beth Jones. Clearly there is no shortage of books on the subject, but why do we talk so much about leadership with so few demonstrable results? Surely it is not because we do not have enough information.

Christena Cleveland wrote an article in *Christianity Today* in 2015 entitled “The Hole in Our Servant Leadership.” She concludes by saying:

It's relatively easy to hold on to one's power while being a servant leader, but Jesus showed what power put to godly ends looks like: death. In Jesus' life, leadership and death were inextricably linked. What would it look like for Christians to truly be servant leaders? To start, it would involve looking at our society's inequitable structures and acknowledging the ways we who hold power benefit from and even maintain these structures. For many of us, this journey would be the beginning of a small death.¹²

For religious publishing and especially the publishing performed by the General Boards and Agencies, this means that we must be not only be aware of power dynamics but that intervening

¹² Christena Cleveland, “The Hole in Our Servant Leadership,” *Christianity Today*, October 2015, accessed June 22, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/november/hole-in-our-servant-leadership.html?start=1>.

in the power structures or giving access and voice to those without power and privilege will be costly—costly on a personal level and costly in terms of finances. For GBHEM Publishing, servant leadership means participating in the E-reader program and investigating the possibility of an Open Access library to increase availability to scholarly books and papers. But beyond this, it also means publishing those voices who would remain otherwise unheard, for example, scholars who live outside the United States and young Methodist/Wesleyan scholars who, for lack of a sufficient author platform or reputation to command an audience, would not be published elsewhere. But this *does not mean* that their scholarship is questionable; only that, given low sales expectations, other publishers would decline their projects.

GBHEM Publishing respects the power dynamics involved in academic freedom. Scholarship by its nature is experimental. Ideas need to be played out and discussed by the community. This means that we publish points of view other than our own. If we want scholarship to take us to new places, we need to be patient and expect people to have some iconoclastic albeit well-reasoned and well-research, ideas.

Attention to power dynamics goes beyond authors; it also applies to staff, including freelancers, without whom our enterprise would not be possible. In publishing, like anywhere else, there is an assumed pecking order, but GBHEM Publishing strives to collaborate and treat all as valued members of a team that is dedicated to making the best books possible. Acknowledging that people have valuable contributions to make speaks to servant leadership but also to a theological anthropology that views all people as reflections of God's image. While all

sin and fall short of the glory of God, GBHEM Publishing seeks to practice the faith that our authors write about and our agencies hold dear.

Justice Seeking

I am a deacon, and as a United Methodist deacon, I am ordained to Word, service, compassion, and justice. Consequently, I do not need to elaborate why I see the necessity of practicing justice and including it as part of a practical theology of publishing.

Years ago I ran into Ron (not his real name) getting on the elevator. Ron had recently been “let go” by our employer due to recent budget cuts, so I was surprised to see him. “Ron, you’re back!” I said. “Did they rehire you?” Ron shook his head, “No, I’m just back here doing a temp job, but I’m grateful for the hours.” He went on, “You see, that way they don’t have to pay me as much, and they don’t pay benefits.” “That sounds unfair.” “Don’t worry. I get it. Times are tough. But this is how I see it: we’re all in this together. I think instead of letting people go, they should employ as many as possible. Oh, I get it about maximizing profits, but seems to me that they’re just squeezing people as hard as they can. They let me go and they didn’t have to, but there’s the same amount of work. Sam will be working overtime a lot now. He won’t last long.” Ron went on to say: “Sound Christian to you?” Then mercifully, the elevator stopped on my floor and I got off. Over the years, I’ve thought a lot about that brief conversation, usually in connection with: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36, KJV).

As a Christian leader and as an ordained person, I take issues of justice seriously, especially when it comes to paying a fair wage and dealing with money. And here, I must say the church’s reputation could stand some improvement. My dad and grandfather owned a hardware

store. They gave a generous discount, so our church bought paint, grass seed, and other necessities from us. At the end of the month when my grandfather sent out the invoices, the church would invariably send their payment late. This was a solidly middle-class church. They had money. And it wasn't as though our family had money to burn; there were plenty of times we went without. But my dad would just shake his head and say, "It's interesting to me that the women's prison—our best customer—always pays on time and the church never does. What does that say?" What does it say?

We all have stories about the church and how it handles money. But to be faithful and practice justice, we cannot neglect how we deal with money and how we deal with paying people. That is why, as often as I responsibly can, I pay people as much as possible. While no one really gets paid what they're worth, I also don't have to pay them less than I can.

At another place where I worked, there were periodic layoffs. While demoralizing, one layoff was particularly difficult. Employees were let go just before Christmas, and then the company turned right around and announced bonuses and pay increases for the remaining staff for the next year. Frankly, I would have given up both of those if that would have kept at least some, if not all, of those people employed. And I wasn't the only one who thought this way, but it did not matter. We were told the decision had been made. Period. This raises questions such as, How much money is enough? What would you do in the situation? Would you give up something so that others could keep their jobs? As a servant leader, what are your responsibilities to your employees? Where do your primary loyalties lay? What can you do to make lives better, more meaningful? How does justice look in this situation?

I recently heard a CEO at a major corporation say that before the Great Recession of 2007–2008, he earned about twenty-five times more than the janitor. Now, he earns one hundred times more. He does not think this is right, so he did something about it. What do you think? Is this a case of exploitation? How much should leaders make as compared to the lowest-paid employee in an organization? What is just?

Talk about money and salaries in the church may be seen as controversial. And over the years I have observed that many who end up in ministry are ambivalent about money. The money we have at the General Agencies comes from the church—this is true. But the church has also ordained me and has charged me as a deacon with a ministry of justice, even if that ministry stance proves inconvenient for the church. This charge I carry into my role as publisher. Paying people what they are worth and paying them on time, treating them with respect, is part of the mission and ministry. Within the Publishing Office of GBHEM, this has yielded untold benefits, one being that contracted employees know when I say we can only pay a certain amount for a service, I am telling the truth. This helps create and cement a two-way bond of trust and loyalty. But this is not the only reason. It is also an act of *philia*. This is done out of theological and ethical conviction. It is practicing the faith as well as changing the culture of leadership.

Conclusion

In practicing one's faith, one's relationship with God grows increasingly in depth and scope and results in individual and corporate participation in the reign of God. As we leaders grow in stature and wisdom, we imbibe sanctifying grace and extend that possibility to others.

Reflecting on a practical theology of church publishing offers the community of faith

another way to be in ministry and relationship to God and the world. Through publishing, we can love God with our mind and better understand God's full participation in the particularities of experience. Through church publishing we broadcast that God continually offers possibilities of reconciliation, redemption, and salvation. And by meeting God face-to-face in the lives of others, people can become disciples of Jesus Christ who will transform, not just the realm of leadership, but the world.