A Wesleyan-Methodist Response to Survivors of Sexual Misconduct within the United Methodist Church

Rev. Maddie Johnson, M.Div.

Written for the 15th Oxford Institute held on August 4-11, 2024 in Oxford, England

The World is My Parish: Glad Tidings of Salvation in an Age of Crisis

July 22, 2024

At the United Methodist General Conference held in 2024, with an 85% majority, the United Methodist Church (UMC) voted to approve the apology and commitments put forth by the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (GCSRW) to survivors[1] of sexual misconduct[2] in the UMC.[3] In the apology presented on May 3, 2024 by the secretary for the General Conference, Rev. Gary Graves spoke on behalf of the church, saying, "[w]e apologize for the times we have not listened to [survivors of sexual misconduct], doubted your stories, ignored your wounds, and have not tended to your pain." He continued saying that an apology means nothing without clear commitments to change. The four commitments read were to 1) publicly apologize to survivors of sexual misconduct at each annual conference, 2) educate church leadership regarding power imbalance and sacred trust, 3) provide healing resources in complaint procedures, and 4) develop a trauma-informed response to complaints in sexual misconduct.

With this very timely public apology and call for accountability, there is a unique opportunity for a Wesleyan-Methodist response to this global crisis of sexual misconduct, particularly its unique manifestation within the context of the church. Looking at the Great Plains United Methodist Conference (GPUMC) as a case study for the UMC and greater Wesleyan-Methodist traditions, I will analyze the current status of these four commitments and offer practical suggestions for how to bring integrity to both the church's response to sexual

---

[1] Throughout this paper, I will use "survivor" to reflect those who have experienced, who have survived, sexual misconduct. Other survivors, scholars, and resources might use "victim" or "victim/survivor" to capture this same sentiment.

[2] In the United Methodist Church (UMC), the updated definitions for sexual misconduct, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment were approved at the 2024 General Conference, and are recognized as distinct chargeable offenses in ¶2702 in the Book of Discipline at the hands of both clergy and laity in the UMC. For the purposes of this paper, sexual misconduct is defined as a form of misconduct of a sexual nature that uses sexualized verbal comments or visuals, unwelcome touching and advances, use of sexualized materials including pornography, stalking, or misuse of the pastoral or ministerial position using sexualized conduct to take advantage of the vulnerability of another.

[3] "Apology from the United Methodist Church to the Victims/Survivors of Sexual Misconduct," ResourceUMC, May 8, 2024. https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsrw/home/content/apology-statement-from-the-united-methodist-church.

misconduct and support for survivors of sexual misconduct grounded in Wesleyan-Methodist theologies of repentance, grace, and salvation. By embracing a more holistic apology and repentance for survivors of sexual misconduct, shifting the starting point in education from prevention to a values-based sexual ethic, exploring models of healing teams for survivors, and recognizing the importance of power, intersectionality, and particularity as a prerequisite for trauma-informed care in complaint procedures, our Wesleyan-Methodist traditions might concretely adhere to these four prophetic commitments with action that fosters greater health and wholeness for our communities of faith.

Analysis of Sexual Misconduct in the UMC and Great Plains UMC[4]

While the global crisis of sexual misconduct transcends church spaces, the unique manifestation of sexual misconduct in the church, and the UMC specifically, is an important context in order to better understand the necessity of both assessing how these commitments are currently being met and how they might be expanded upon. In 2017, GCSRW published a study that surveyed 4,374 United Methodists[5] within the United States regarding the reality of sexual misconduct within the UMC as a response to the #metoo and #churchtoo movement at the time.[6] Through their findings, trends emerged regarding who is more likely to experience sexual misconduct, what responses and reactions were received by survivors who shared complaints, and whether the harm was known to be isolated or not. In summary:

[4] This is a continuation of the analysis of sexual misconduct in the UMC first addressed in my paper submitted on Monday, July 15th, 2024 entitled “Prophetic Leadership for Social Transformation Final Paper.”

[5] This study does not offer the full perspective needed to effectively address the current reality of sexual misconduct with a majority of surveyants being white and in the United States (though this demographic was prioritized for comparative purposes based on previous studies that were U.S.-centric). With the new regionalization of the UMC and our global nature, a global and intercultural survey would need to be conducted to reflect the diverse body of United Methodists in order to see the patterns of sexual misconduct across Wesleyan-Methodist traditions.

[6] “Sexual Misconduct in the United Methodist Church: US Update,” ResourceUMC, January 1, 2018, https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsrw/home/content/sexual-misconduct-in-the-united-methodist-church-us-update-general-commission-on-the-status-and-role.

- clergy are more at risk to experience all behaviors than laity, and younger persons report misconduct more than older groups. In fact, as age increases, reported experiences decrease.
- Most respondents (53.6%) said they were not aware of their perpetrator harming anyone else, but almost one-third (32%) said they knew of others, while the remainder (14.4%) were unsure. Those experiencing some of the most severe forms of sexual misconduct were the most likely to know of others being harmed.
- The most common response to sexual misconduct is to avoid the person (50.8%) or ignore the behavior (46.3%). Also notable is that women and younger respondents are more likely than others to tell a supervisor, request a transfer, or quit.
- For those who made a formal report to a supervisor, the most common reaction was that they were believed, supported and corrective action was taken (52.9%), but that was closely followed by the second most common result, which was that the complaint was minimized, trivialized or dismissed (40.3%).[7]

In addition to these findings, looking at GCSRW's comparable studies from 1990 and 2005[8], the reporting of sexual misconduct has increased over the years for women in the UMC in the United States. Placing more concrete numbers on this increased reporting, in a 2010 study, the UMC was averaging between 140 and 500 known cases of specifically clergy sexual misconduct annually in the United States.[9] While this increase might be as a result of greater awareness of sexual misconduct and more public examples of accountability, the crisis of sexual misconduct within the church is apparent and antithetical to our baptismal vows as Wesleyan-Methodists of faith.

As an ordained deacon in the GPUMC serving for the Mercy and Justice team, and as a survivor of sexual misconduct within the church, I have seen the ways that these commitments are currently being addressed, personally, through online resources, and through stories shared in the GPUMC. In order to bring integrity to the adherence of these commitments, the GPUMC will serve as a case study for how this work might be addressed not just in Kansas and

---

[7] "Liturgy: Service of Lament, Confession, and Hope," ResourceUMC, April 3, 2024, https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsrw/home/content/service-of-lament-confession-and-hope.
[8] Gail Murphy-Geiss, "Hospitable or Hostile Environment: Sexual Harassment in the United Methodist Church." *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 3 (2007): 260–72, July 20, 2024. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20447443.
[9] Sally Badgley Dolch, Healing the Breach: Response Team Intervention in United Methodist Congregations, Doctor of Ministry, Wesley Theological Seminary, 2010, 131-132.

Nebraska, but also across the Wesleyan-Methodist connection, by first lifting up the current reality of our response to survivors.

The first commitment was for each Conference to read the public apology passed at the General Conference during this Annual Conference cycle. In the GPUMC, Conference leadership issued two trigger warnings, one earlier in the morning, and one immediately before reading the apology on Saturday, June 8th. Then, the Bishop, one District Superintendent, and the Board of Ordained Ministry Chair not only read the apology, but also led a liturgy[10] with call and response, both lamenting for survivors of sexual misconduct and calling for change within the GPUMC. The Conference leadership also had a room set aside in the conference center for participants to process the apology with trained chaplains and spiritual directors.

The second commitment is to educate church leadership regarding power imbalance and sacred trust. In the GPUMC, it is required that all clergy, including staff of the Conference and other lay leaders within the church, be certified through the online training, Safe Gatherings, which must be renewed every three years. For those serving in appointments, not only are United Methodist seminaries expected to provide training on sexual misconduct prevention for seminarians,[11] the GPUMC requires that those in new appointments participate in an in-person "Boundary 101" training focused on setting healthy boundaries, navigating power imbalance, and engaging conversations about personal and professional sexual ethics.[12] After that, clergy are asked to complete a "Boundary 201" course within the first four years of ministry through various third-party online platforms.[13]

---

[10] "Service of Lament, Confession, and Hope," ResourceUMC, accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/cosrow-media/2024/04/29/12/55/english---service-of-lament.pdf.
[11] "Bor #2046: Sexual Ethics as Integral Part of Formation for Ministerial Leadership," ResourceUMC, October 1, 2021, https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/um-sexual-ethics/home/content/bor-2046-sexual-ethics-as-integral-part-of-formation-for-ministerial-leadership.
[12] I do not know how this has shifted since the pandemic, nor who currently leads this within the Great Plains Conference.
[13] One of the three Boundary 201 options: Understanding Clergy Sexual Ethics Through the Lewis Center, Maintaining Boundaries in a Digital Age Through the Lewis Center, Clergy and Ministerial Ethics Through Congregation U

The third commitment is to provide healing resources to those involved in complaints procedures. While the GPUMC has regular self-care mini-grants for clergy well-being, as well as grants and resources for sabbatical leave after 6 years of ministry,[14] the only concrete resource provided for survivors who go through the complaints process is $2,000 which can be used in any way deemed appropriate for one's healing. The only written confirmation for how this funding is used is through email exchange with the Bishop, Chief of Staff, and Bishop's assistant to reimburse the receipts connected to the healing, which does not require justification.

The fourth commitment is to offer a trauma-informed response to complaints of sexual misconduct. The nature of this commitment is incredibly contextual, because it is dependent upon the training and gifts of each individual involved in the complaints process, as well as the structure of the complaints process itself. Because disclosure can be risky, vulnerable, and traumatic for survivors, the discernment process of entering the complaints process ideally includes communal feedback and support. For example, the first person that a survivor chooses to share their story with could alter whether the survivor decides to move forward through the complaints process or not, which can be affected significantly depending on the presence of trauma-informed care or not. Then, every person after that initial sharing continues to impact the fate of the complaints process. If a survivor does file a complaint, during the interview with the Bishop, they have a right to a support person or advocate of their choosing.[15] As the results of the 2017 survey show, while 53% of survivors felt believed and supported with accountability, 40% felt their complaint was met with dismissal, trivialization, or minimization. It is appalling that the response of church leadership to survivors of sexual misconduct is comparable to the flip of a coin.

---

[14] Those eligible for sabbatical leave and resourcing must have served at least 6 consecutive years of full-time ministry as an associate member, full member, or local licensed pastor who has completed Course of Study.

[15] 2016 Book of Discipline, ¶362.1b

With this assessment, there is an opportunity to deepen the work of both addressing sexual misconduct within the church and supporting survivors of sexual misconduct grounded in Wesleyan-Methodist theologies of repentance, grace, and salvation by looking specifically at these four commitments.

First Commitment: Apology in the context of a Wesleyan Understanding of Repentance

In John Wesley's sermon, "The Repentance of Believers," he distinguishes between repentance and faith which precedes justification, and repentance and faith which follows.[16] Though similar in many ways, the repentance and faith of believers who are justified is "requisite after we have 'believed the gospel,' [...] and in every subsequent stage of our Christian course, or we cannot 'run the race which is set before us.'"[17] The reason this repentance and faith is distinct is because, though sin has lost its power through God's justifying grace, it remains within our hearts.[18] Wesley then details what we as sinners, even after justification, are to repent of, including sins of word, action, and omission.[19] Without honestly recognizing that we are "not yet whole,"[20] change, experienced through God's sanctifying grace, is hindered.

With this theological foundation, the apology shared across the United Methodist connection to survivors of sexual misconduct is to be measured by its ability to embrace repentance as outlined by Wesley. In many ways, both the apology and accompanying liturgy offer a powerful lament for the sins of word, action, and omission that manifest in the church. Through intercessory prayer, the GPUMC lifted up the myriad ways that survivors have been impacted by sexual misconduct. Through an expanded prayer of confession, the GPUMC lifted up the ways that the church has been complicit, perpetuated injustice, and harmed survivors.

---

[16] John Wesley, Albert C. Outler, and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 406.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid, 407.
[19] Ibid, 406-412.
[20] Ibid, 415.

And lastly, the GPUMC lifted up a call for accountability through an adapted reaffirmation of baptism.

Throughout his sermon, Wesley was clear that without a deep understanding of the sin [of sexual misconduct], without the weight of this knowledge, we cannot effectively cry out for deliverance from this sin, which further prevents healing and change.[21] There are two components of this apology worth exploring in order to embrace repentance as justified people of faith. The first is the ongoing nature of both the sin of sexual misconduct and the need for repentance, and the second is regarding *who* voices the lament of sexual misconduct.

Looking closer at these two components, Walter Brueggemann's concept of prophetic criticism provides helpful discourse in the work of repentance.[22] In his book, *Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann describes prophetic criticism as the exercise of disrupting the status quo of the empire, or those in power, through grief and lament. Using the Exodus account as an example of the work of prophetic criticism, the Israelites cry out to God for help in light of their bondage at the hands of the Egyptian empire.[23] Bruggemann extrapolates the Hebrew word "cry out" (*za'ak)* as both a cry of misery and, functionally, the filing of a complaint against the empire.[24] The Israelites are being wronged, they are grieving, and they are publicly expressing the reality that things are *not* alright. As the plagues continue, the Israelites' public cry turns away from the empire, knowing that their cries are not being heard, and turns to those who can help, the masses, as an alternative community.[25] Lastly, this public grief empowers people to demand answers and find places where their wrongs might be believed.[26]

---

[21] Ibid, 415-416.
[22] This is a continuation of the exploration of prophetic criticism and sexual misconduct in the UMC addressed in my paper submitted on Monday, July 15th, 2024 entitled "Prophetic Leadership for Social Transformation Final Paper."
[23] Exodus 2:23-25.
[24] Walter Brueggemann and Davis Hankins, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 11.
[25] Ibid, 12-13.
[26] Ibid, 13.

Both the Exodus account and Brueggemann's prophetic criticism provide an important example of the nuance of the work of grief and lament as we look at the apology to survivors of sexual misconduct across the United Methodist Connection. Like the Israelites' cries in response to their suffering at the hands of the Egyptian empire, the cries of survivors of sexual misconduct at the hands of the UMC are ongoing. This apology, which is to occur only once during this annual conference season, keeps the context of sexual misconduct general and abstract, while using mainly the past tense to frame sexual misconduct within the UMC as historic. For example, one petition of lament reads: "[t]o the women, children, and men harmed by clergy, lay leadership, and laity who hid behind United Methodist polity and the Christian faith to justify their actions and avoid accountability, we believe you, and we lament the wounds you have endured."[27] However, both Wesley's sermon on repentance and the Exodus account describe the sinfulness of humanity and the sinfulness of the Egyptian empire, respectively, in ongoing and specific ways, while using the present tense. While this feels a subtle shift, contextualizing the current and ongoing reality of sexual misconduct with details like increased reporting and prevalence, naming the continued impact of sexual misconduct on survivors, and committing to apologize at more than one annual conference cycle, is a more holistic recognition of the sin and a more faithful act of repentance.

Connected to the ongoing nature of both sin and repentance, the Exodus account and Brueggemann's notion of prophetic criticism highlight the importance of *whose* voice leads the lament. Throughout the book of Exodus, we see the cries of injustice and lament come from the Israelites, and, at times, Moses and Miriam as prophets for the Israelites. The cries of injustice and lament are not facilitated by the Egyptian empire, those in power, because the oppression is still ongoing. For the UMC, while our reality is not as stark as the Israelites and the Egyptian empire, there is a distinction between survivors and those in power in regard to sexual

[27] "Liturgy: Service of Lament, Confession, and Hope," ResourceUMC.

misconduct.[28] With Conference leadership reading the lament and apology (for the GPUMC, the Bishop, one District Superintendent, and the Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry),[29] They represent both the prophetic voice who denounces the reality of sexual misconduct on behalf of survivors and the voice of power who decides the fate of complaints of sexual misconduct. In Brueggemann's framework, the prophetic voice holds space for public cries to be heard and change to be expected, while the voice of power holds space for public cries to potentially go unheard and for no change to occur. Ideally, the voice of power who listens to the cries of survivors would be able to disrupt the status quo. Yet, with our current denominational reality of a 53/40 split on belief and accountability, there is a dissonance between the action and words of the voice of power which impacts the work of repentance as a means of healing and change.

Another nuanced layer of this tension is that the complaints process surrounding LGBTQIA+ clergy and allies is the same process for complaints of sexual misconduct. What message is the UMC communicating when the cries of homophobia have been taken seriously in criminalizing LGBTQIA+ folks for the last five decades, yet the cries of sexual misconduct are being met with dismissal or minimization at least half of the time?[30] Both the GPUMC and UMC have a crisis of integrity to reckon with.

In an effort to address the tension of *who* speaks on behalf of survivors, Bruggemann would suggest that a "prophet" like Moses or Miriam would be the one to engage in the work of prophetic criticism. Which leads to the question: who in the GPUMC could be the prophetic voice to lift up the reality of sexual misconduct? This prophetic voice would be one who can more faithfully represent survivors of sexual misconduct by not being involved in the

---

[28] I recognize that Conference leaders might also identify as survivors. However, much like the Egyptians and the Israelites both suffer under a system of oppression, our Wesleyan-Methodist traditions also suffer with our perpetuation of sexual misconduct at the hands of our structures that transcend individuals' experience with sexual misconduct.

[29] I do believe there is a place for voices of power to lament and apologize and take accountability, but until we can bring more integrity to the current reality of sexual misconduct and our complaints process, I find that distinguishing the prophetic voice and the voice of power to be more genuine.

[30] Traci C. West, "Ending Gender Violence: An Antiracist Intersectional Agenda for Churches," *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 2 (May 2020): 201, https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637320924015.

decision-making of the complaints process.[31] With an invitation made by Conference leadership to the masses, there are justice-seekers, truth-tellers, survivors in quiet who would be willing to take on the role of prophet who are not involved in the complaints process. The GPUMC also has groups, teams, agencies, and committees that reflect values of justice and inclusion who could be the prophetic voice (for GPUMC, the Mercy and Justice team).[32] Looking to Dr. William Barber's call for "fusion politics,"[33] or the understanding that the work of justice is stronger when people across different justice movements come together, possible prophetic voices for this apology could come from other justice movements within the GPUMC. For example, what would it mean to have LGBTQIA+ folks (those who are out and willing) to lift up this lament, recognizing the complaints process has helped and harmed them too? Discerning *who* can best represent survivors of sexual misconduct is trauma-informed and centers survivors' experiences related to sexual misconduct within the UMC.

By engaging with a Wesleyan understanding of repentance and exploring Brueggemann's work of prophetic criticism, having a prophetic voice lift up an apology that reflects the contextual, ongoing, and present reality of sexual misconduct and its impact on survivors, beyond one annual conference season, feels a more holistic act of repentance as a means of change and healing as justified people of faith.

Second Commitment: Education Rooted in the *Imago Dei* and the Love Commandment

When it comes to the second commitment of education related to sexual misconduct, the reality for the GPUMC (and arguably the UMC and the Church at large) is that the starting point for this education is the prevention of harm and clarity of policies related to sexual misconduct, including power imbalance and sacred trust. While prevention is an essential part of harm reduction related to sexual misconduct, many contemporary sexual ethicists have argued that

[31] Not necessarily including the support person/advocate for a survivor during the complaints process.
[32] Some Annual Conferences have Annual Conference Commissions on the Status and Role of Women (AC COSROWs) that advocate for the full inclusion of women at more local levels.
[33] William J. Barber et al., *Revive Us Again: Vision and Action in Moral Organizing* (New York: Beacon Press, 2018), 40.

this is not the most conducive starting point for developing healthy and whole individuals, including their sexual selves. In her book, *Sex, Tech, and Faith: Ethics for a Digital Age*, Kate Ott writes, “advocacy and prevention policies do not teach Christians how to have healthy sexual relationships, how to apply their faith values to sexual decision-making, or how to understand and express their sexuality in faith-informed ways.”[34] When education starts from a place of failure[35], restriction, and legalism, our sexual selves will inevitably be grounded in a more rigid, noncontextual, and shame-filled ethic.

Looking to Scripture, choosing a starting point of prevention is comparable to skipping over Genesis 1:1-2:4a where humanity is first rooted in the image of God, and instead, beginning with an understanding of humanity as shame-filled, fallen, and sinful. While both creation narratives reveal key components of humanity, beginning with goodness and belovedness rather than shame and brokenness necessarily affects one’s self-understanding and walk of faith. Similarly, if the starting point for education regarding sexuality is seen as intimately connected to one’s health and wholeness, our sexual selves will inevitably be grounded in a more positive and affirming ethic, particularly when grounded in the theological concepts of the *imago dei* and the love commandment as a means of grace.

First looking at the *imago dei,* in John Wesley’s sermon, “The Image of God,” he moves through our creation narratives by first lifting up what it means to have been created in the image of God seen in Genesis 1, where our understanding is just and clear, our will is rooted in God’s, our liberty is perfect, and our happiness is grounded in enjoyment.[36] Wesley then goes on to describe how we lost the *imago dei* when, in our liberty, the first humans chose to be God rather than to be in relationship with God, resulting in death for themselves and future

[34] Kate M. Ott, *Sex, Tech, and Faith: Ethics for a Digital Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022), 1.
[35] Ibid, 8.
[36] Wesley, Outler, and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, 14-16.

generations.[37] However, the good news is that through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ our *imago dei* is being restored. This renewal is marked by values of humility, charity, liberty rooted in the Spirit, and our resulting happiness as God's beloved.[38]

In this same spirit of the renewal of the *imago dei,* education surrounding sexuality, which precedes prevention education, should be values-based. Traditionally, there are three different starting points in developing a sexual ethic which are 1) behaviors, such as celibacy, 2) relationships, such as marriage as means of procreation, or 3) values.[39] In more recent years, a values-based approach has been embraced where discerning what is "good" is based on values which then inform one's decisions in relationships and regarding behaviors.[40] There are myriad values to undergird a sexual ethic that reflects health and wholeness, and in addition to Wesley's values of humility, charity, freedom, and happiness, Ott names values such as honesty, intimacy, sensuality, shame-free, pleasure-pleasing, consent, mutuality, and equality.

As people of faith created and renewed in the image of God, beginning with a value-based sexual ethic is strengthened by our call to follow the love commandment which marks all of our relationships. For John Wesley, "'the end of' every 'commandment is love [...]: the loving the Lord their God with all their heart, and their neighbor as themselves."[41] John Wesley was adamant about how this love was manifest through the means of grace as a response to being saved by faith. Looking specifically at how the love commandment informs our sexual ethic, in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach*, Ott describes the love commandment as a guideline for balancing our love for God, neighbor, and self, which includes supporting one's sexual health.[42]

---

[37] Ibid, 17.
[38] Ibid, 18-19.
[39] Ott, *Sex, Tech, and Faith: Ethics for a Digital Age*, 5.
[40] Ibid, 7.
[41] Wesley, Outler, and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, 158.
[42] Patricia Beattie Jung and Darryl W. Stephens, *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 16.

Another component of the love commandment as understood from a Wesleyan perspective is that it is both a means and an end to salvation itself. Wesley writes that "salvation [...] might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory."[43] For Wesley, the experiences of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace mark the salvific work of God in one's life and in the world. In turn, the love commandment is an ongoing call, guideline, means, and end to salvation. Similarly, in following the commandment to love God, neighbor, and self in the context of sexuality, cultivating a sexual ethic marked by values of humility, charity, honesty, consent, mutuality, etc. is also a means and end to salvation where "[health and wholeness] are a state of being that must be constantly evaluated, pursued and sustained."[44]

Looking at our case study of the GPUMC, the education regarding sexuality begins with prevention and harm reduction, similar to many church spaces. Implicitly, this starting point insinuates that our sexual ethic is grounded in failure, shame, and sin.[45] While this reveals some truth regarding the nature of sexual misconduct and the educational work needed, it is also incomplete. In an effort to truly support survivors of sexual misconduct, embracing a starting point for education that helps individuals develop a values-based sexual ethic rooted in the Wesleyan understandings of the *imago dei* and the love commandment, which ought to *then* be followed with conversations regarding prevention of sexual misconduct, including power imbalance and sacred trust, will better equip individuals of faith to be more healthy and whole as both a means and end to God's salvific work.

Third Commitment: Healing, Wesleyan Bands, and Base Christian Communities

---

[43] Wesley, Outler, and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, 373.
[44] Jung and Stephens, *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach*, 17.
[45] See Elliott W. Eisner's work on explicit, implicit, and null education found in *The Educational Imagination: On Design and Evaluation of School Programs,* 2nd ed.

When it comes to the work of healing needed for survivors of sexual misconduct, each individual will require unique support. Looking at the GPUMC, the unstipulated financial compensation offered to survivors grants freedom for individuals to discern what healing is necessary for them. In 2024, the General Conference of the UMC approved the update to Resolution #2044 titled “Sexual Misconduct within Ministerial Relationships.” Within this resolution, particularly in relation to this third commitment of healing resources, the only two entities that are specifically required to address healing related to sexual misconduct are the GCSRW and the Council of Bishops (COB). For GCSRW, as a general agency, they will provide healing resources for various constituencies, implement models for healing, and coordinate interagency support for the work of healing. For the COB, they are responsible for implementing policies and procedures, including but not limited to: “intervention and healing teams.”[46] Though this updated resolution was approved in 2024, the resolution was first adopted in 1996 and has been revised every quadrennium since with updated expectations for both GCSRW, the COB, and beyond.

Though the responsibility for healing has been assigned to these two entities, I find the idea of healing teams, imagined by the Council of Bishops, to be an important avenue of healing for survivors of sexual misconduct to specifically expand upon, particularly as it relates to our Wesleyan-Methodist history of community-building seen in bands, classes, and societies. John Wesley was clear of the importance of Christian fellowship, particularly in response to the controversy of quietism, as a means of nurturing and encouraging one’s growth in grace, while also providing different organizational models for community which grounded the early Methodist movement.[47] Bands, which were more uniquely Wesleyan compared to societies, were small groups ranging from 5-10 people, distinguished by gender and marital status, who

[46] Petition # 20541-IC-R2044-G approved at General 2024 replacing Resolution #2044 in the 2016 Book of Resolutions
[47] Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 114.

"banded" together for both spiritual growth and mutual support.[48] The Holy Club at Oxford was an example of an Anglican society which included regular prayer, study of Scripture, the classics, and divinity, attendance at Holy Communion, collection of money for the poor, and the direct outreach to the poor, elderly, and prisoners and their families.[49] Class meetings, which were also distinctly Wesleyan, met weekly in groups of about 12 in order to pray, study Scripture, confess, and support one another.[50] One of the most radical components of class meetings was that it provided space for ordinary, possibly illiterate, people to come together and find their voice through Scripture reading and education.[51]

The Wesleyan-Methodist history of classes and bands influenced the modern movement of "base Christian communities (BCCs)" seen throughout the church of Latin America.[52] BCCs are small groups for the poor to come together and study, pray, and, most notably, address contemporary concerns in light of the Scriptures.[53] In these spaces, the poor read the Bible in community, allow themselves to be challenged by the Word as it relates to their context, and situate themselves within oppression (as a consequence of their preferential option) in order to experience the fullness of liberation.[54] These communities are led *by* the poor, not just for the poor, as qualified subjects of liberation.[55]

The transformation experienced both in Wesleyan-Methodist bands, classes, and societies, as well as in BCCs throughout Latin America, is inspiring in regard to the exploration of healing teams for survivors of sexual misconduct. During the complaints process, there is a

---

[48] Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 114-115.
[49] Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, 117.
[50] Ibid., 119.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid, 120.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ignacio Ellacuría and Michael Edward Lee, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 59.
[55] Ibid.

natural isolation that occurs due to its confidential nature. While this confidentiality can be in survivors' best interests, it also inadvertently silences the experiences of survivors, siloing them from the possibility of processing in community. The Council of Bishops has a unique opportunity to channel its Wesleyan-Methodist history of small groups in order to create communities of healing for survivors. Applying the Wesleyan-Methodist small group model to healing teams, groups of 10-12 people could be assigned by gender, clergy or laity status, and possibly age, region, and sexual identity and orientation.[56] Within these groups, which would be led *by* survivors, a rhythm of life could be created grounded in prayer, study of Scripture in liberative ways,[57] partaking in the sacraments, collecting funds to support survivors of sexual misconduct locally and globally, serving other survivors either individually or as a group (if not traumatic), and storytelling with clear expectations of confidentiality.[58] Because of the isolated nature of the complaints process, there would need to be interagency support between the COB, GCSRW, and Annual Conferences in order to both protect the identity of survivors and to communicate the opportunity to those desiring healing in community after enduring the complaints process.

In light of the reality that the complaints process has been traumatic for other groups, particularly for LGBTQIA+ folks over the last five decades, it is important to acknowledge the overlap of harm, as well as the possible overlap of healing, available to both survivors and LGBTQIA+ folks. Joretta Marshall lifts up the unique positioning of LGBTQIA+ folks by saying

---

[56] While all genders experience sexual misconduct, gender can deeply influence the potential safety and comfort of these healing teams. I would recommend splitting based on two groups: 1) for those identifying as men and 2) for those identifying as women and nonbinary/trans folks.

[57] See Wilda C. Gafney's, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2017). Healing teams could use Gafney's sanctified imagination as a foundation for liberative biblical interpretations that center women's experiences in the Bible.

[58] In 2012, General Conference removed the requirement of confidentiality, and instead, opens the status of confidentiality to the discernment of the supervisory response in the case of a just resolution. See Overview of complaint process, January 11, 2017, https://www.gnjumc.org/content/uploads/2017/01/Overview-of-Complaint-Process-Jan-11-Clergy-Gathering.pdf.

that while conversations about sexuality are already “in the closet” because of their taboo nature, the reality for LGBTQIA+ folks is that their identities operate as a “closet within a closet,” not to mention the intersectionality that comes with closeting.[59] Since both groups are needing to “closet” their stories for various reasons, healing teams could be mutually beneficial so long as there is clarity regarding the level of safety and welcome for LGBTQIA+ participants in these shared spaces.

While healing is incredibly contextual to the needs of each survivor, the opportunity to create healing teams that center survivors by nurturing safe and brave spaces of spiritual growth, storytelling, and community-building grounded in the Wesleyan-Methodist tradition of classes, bands, and societies is a worthy place to start for the Council of Bishops.

Fourth Commitment: Trauma-Informed Responses, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and Power

In recent years, trauma-informed care and leadership has become an important topic of conversation for clergy in our efforts to provide the most effective pastoral care for congregants and communities. In regard to sexual misconduct specifically, there are innumerable ways that trauma-informed care can and should be integrated into the complaints process, as well as in conversations regarding sex and sexuality generally. With this wide scope, this section will simply address that one of the ways to further develop a trauma-informed response is to have an understanding of power, social location, and intersectionality. Like any injustice, the reality of sexual misconduct is socially embedded and influenced by the social structures of the world.[60] As discussed earlier, because disclosure of sexual misconduct requires interfacing with so many leaders, the likelihood that survivors are met with trauma-informed care is dependent upon each individual’s commitment to the education and practice of trauma-informed leadership. Not only

[59] Jung and Stephens, *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach*, 109.
[60] Karen Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Christian Account* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 46-47.

that, each individual that is involved in the complaints process for survivors (at minimum: District Superintendent, Bishop, and advocate) has their own unique social location which cannot be separated from power structures. For example, if a young, black clergywoman needs to disclose sexual misconduct to their district superintendent (DS) who is an older, white man, even if the DS is versed in trauma-informed care, there are already intersecting identities that might impact the comfort, safety, and likelihood of being believed for the clergywoman, including identities related to race, age, gender, and power with the DS operating as the clergywoman's supervisor.

In the moments of vulnerability required of survivors in disclosing sexual misconduct, the response received has the power to contribute to the survivor's healing or to further the damage.[61] With this, clergy and church leadership should be equipped with the critical thinking skills to analyze power, recognize intersectionality, and understand one's own social location as necessary for providing trauma-informed care. Traci West expands upon this saying that sexual misconduct as a universal concept cannot be separated from the particular identity of the one experiencing the injustice.[62] If we don't acknowledge a survivor's particularity, we are more likely to "ignor[e] or disadvantag[e] women by minimizing the significance of moral issues tied to concrete circumstances in their daily lives or related to their bodily integrity."[63] Furthermore, church leaders involved in the complaints process who are seeking to be trauma-informed have a responsibility to consider the particularity of each survivor, through a lens of power, intersectionality, and one's social location, while also acknowledging the broader social context.[64]

---

[61] Ibid, 101.
[62] Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 42.
[63] Ibid, 43.
[64] Ibid.

In many ways, the importance of practicing trauma-informed care through a lens of power, intersectionality, and one's social location, is a faithful response to the Wesleyan quadrilateral. As Wesleyan-Methodists, there are four sources of authority to help understand who God is in the world. While Scripture is the primary source of authority, one's own particular experience is also informative of who God is. When it comes to the crisis of sexual misconduct, the interpretation of God's Word, even of the challenging stories of sexual violence in the Bible, informs us of who God is, as does the unique experience of survivors. In the converse, if we choose to avoid or ignore problematic and violent biblical passages related to sexual misconduct, we can't know who God is when similar experiences of sexual misconduct occur today.[65] The Wesleyan quadrilateral is a tool for understanding who God is in all moments, including traumatic moments of sexual misconduct. It is the responsibility of Wesleyan-Methodists, but especially those involved in the complaints process, to pay attention not only to the survivors in Scripture, but also to the stories of survivors in our midst by acknowledging their particular experience, not just as a means of being trauma-informed, but also to better know how God is showing up amidst this particular pain.

Practically speaking for the GPUMC, providing trauma-informed care through a lens of power, intersectionality, and particularity, begins with equipping clergy and church leaders involved in the complaints process with the critical thinking skills to analyze the particular and social contexts surrounding the disclosure of sexual misconduct by the survivor. Another avenue to consider is how the GCSRW's Response Team Ministry for Sexual Misconduct might operate in order to respond to survivors directly, as well as to congregants, staff, and individuals involved when sexual misconduct occurs at a local church level as the resolution states.[66] Because power dynamics and intersectional identities can both prevent survivors from disclosing

[65] Traci C. West, "Ending Gender Violence: An Antiracist Intersectional Agenda for Churches," *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 2 (May 2020): 199–203, https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637320924015.
[66] Petition #20543-IC-R2043-G approved at General Conference 2024 to amend Resolution #2043 Response Team Ministry for Sexual Misconduct.

misconduct and cause survivors to be dismissed or not believed, an expanded role for the Annual Conference's Response Team Ministry might help mitigate this harm. In this expanded role, a diverse group of trauma-informed leaders who reflect the diversity of the GPUMC would be visible to the Conference so that when survivors come forward, the Response Team Ministry leaders are known entities and survivors have agency to connect with who they feel most comfortable with as an initial disclosure space that is safe and confidential. While this adds another step to the complaints process, ensuring that there is agency, transparency, and advocacy for survivors in their initial disclosure might help nurture a more trauma-informed response.

To truly honor the commitment of developing a trauma-informed response to the complaints process, there is much more to be considered.[67] However, a first step is to acknowledge that survivors' experiences of sexual misconduct are informative of who God is. In order to be pastoral in sensitive and traumatic moments like this, analyzing power, acknowledging intersectionality, and knowing one's own social location is necessary to empathetically meet survivors where they are at. The exploration of an expanded role of a potential GPUMC Response Team Ministry is a faithful next step to ensuring that there are trauma-informed structures in place, with trauma-informed leaders that survivors can trust, particularly in the initial disclosure of sexual misconduct.

Conclusion

Across the world, the crisis of sexual misconduct is pervasive, and its unique manifestation within the church, including across Wesleyan-Methodist traditions, is cause for concern as survivors continue to come forward at an increasing rate within our church spaces. At the most recent General Conference, an apology to survivors of sexual misconduct was read

[67] See Darryl Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Ministry" at https://darrylwstephens.com/trauma-informed-ethics/trauma-informed-ministry/

to the elected delegates of the UMC which included the following four commitments of change: 1) publicly apologize to survivors of sexual misconduct at each annual conference, 2) educate church leadership regarding power imbalance and sacred trust, 3) provide healing resources in complaint procedures, and 4) develop a trauma-informed response to complaints in sexual misconduct.

Using the Great Plains United Methodist Conference (GPUMC) as a case study for both the UMC and Wesleyan-Methodist traditions, first analyzing the current reality of these four commitments within the GPUMC revealed the starting point for this work. While steps toward change have occurred such as the reading of the apology at Annual Conference, the required education of prevention of sexual misconduct, and financial compensation for the healing of survivors who go through a complaints process, there is an opportunity for our Wesleyan-Methodist traditions to bring integrity to the adherence of these four commitments in practical ways. By embracing a more holistic apology and repentance for survivors of sexual misconduct, shifting the starting point in education from prevention to a values-based sexual ethic, exploring models of healing teams for survivors, and recognizing the importance of power, intersectionality, and particularity as a prerequisite for trauma-informed care in complaint procedures, our Wesleyan-Methodist traditions might concretely foster greater health and wholeness in our churches.

With this apology and these commitments being so timely, this Wesleyan-Methodist response is emerging. In the future, in order to better meet the needs of survivors today, conducting a new study in a post-pandemic world that reflects the global Wesleyan-Methodist communities will better assess the nature and prevalence of sexual misconduct, as well as uncover leaders, churches, and faith communities that are supporting survivors and nurturing health and wholeness related to sexuality. With a more global understanding of sexual misconduct, our Wesleyan-Methodist response will inevitably be more contextual, intercultural, and decolonial. In light of the decriminalization of LGBTQIA+ folks in the UMC, a more

intentional exploration of sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual identity in relationship to how sexual misconduct and the complaints process have been used to further harm LGBTQIA+ folks will be necessary as we lean into a more inclusive reality. Engaging with other disciplines such as nonprofit work, community organizing, and education will help deepen the holistic response to sexual misconduct as it manifests both within the church and within our communities.

As the world continues to evolve, and the work continues to emerge, our distinct Wesleyan-Methodist traditions will continue to sustain our baptismal call to resist the evils of sexual violence, misogyny, and homophobia within our churches and world, while also nurturing one another in Christian life rooted in health, wholeness, love, and justice, as we join in God's salvific work.

Bibliography

"Apology from the United Methodist Church to the Victims/Survivors of Sexual Misconduct." ResourceUMC, May 8, 2024. https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsrw/home/content/apology-statement-from-the-united-methodist-church.

Barber, William J., Liz Theoharis, R. H. Lowery, JD Jackson, and Erin Bennett. *Revive us again: Vision and action in moral organizing*. New York: Beacon Press, 2018.

"Bor #2046: Sexual Ethics as Integral Part of Formation for Ministerial Leadership." ResourceUMC, October 1, 2021. https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/um-sexual-ethics/home/content/bor-2046-sexual-ethics-as-integral-part-of-formation-for-ministerial-leadership.

Brueggemann, Walter, and Davis Hankins. *The prophetic imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018.

Ellacuría, Ignacio, and Michael Edward Lee. *Essays on history, liberation, and salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013.

Gafney, Wilda C. *Womanist Midrash: A reintroduction to the women of the Torah and the throne*. 1st ed. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2017.

Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and the people called Methodists*. 2nd ed. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013.

Jung, Patricia Beattie, and Darryl W. Stephens. *Professional sexual ethics: A Holistic Ministry approach*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.

"Liturgy: Service of Lament, Confession, and Hope." ResourceUMC, April 3, 2024. https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsrw/home/content/service-of-lament-confession-and-hope.

Murphy-Geiss, Gail. "Hospitable or Hostile Environment: Sexual Harassment in the United Methodist Church." *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 3 (2007): 260–72. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20447443.

Overview of complaint process, January 11, 2017. https://www.gnjumc.org/content/uploads/2017/01/Overview-of-Complaint-Process-Jan-11-Clergy-Gathering.pdf.

Ott, Kate M. *Sex, tech, and faith: Ethics for a Digital age*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022.

Peterson-Iyer, Karen. *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics: A feminist Christian account*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022.

Runyon, Theodore. *The New Creation: John Wesley's theology today*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998.

"Sexual Misconduct in the United Methodist Church: US Update." ResourceUMC, January 1, 2018. https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsrw/home/content/sexual-misconduct-in-the-united-methodist-church-us-update-general-commission-on-the-status-and-role.

Wesley, John, Albert C. Outler, and Richard P. Heitzenrater. *John Wesley's sermons: An anthology*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991.

West, Traci C. *Disruptive christian ethics: When racism and women's lives matter*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

West, Traci C. "Ending Gender Violence: An Antiracist Intersectional Agenda for Churches." *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 2 (May 2020): 199–203. https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637320924015.