

Discussion paper for OIMTS-11: Ecumenism and Evangelism group
Working Group--Evangelism and Ecumenism in the Light of God's New Creation

"Creating Congregations that Witness to God's New Creation"

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Perhaps since this is an institute on Methodist theological studies, it is entirely appropriate to begin with a verse or two of a Wesley Hymn.

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down;
fix in us thy humble dwelling;
all thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation;
enter every trembling heart.¹

When Charles Wesley penned these words in 1747, the Methodist movement was scarcely a decade old; yet, as with most of his multitude of hymns there is profound theology that lasts for centuries in these memorable words. Which of us could hope as much for our meager offerings shared here at Oxford.

As can be seen from the title of this paper, I want to attempt to answer how we might help create congregations that bear witness to God's new creation. For the sake of our continuing discussion, I have chosen to address the subject under two key ideas found in the title: (1) God's new creation and (2) creating congregations that witness.

God's New Creation

Which God?

In light of the Trinitarian theme of the 10th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, it is first of all important to remember that the God we refer to is not the god that many have in mind—even in our churches. Our God of creation and new creation is the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—as revealed in scripture and experienced by the church over the two millennia of our history. Too often the God of creation is thought of only as "God the Creator" and usually identified with "God the Father Almighty" or even just "God" as deists, universalists and other monotheists might propose. And the God of the new creation is a likewise a one person God—either the same person or perhaps the second or third person of the Trinity. But to segment God's divine, creative nature into separate persons of the Trinity is obviously a mistake. All are part of the original creation (Genesis 1-2; John 1; Colossians 1) and of the new creation (Romans 8; 2 Corinthians 3 & 5; Revelation 22).

So, I raise the questions: (1) Do our Methodist clergy and members truly believe in and consciously live in God the Holy Trinity? (2) Do our words, our music, our celebration in worship, our deeds of mercy and justice, bear witness to and announce a gospel that is as thoroughly Trinitarian as our Methodist roots? If so, we would recognize that inherent in the very nature of God and thus in the design of all of God's creation is the divine, dynamic, *perichoresis* "community" of creative and contagious love. In the words of Charles Wesley

Love divine, all loves excelling, . . .
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation;

enter every trembling heart.

Or

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;
 come quickly from above;
 write thy new name upon my heart,
 thy new, best name of Love.²

Or

Eternal Triune Lord!
 Let all the hosts above,
 Let all the sons of men record
 And dwell upon Thy love.
 When heav'n and earth are fled
 Before Thy glorious face,
 Sing all the saints Thy love hath made
 Thy everlasting praise.³

Which New Creation?

John Wesley recognized perfect love as the nature of the triune God and as the destiny of humankind offered through the new creation.

We see—and who does not?—the numberless follies and miseries of our fellow creatures. We see on every side either men of no religion at all or men of a lifeless, formal religion. We are grieved at the sight, and should greatly rejoice if by any means we might convince some that there is a better religion to be attained, a religion worthy of God that gave it. And this we conceive to be no other than love; the love of God and of all mankind; . . .

This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never-failing remedy, for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of men.⁴

And

By salvation, I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. . . . Without faith we cannot be thus saved. For we can't rightly serve God unless we love him. And we can't love him unless we know him; neither can we know God, unless by faith. Therefore, salvation by faith is only, in other words, the love of God by the knowledge of God, or the recovery of the image of God by a true spiritual acquaintance with him.⁵

Charles Wesley's contribution to this perception of the new creation comes in his last stanza of the hymn cited above—"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."

Finish, then, thy new creation,
 pure and spotless let us be.
 Let us see thy great salvation
 perfectly restored in thee;
 changed from glory into glory,
 till in heaven we take our place,
 till we cast our crowns before thee,
 lost in wonder, love, and praise.⁶

The new creation in our frame of reference is one that comes through faith in the God whose name is Love and who has redeemed and reconciled us from the destruction of sin and death through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. This new creation is what the living God accomplishes in and through those who entrust themselves to Jesus as Lord and seek to be ever mindful of the Holy Spirit's leading and transforming work in us, through us, and beyond us "from one degree of glory to another." In fact, the new creation is not *another* creation, but a fulfillment of the first creation. What was designed from the beginning and intended to be modeled and offered as a blessing to all the earth through God's chosen servant Israel, is now at work as a *good infection* (C.S. Lewis' image)⁷ through those who with the Apostle Paul declare:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:14-18, NIV)

Evangelism is about a gospel of God's new creation that overcomes the destructiveness of sin and makes us over into the likeness of Christ. There are many dynamics of reconciliation involved in this new creation—appreciation of the gift of the first creation and protecting the resources of earth, for example—but the most distinctive quality of the new creation is that the love of Christ controls us and we no longer see persons as we used to “according to the flesh” or “from a worldly point of view.” Instead, we see everyone—*every one*, and *all peoples* (Matthew 28:19)—as designed to be restored with all creation through divine love to “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:22).

If we allow this gospel of a new creation to be changed from either its particularity in Christ who died for all, or its universality as an offer extended to all through God's agents of reconciliation, or its power to restore humanity and the whole of creation to a glorious liberty, we have abandoned our calling and sold our birthright.

Creating Congregations that Witness

Although we do not control the cosmic timetable or the response others may make to this offer of God's new creation, we do have a good bit of say so about the shape of our congregations as witnessing manifestations of God's new creation.

Creating Congregations

Any pastor or committed lay leader in one of our churches who has sought to bring change to his or her congregation has experienced some of the frustration expressed by God (Isaiah 1; John 13-14,) by the apostles (Galatians 3:1-5), and by every “reformer” including the Wesleys and early Methodists. John Wesley journaled his concerns over the Methodist movement frequently; and late in his life even feared it might not survive except “as a dead sect having the form of religion without the power.” Ours is a “great line of splendor” mixed with plenty of conflict and battle scars. It would be “nice” if we didn't have to talk like this—if the new creation was just one big “success story” after another. But there is often a battle for the minds and hearts of both the unconverted as well as for those who claim an allegiance to Christ and to his kingdom.

My work with pastors serving in old established congregations and with new church planters reminds me that both have their hands full and neither is entirely free of bouts with discouragement and doubt. Much has already been written about some of the dynamics related to “healthy” or “contagious” or “growing” congregations. But what would “new creation” congregations look like? A brief list of characteristics that might lead us into some interesting discussion follows.

- (1) They are openly Trinitarian in their life, language, and ministry.
- (2) They believe love is the highest law and the most precious gift of the Spirit.
- (3) They value both prayer and mission as great privileges, not as obligations.
- (4) They live no longer for themselves but him who died and rose again.
- (5) They see all others through eyes that have experienced amazing grace.
- (6) They believe in and value the creation because they believe in the Creator.
- (7) They believe in the *new* creation as an ongoing process of love and grace.
- (8) They believe in the *new* and are open to what God may yet teach them.
- (9) They believe the church is Christ's body designed to reveal the new creation rather than protect old traditions (or denominations).
- (10) They discuss honestly the challenges of living together in unity, but seek to exercise ministries of reconciliation in a “catholic spirit.”

- (11) They believe creativity is of God and employ a diverse orchestration of art, music, story, color, dance, sights, sounds, languages, and cultures.
- (12) They design flexible means by which new creatures in Christ can become fully mature disciples.
- (13) They de-emphasize the old ideas of "membership" and instead focus on entering the Christian life of healing, discovery, transformation and ministry.
- (14) They listen attentively both to the Bible as God's word, and to the risen Lord as he leads them out to minister to their Jerusalems, Judeas, Samarias, and to the ends of the earth.
- (15) They exercise their witness boldly but with gentleness and respect.
- (16) They live in and offer a hope that does not disappoint "because of the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit."

Obviously this is an incomplete list; but even so, it offers more than enough challenge for most of us as leaders of congregational life. The big question is *how*? The simple answer is with faith, hope, and love. Intentionality from the start is key. This is why many "new creation congregations" will more than likely emerge from new church starts rather than from older churches trying to pour new wine into their old wine skins. But for those of us still working at turning some of our existing churches toward this new creation emphasis, persistence, patience, and prayer are the "3 P's of the new curriculum." It must begin with a new investment in teaching these biblical themes and celebrating the manifestations of this full-orbed new creation. It needs preaching and worship that joyfully offers a larger hope and vision than is often associated with consumer-oriented congregations. It will need a growing array of opportunities to "try on" more of the new creation garment in conversation with other Christians, pre-Christians and non-Christians. It will take exposure to books, resources and programs like Alpha, Emmaus, Disciple Bible Study, Christian Believer, Companions in Christ, Habitat for Humanity, Volunteers in Mission, Global Focus Weekends, and Witness that will help church-people *experience* the transforming love of God the Holy Trinity—often in ecumenical settings beyond the local church. In this context of talking, studying, working, worshiping, and praying together people discover how enriched their own lives are and become more ready to offer this new creation opportunity to others.

That Witness

Having spent the last several years of my research and writing in the field of Christian witnessing and Christian conversion, I offer these final observations and suggestions.

Congregations that witness to the new creation emerge from reminding one another repeatedly that *we all are witnesses*! No church-goer or professing Christian or local congregation escapes without a witness. The only question is what kind of witness is it, and does it help or hinder others in their discovery of God's new creation? Jesus reminded his disciples to anticipate the Holy Spirit's coming with power for their lives and for their witness. This was to be their primary identity—"my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Congregations need pastors and other leaders who openly seek to live out this identity and P.R.E.P.A.R.E.⁸ all Christians in their care to follow the guidance of Peter.

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)

In 10,000 interviews conducted over a decade people were asked what it was about those who witnessed to them that helped them find the door to God's *new creation* through faith in Christ. Most important was that person's obvious relationship with God ("in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord"). Of second importance was that person's ability to clarify the message and meaning of the offer that is ours in the gospel ("a reason for the hope that you have"). Of third importance was how the person cared for me ("gentleness and respect").⁹

How do we help more congregations become contagious manifestations of the new creation? We work with all the tools available and give special attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit at both the congregational level and the individual Christian level to "liberate the children of God" so they might be more naturally what they are becoming as God's new creatures and learn to both act and

speak their primary identity as Christ's witnesses. This happens best in congregations that place a high value on the power of God to change human lives and on our ability to impact others through both our corporate and individual witness.

The need for a new tool to stimulate this lifestyle in more of our Methodist congregations was noted four years ago by a team of United Methodist leaders in the United States. The resulting 25 week small group resource called *WITNESS: Exploring and Sharing Your Christian Faith* was released in May of 2001 by Discipleship Resources.¹⁰ It has been the best selling resource Discipleship Resources has ever produced. Perhaps there is a new hunger in our churches to thoroughly engage in biblical and theological reflection with others so that we might fulfill in this new century what the Wesleys discovered as the hunger of the human soul in their day—the possibility of a new creation for all humanity and in fact for the entire cosmos.

Perhaps it is worth closing with two expressions of how the new creation “works” and how we are to function. First, from our Lord:

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. . . . My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit. (John 15:5, 8 NRSV)

And from the pen of Michael Hewlett, a 20th century hymn writer:

Sing to him in whom creation found its shape and origin;
Spirit, moving on the waters troubled by the God within;
Source of breath to all things breathing, Life in whom all lives begin.

Pray we, then, O Lord the Spirit, on our lives descend in might;
Let thy flame break out within us, fire our hearts and clear our sight,
Till, white-hot in thy possession, we, too, set the world alight.¹¹

Notes

¹ “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” words by Charles Wesley, 1747, in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 384.

² “O For a Heart to Praise My God,” words by Charles Wesley, 1742, in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 417.

³ “Father in Whom we Live,” words by Charles Wesley, in *Wesley Hymns*, 135 (Lillenas Publishing Co. Kansas City, MO 1982).

⁴ *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 11: *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, ed. Gerald R. Cragg (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) p. 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶ “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” words by Charles Wesley, 1747, in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 384.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, MacMillan Paperbacks Edition, 1960), p. 152.

⁸ PREPARE is a generic training model proposed in *The Contagious Witness: Exploring Christian Conversion*, by Ron Crandall (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1999). P. (prioritize our relationship to Christ), R. (relate as a true friend in Christian love), E. (explain the reason for your hope), P. (present the gospel and offer Christ), A. (ask for an appropriate response), R. (repeat the offer as often as necessary), and E. (enable those with new faith to grow toward maturity).

⁹ These statistics varied some by age and stage of life; but overall when asked to identify the most important characteristic of those who led them to faith: #1 (27%) mentioned their obvious relationship with God or Christ; #2 (25%) mentioned their ability to explain the essence of the Christian message; and #3 (17%) mentioned how this person cared for me. In fourth place was (14%) something about the person's personality or character that stood out. The details of this study and a host of testimonies are recorded in *The Contagious Witness: Exploring Christian Conversion*, by Ron Crandall (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

¹⁰ This resource includes a workbook and journal (\$19.95 for the packet) for each participant, and a video using a hiking theme (\$9.95) for use by the group or church. This writer was privileged to create the manuscript. More information can be found on the GBOD website www.gbod.org/witness.

¹¹ From *Hymns and Psalms: A Methodist and Ecumenical Hymn Book* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983), #324.