

Education in the Wesleyan and Methodist Tradition:
How does Wesleyan theological education impact the clergy leadership of the United Methodist
Church in a global context?

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"The gospel of Christ knows no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness." John Wesley.

The United Methodist Church (UMC) has a long history of exploring the dynamics of reason and experience in Christian faith, which has laid a foundation for social consciousness. Walter Muelder, Harold DeWolf, Paul Schilling, John Cobb, Margery Suchocki, and Catherine Keller are liberal theologians who taught at United Methodist theological schools such as Boston, Claremont, Candler, Wesley and Drew. It is through these United Methodist theological schools but particularly Boston that Personalism scholars have been influenced by Wesleyan activism in the construction of their liberal theology. Majority of United Methodist clergy have been educated under these liberal theologians and learned to give equal weight to scripture, tradition, reason and experience in their theological reflections and ministry. As a scholar-practitioner, within a religious context working in the field of higher education, I would like to argue that when theology becomes praxis-centered and when one's own *Han* (a deep experience of suffering and oppression) becomes the embodiment of creativity, relativity, and relationality in the world, this is when Wesleyan theology could become revolutionary and facilitates transformation of a historical reality.

One of the traits of liberalism is to tackle the most current issues of the day in their theological analysis. In the midst of an intensifying political climate elevated by ethnocentric nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and misogyny aggravated by the 2016 US Presidential election, there is an urgent cry for theologians to nurture, coach and advise professional church leaders to advocate for social transformation, disrupt marginality and afflict the comfortable, and embrace

interpersonal relationships. It makes me wonder about, for example, racial-ethnic,¹ such as African American male pastors practice their theology in their ministry within the majority white congregation when one in three African American males can expect to go to jail in their lifetime.² 26% (2015) to 20% (first half of 2018) of African Americans have been killed by the police when African Americans comprise 13% of the population in the U.S.³

According to Vocabulary.com, “a revolutionary person fearlessly advocates radical change. Revolutionary people and ideas challenge the status quo. It is all about turning things around.”⁴ Based on this definition, a revolutionary leader disturbs the status quo and takes the risk of speaking out for justice. I argue that the historical conditioning of a person, intertwined with religion and culture is an integral part of liberal theology becoming revolutionary.

Main Question & Methodology

The main question of this paper is, “How does Wesleyan theological education impact the clergy leadership of the United Methodist Church in a global context?” Here I define Wesleyan theological education as a theological education based on liberal theology that becomes revolutionary when it is practiced by a clergy who transforms his/her *Han* into a creative and relational ministry. This study will analyze the leadership style of Racial Ethnic Cross Racial-Cross Cultural (RE CR-CC) lead pastors to answer the main question. RE CRC-CC lead pastors are those who are serving large Caucasian majority United Methodist churches.

¹ *Racial-ethnic* is a general term to describe people who are Asian, black or African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Pacific Islanders, and white. However, the term is often used to abbreviate ‘racial and ethnic minority,’ in which case it generally describes all these groups except white people. (The General Commission on Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church, Glossary of Terms, <http://gcorr.org/resources/glossary-terms-new-conversations> , accessed September, 2014.

² The Huffington Post, October, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/04/racial-disparities-criminal-justice_n_4045144.html.

³ The Society Pages. March 1, 2018. <https://thesocietypages.org/toolbox/police-killing-of-blacks/>

⁴ Vocabulary.com. <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/revolutionary>

A “practice-theory-practice” is the critically interpreted model used in a sociological analysis of RE CR-CC lead pastors’ leadership styles. In 2011, there were only 20 racial-ethnic pastors (19 of them are African American men) out of 1,070 lead pastors who were serving large white-majority congregations and this number has not changed.⁵

In 2008, Susan Willhauck and I conducted a survey on the leadership style of pastors⁶ who were serving churches with a membership of 1,000 or more in the United Methodist Church. Our study found there were very few racial-ethnic clergy in this category.⁷ Furthermore, in collaboration with sociologist Mark McCormack in 2014, I sought to measure leadership patterns among RE CR-CC lead pastors.⁸ The survey was an adaptation of an earlier survey disseminated in 2008, with the addition of several items related to racial-ethnic and cultural issues, as well as challenges faced during their appointments.

Importance of the Study

This study identifies the *revolutionary practice of Wesleyan theology, which is liberal*, of the racial-ethnic, mostly African American male clergy who interpersonally encounter white parishioners cross-racially and cross-culturally. These pastors are bridge builders, wounded healers, and breakers of old stereotypes. I characterize them as religious radicals who preach with “tragic consciousness,”⁹ facilitating the creative transformation of their *Han* into a

⁵ That is, there were 984 male clergy (89.2 percent) and 116 female clergy (10.8 percent), according to the UMC data, in 2013.

⁶ The term “lead pastor” was defined by the denomination data center as clergy who are serving churches with 1,000 or more members within the United Methodist Church.

⁷ Only one Asian-American and two African-American lead pastors responded among a sample of 200 lead pastors. Thirty percent (61) of female pastors and 70 percent (139) of male pastors responded to the survey among the 394 sample of lead pastors (94 female pastors and 300 randomly selected male pastors). There were 1,154 lead pastors in this category, according to the denominational data center in 2005.

⁸ We had to expand the sample to make a survey relevant to comparison since we identified only 20 RE CR-CC lead pastors. We identified 75 racial-ethnic pastors serving in churches with a membership of 500 or more, based on the denominational data service.⁸ An online survey was distributed by email to RE CR-CC lead pastors, and we received a 51 percent response rate.

⁹ Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1990).

constructive energy capable of creating a new revolutionary reality.

Responding to an increasing need for the diversification of our ministries in the U.S.¹⁰ one of UMC's strategies is to develop clergy leadership that can minister to all people through the cross-racial and cross-cultural (CR-CC) appointment system. The CR-CC appointment is a unique ministry of the UMC that represents our theological and denominational commitment to being an inclusive church by strategically deploying clergy who are equipped to serve such a ministry setting:

“Cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments are made as a creative response to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the church and in its leadership. Cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments are appointments of clergypersons to congregations in which the majority of their constituencies are different from the clergyperson’s own racial/ethnic and cultural background. (¶425.4, *BOD*, 2012)¹¹”

Cross racial-cross cultural appointments are a radical expression of the Wesleyan tradition. It represents a deep-rooted factor of the UMC based on Dan McKanan’s arguments about radicalism; he affirms that “radicalism has always had transatlantic and global dimensions.”¹²

Cross racial-Cross Cultural appointments are a prototype of being a worldwide church. Serving a Cross-Racial and Cross-Cultural appointment is a non-violent resistance against systemic racism within the institution of the church. It is an ecclesial movement to affirm and advocate contributions of racial-ethnic clergy leadership in the Church.

“*Practical Christian Thinker*” and “*Reflective Practitioner*.” John Cobb

¹⁰ According to the 2010 census, Non-Hispanic White Americans are 63.7 percent of the U.S. population.¹⁰ The membership of the United Methodist Church is 14.2 million as of 2012 (7.4 million in the U.S. and 6.8 million in outside of the U.S.). However, the membership in the U.S. shows that the UMC is a majority white denomination: 90 percent in 2013.

¹¹ This paragraph was adopted in 2008 during the General Conference. The paragraph 425.4 also requires annual conferences to prepare and train clergy and congregations for cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments.

¹² Dan McKanan, (2011). *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Kindle Edition: Kindle Location 6).

John Cobb, a process theologian called for professional church leadership to be that of a “practical Christian thinker” and “reflective practitioner.”¹³ In this study, I attempt to demonstrate how liberal theology has the opportunity to be revolutionary when racial-ethnic clergy intertwine their theology as practical thinkers and reflective practitioners and exercise “prophetic encounter”¹⁴ with white parishioners daily. Here “prophetic encounter” is interpersonal and calls for a new life that is creative becoming.¹⁵ According to Dan Mckanan, “When human beings encounter one another deeply, in the midst of their struggles for freedom and equality and community, prophetic power is unleashed.”¹⁶ Mckanan argues that interpersonal encounters are the source of the power of announcing the reign of God.¹⁷ By projecting their vulnerable presence, racial-ethnic cross-racial and cross-cultural (RE CR-CC) lead pastors are agitators of the tranquility of Christian faith; they are subversive public theologians in a racially, theologically, and culturally contentious context due to systemic racism, classism, and an unwarranted fear of African American men in the U.S.; their vulnerable presence and leadership style shatters ethnocentrism and opens up a new possibility for God’s revelation. For example, African American male leadership has re-conceptualized the meaning of being a Black man in the U.S. Through their leadership their theology is credible and socially relevant. Their presence denounces and condemns oppression, transforming a community of faith to a community of creative becoming.

¹³ Joseph C. Hough Jr. and John B. Cobb Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985)

¹⁴ Mckanan.

¹⁵ Gary Dorrien, (2006). *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity: 1950-2005* (Kindle Edition: Kindle Location 722).

¹⁶ Mckanan, (Kindle Location 3).

¹⁷ Ibid.

According to Mackanan, Radicals hold multiple allegiances; to specific religious traditions, their professions, and to their communities.¹⁸ From this perspective, RE CR-CC pastors are radicals who hold allegiance to Christianity, to their own ethnic community and Wesleyan heritage of social activism. These “religious radicals” communicate about the best way to promote liberty, equality, and solidarity from the pulpit.

RE CR-CC lead pastors share their socio-political vision in religious terms by encountering people personally and collectively. These pastors are creating a new identity what it means to be human and it is important to recognize that their ministry propels social change. By experiencing radical worship, fellowship, and service with these pastors, the members become consciousness-raising congregations and eventually become “grassroots radicals.”¹⁹

1. Practice of challenging the status quo

The survey found that more RE CR-CC lead pastors, 40.9 percent have a doctoral degree and 15.4 percent have a Ph.D. degree. However, despite their education and experience, the 2014 survey showed that no RE CR-CC lead pastors received over \$150,000 annual salary, while 5.2 percent of white lead pastors received a salary of over \$150,000 with the same or less education. This finding is consistent with the Study of Salaries for United Methodist Clergy from GBHEM in 2008 that racial-ethnic clergy receive 9-15 percent less pay than white clergy in general.²⁰ In spite of experience of inequity RE-CR-CC lead pastors challenge the United Methodist Church to be a community of covenant that pursues equity of all people by their practice of ministry.

2. Practice of breaking stereotypes

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., (Kindle Location 11).

²⁰ Eric B. Johnson, *Study for Salaries for United Methodist Clergy*, GBHEM, 2010.

Walter Muelder affirmed that each person acts from a creative center and the highest virtue of personality is love.²¹ RE CR-CC lead pastors communicate their “highest virtue of personality” out of their historical experience, therefore, transcending a given particular reality. According to our study, RE CR-CC lead pastors are breaking stereotypes not only by their presence but also by their skills, based on transnational and intercultural experiences that contribute to the church and that change the traditional understanding of white, male-oriented “senior pastors.” When asked how they would respond if a parishioner verbally attacked them in a meeting, 69.4 percent of RE CR-CC lead pastors said that they would “calmly address” the matter, compared to 31.1 percent of white lead pastors. This behavior breaks stereotypes about racial-ethnic leaders; stereotypes such as African-American males are loud and rough, Asian-American leaders are too authoritative and rigid, and racial-ethnic leaders are less efficient in administration. In our study, racial-ethnic pastors are shown to be more democratic, collaborative, equipping, directive, confident, creative, nurturing, energetic, adaptive, delegatory, and prophetic and less authoritarian than white pastors.

3. Practice of justice-making care²² as wounded healers

RE CR-CC lead pastors practice intentional openness to the otherness because of their experiences with discrimination; they consider themselves as more empathetic because of their experience of *Han*. Catherine Keller advocated critical mutuality of justice and care forming of a community. RE CR-CC lead pastors are leaders who possess what Muelder called “social mind” because they possess the signs of social and historical racial struggles in their being.²³ They are socially and contextually conscientious about enabling their faith, therefore, they spend more time in pastoral care and social or community work than white lead pastors. They call for

²¹ Dorrien, (Kindle Locations 390-391).

²² Ibid., (Kindle Location 9462).

²³ Ibid., (Kindle Location 382).

cultural and racial inclusiveness in their preaching whenever needed; on average, they say, 10 percent of their sermon contains these issues.

4. Practice of vulnerable trailblazers of an unknown path

RE CR-CC lead pastors reported that they deal with more conflicts within the congregation related to theological issues and cultural diversity compared to white lead pastors. RE CR-CC lead pastors carry triple burdens in large white churches—being a large church pastor, being a racial-ethnic pastor, and being a pioneer in a large church setting; the majority of them are the first racial-ethnic lead pastors in the history of their churches. The presence of RE CR-CC lead pastors shatters ethnocentrism and challenges the congregation to a spiritual transformation towards a new and different future. RE CR-CC lead pastors' leadership represents the theological importance of interconnectedness of human relationality. These pastors become a historical agent of the radical struggle for building a harmonious Christian community through their vulnerable practice of ministry.

Conclusion

Pushing the boundaries and taking a risk rather than being content with a conventional paradigm is a norm of liberal theology. This study analyzed how Wesleyan theological education based on liberal theology has been impacting the leadership style of RE CR-CC lead pastors. RE CR-CC lead pastors are creating their authentic leadership style by synthesizing their distinctive cluster of cultural ideas and their Wesleyan theological understandings. Perhaps the most salient personal, historical, cultural, and theological determinant of the ministries of RE CR-CC lead pastors is their contribution to disrupting marginality within the church and society, skillfully navigating racial-ethnic and cultural challenges in their ministries.

Wesleyan theological education becomes revolutionary when RE CR-CC lead pastors integrate their liberal understanding of a worldview into their leadership practice:

- Their leadership is socially conscientious and progressive because they are able to transfer their *Han* into creative energy by transforming a perceived reality.
- As Paul Shilling mentioned, these pastors demonstrate God's invincible love, kenotic self-sacrifice, and "God's fellow suffering" who suffers with and for humanity.²⁴

Because of their leadership style composes new narratives between faith and practice, faith and culture, faith and politics, and faith and systemic oppression, their ministry is a reflection of the Wesleyan heritage of social activism.

- Their leadership is radical since they confront issues that are distinctive of our times; such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the politics around immigration, boldly advocating for an alternative reality and the encountering of the nitty-gritty lives of their systemic oppressors.

²⁴ Dorrien, (Kindle Locations 720-721).