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Renewing Connections: The Methodist Movement in a Time of Polarization
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The church faces a poly-crisis moment, but we have an opportunity to learn from our past and adapt the learnings from previous struggles to our current context. In our current reality, the United Methodist Church faces a polarized political environment, a crisis due to disaffiliations over theology, and ongoing systemic racism. Throughout our history, leaders of the United Methodist Church faced similar crises: during the American Revolution, the American Civil War, and modern fights and disaffiliations because of theology disagreements on human sexuality. When The Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church South reunited in 1939, leaders were so focused on survival (Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, 2012) that they sidestepped the work of actual healing and reconciliation. Ultimately, the reunification was tenuous, motivated by a desire to maintain a strategic advantage over other denominations rather than forged by theological reassessment and rebuilding.

In *The Radical Wesley: The Patterns and Practices of a Movement Maker*, Howard Snyder (2014) argues that the key to our modern Methodist denomination's future must be rooted in a shared history and vision for the future. Synder urges us to reclaim John Wesley's church polity. Specifically, he advocates for a return to class meetings and a readoption of Christian Conferencing for the General Conference. However, these efforts at community and denomination building will again be tenuous if we do not confront mistakes, practices, and decisions from our past that shape the current reality.

Snyder explores the early Wesleyan movement by exploring John Welsey's own season of spiritual renewal, and how his personal experience of God and community launched a movement that became a denomination. As the movement unfolds, we see numerous influences on Wesley's life, from his parents, his Anglican heritage, the devotion of the Moravians and the interactions with others with whom he shared his life of faith.

While seeking to deepen his connection with the Triune God, Wesley faced his own faith crisis. Snyder identifies these crises as:

1. "His sense of failure on returning from American in February 1738;"
2. "His 'heart-warming experience' on May 24, 1738;"
3. "HIs confrontation with the field preaching in April 1739;"
4. "His break with the Fetter Lane Society on July 1740."[1]

From these crises, Wesley sought a new direction in his life of faith and in his ministry. As a

[1] Snyder, H.A., 2014. *The radical Wesley: the patterns and practices of a movement maker*, p.13.

result, he became committed to the concept of transformation by grace, and how that transformation calls us to personal and social holiness. This holiness was a growth through grace that was both individual and communal, spiritual and embodied. “From the Moravians Wesley learned the inwardness of faith, but he insisted on balancing this with that steam of Anglican piety that insisted on holy living.”[2] In this way of thinking of holiness, Wesley believed in the balance of the two - loving God through acts of personal devotion (e.g. prayer, Biblical study) coupled with loving neighbor (e.g. outreach, connection).

Wesley sought to create communities where transformation by grace and growth in holiness could happen both individually and communal. Following the example of his own experience of the Holy Club in Oxford, which engaged in personal and social holiness activities together, Wesley started a movement that was based on accountability groups. Within the existing framework of the Church of England, Wesley started “Methodist societies that were soon divided into class and bands.”[3] These gatherings created communities that transformed believers, and created new radical ways of engaging faith which is why Snyder calls him a “radical.”

Class meetings created a weekly space for people to share “his or her spiritual progress, or on particular needs or problems, and receive the support and prayers of the others.”[4] Bands were usually “smaller and generally divided by age, sex and marital status,” and participants agreed to follow rules to help them “abstain from doing evil, to be zealous in good works, including giving to the poor, and to use all the means of grace.”[5] Select Societies were even smaller, and had the goal “for those appeared to be making marked progress toward inward and outward holiness, and also instituted separate groups for penitents.”[6] These groups built connections among believers, and helped participants engage in actions to help them live into the call to love God and neighbor.

In this paper, I will propose practical ways to use Synder’s renewal framework to engage in transforming conversations at the local church and the General Church levels of the institution. Through this dialogue, we have the opportunity to claim a theology that challenges existing power structures and dismantles colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative systems. With a practical application of Snyder’s framework and other relevant scholars, our ecclesiology may embrace the hope and promise of the original movement, but with a commitment to addressing past wrongs and learning from our ecclesiological ancestors to position the institution of the United Methodist Church to build communities for the future. Using a case study of systemic racism within the church, we will specifically evaluate how Snyder’s recommendations may be

[2] Ibid., p.46
[3] Ibid., p.54
[4] Ibid., p.54
[5] Ibid., p.59
[6] Ibid., p.61

modified to break through the polarization of the church to resist the larger culture of the United States.

Why Class Meetings Matter

The early Methodist movement took place during a time of revival in the Church of England. John Wesley and his contemporaries looked to the primitive Christian church as a model to be replicated. As Snyder writes, "Radical Protestantism consists of those church bodies which wanted to carry the Reformation through to a thorough restructuring of the church on a New Testament model."[7] With Welsey at the forefront of this movement, Snyder dubs him as a "radical" that originally used the model of "Anglican religious societies" which had "spread and became a mini-renewal movement."[8]

Starting this renewal through the Holy Club in Oxford, Wesley and his ban group met for actions of prayer, devotion, and worship, and then looked outward to become involved in the community of Oxford. Members of the group reached out to the poor and to the imprisoned. "The special concern of the religious societies for the poor and disadvantaged is especially noteworthy," Snyder writes, "in light of later Methodism."[9] Building on the success of his small group, Wesley sought to take this mini-renewal movement to other Anglican communities. In fact, Wesley put this model to use on a trip to the state of Georgia in England's North American colonies that would later become the United States. On the boat, members gathered as they had in Oxford. They made a schedule to devote themselves to prayer and study and also set aside time every afternoon for the teaching of both children and adults.[10]

In Wesley's vision, these meetings provided a space for people of various backgrounds to come together and share their journey of faith. "The primary purpose of these substructures of the Methodist societies was to support members' *responsible* participation in the transforming work of God's *grace.*[11] The groups were designed to help participants embrace a holy way of living as they engaged in activities that prompted both personal and social holiness.

As Snyder writes, the groups formed by Wesley helped the church live into the New Testament's vision of Christians sharing authentic life together. "Through the small group structure of the class meeting, biblical descriptions of what *should* happen in the church sprang to life."[12] This fit the vision of the Methodist movement as rooted in the primitive church, and helped participants grow in their faith as individuals and as a community of believers.

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[7] Ibid., p.8
[8] Ibid., p.15
[9] Ibid., p.15
[10] Ibid., p.20
[11] Maddox, R.L., 1994. *Responsible grace: John Wesley's practical theology*, p.212
[12] Snyder, p.37

As these groups met together, they engaged in conversations centered in personal and social holiness, or the love of God and neighbor. To help bring consistency to these group meetings, Wesley created questions for conversation and accountability. Though the list of Wesley's questions was extensive, the questions have often been simplified to three rules: Do no harm, do good, stay in love with God.[13] And while growing in grace was the primary goal of Wesley's small groups, the resulting connections with one another not only brought accountability, but also built community. With this model, connections formed between participants offered "mutual support" that "produced a deeper level of healing" than could be found through connection or confession to a past alone.[14] As Snyder explains, "without this intimate form of community, believers were not, in fact, bearing one another's burdens; encouraging and exhorting one another; really coming to know each other; speaking truth in love."[15] This accountability among the groups provided a space where true conversation and struggles could be shared. Through these conversations, people got to know one another through questions that explored life and faith.

Wesley's early bands in Bristol were homogenous in some aspects: "There were women's bands, men's bands, even boys' bands" that were further "grouped by marital status." The goal of this segregation was to lead to authentic conversations.[16] But while this homogeneity did exist, there was diversity in background, cultural and socio-economic status inside the gendered groups.

At the time when the groups were formed, a larger struggle for workers rights in England was unfolding. "The rioting around Bristol was part of a larger pattern of unrest during the period 1738-40 sparked by high corn prices, low wages and the oppressive poverty of the new class of urban workers."[17] As the Methodist community formed with the poor and impoverished, burdens felt by group members were shared. While some group participants may not have personally known what it was like to be poor in changing English cites, the Methodist movement made room for their voices to be heard and for their needs to be addressed. As Snyder writes, it is with those whom others neglected that the movement found a foothold. "The Wesleyan Revival had begun. From the beginning it was a movement largely for and among the poor, those whom 'gentlemen' and 'ladies' looked on simply as part of the machinery of the new industrial system."[18] Suddenly they were in a movement that not only cared for their spiritual selves, but also their physical needs as well.

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[13] Job, R.P., 2007. *Three simple rules: a Wesleyan way of living.*
[14] Snyder, p.38
[15] Ibid., p.37
[16] Heitzenrater, R.P.,. *Wesley and the people called Methodists*, p.114-115
[17] Snyder, 32
[18] Ibid., 33

John Wesley modeled this work himself. After hearing the plight of coal miners, he engaged in work to improve their lives on multiple levels. “Wesley worked tirelessly for their spiritual and material welfare. Among other things, he opened free dispensaries, set up a kind of credit union and established schools and orphanages.”[19] He encouraged other Methodists to do the same, and as they lived out their call to social holiness, their lives were transformed as they also worked for societal change. As the Methodist movement grew, this model was replicated. And as they deepened their understanding of the economic needs of those in poverty, the Methodists started programs to provide direct aid to those in need. This included meal assistance and funding from the common purse for other immediate needs.

As the Methodist movement moved into the North American colonies that would become the United States, the spirit of the groups in England helped to form a community across the Atlantic Ocean. Like the groups Wesley started in England, these small groups lead to the transformation of lives as they lived into the call of holiness. “Society membership required participation in Sunday services, the Lord’s Supper, and especially the weekly class meetings, which provided continued solidarity and consciousness-raising with the new recruits’ fellow believers.”[20] This consciousness raising compelled these groups to become involved in social issues in the newly-forming country.

Methodist spirit groups in North America “covenanted together to transcend the world’s nations of kinship, they addressed one another as brother and sister, though of different neighborhood, family, class, and race.”[21] While these groups helped individuals from diverse backgrounds connect with one another in a way that led to transformation, they also created an environment with disagreements and misunderstandings. And while there was conflict and tension, the groups did live into Wesley’s call for primitive Christianity: to be authentic with one another, striving for unity even in differences.

Replicating Wesley’s model, the model of class, band and society groups allowed similar cross sections of the population to encounter one another in order to provide for individual needs as they also fought for societal change. As it had in England, the movement intentionally created space for those who were otherwise overlooked by the larger society. “For women and men locked into positions of filial subservience, tenantry, servitude, and slavery,” these societies provided not only connection, but also individuals working together to abolish slavery.[22]

As Snyder states, these societies led to transformation in personal and social holiness. And

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[19] Ibid., 86

[20] Andrews, D.E. and Andrews, D., 2002. *The methodists and revolutionary America, 1760-1800: the shaping of an evangelical culture*, p.93

[21] Richey, R.E., 1991. Early American Methodism. Religion in North America, p.20

[22] Andrews, D.E. and Andrews, D., 2002. *The methodists and revolutionary America, 1760-1800: the shaping of an evangelical culture*, p.95

through their service, "the whole Methodist system in fact encouraged the kind of spiritual growth in which useful charisms would spring forth and be put into redemptive service."[23]In other words, the connections made within the small groups compelled individuals to use their gifts to participate in the transformation of the world. "It was a mass movement of people coming to know the power of God and the power of genuine Christian community in their daily lives."[24] Many Methodists were counted among advocates for workers rights, women's rights, and the abolition of slavery. This model helped to expand the Methodist movement, and made it the fastest growing denomination within the United States.

Our Modern Political Reality in the United States

The Pew Research Center has been researching political polarization in the United States over many years. From 2016 to 2022, data in Pew-sponsored opinion polls showed a significant decline in how Republicans and Democrats, the two major political parties in the United States, saw one another. At the end of Barack Obama's tenure as President, there was an increased sense of division in the country. That division was present within the following election cycle between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. These two events in the not-too-distant past exposed issues that the nation has yet to adequately address.

But after four years of the Donald Trump presidency and two years of the Joe Biden presidency, "72% of Republicans regard Democrats as more immoral, and 63% of Democrats say the same about Republicans." Additionally, "72% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats say people in the opposing party are more dishonest than other Americans."[25] This mistrust of one another makes it difficult to connect with others in transformational conversations. Further research shows that people are concerned with having political conversations with those that have a different opinion than they do. "Around six-in-ten U.S. adults (61%) say having political conversations with people they disagree with is generally "stressful and frustrating,"[26] These statistics reveal a stark reality; individuals both distrustful of people they disagree with *and* afraid to engage in conversation with one another. A lack of connection could lead to deepened polarization in the United States.

On January 6th, 2020, the United States witnessed an attack on the Capitol building that fully exposed this polarization as radical conservatives tried to stop the counting of the Electoral College votes which would officially solidify President Biden's election. While Trump supporters waved flags, and expressed racist, homophobic and sexist viewpoints, polarization influenced how Republican and Democrats viewed the violence. "Around half of Republicans

[23] Snyder, p.98
[24] Snyder, p.125
[25] Pew Research Center, 2022. *As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System.*
[26] Pew Research Center, 2023. *Americans' feelings about politics, polarization and the tone of political discourse.*

and GOP leaners said Trump either bore a lot (18%) or some responsibility (34%) for the riot. But nearly as many (46%) said he bore no responsibility at all."[27] From the other side, "an overwhelming majority of Democrats and Democratic leaners (95%) placed at least some blame for the riot on Trump, including around eight-in-ten (81%) who said he bore a lot of responsibility for it."[28] Even when evaluating events that unfolded in the media in real time, this research shows how partisan polarization influenced the way that citizens tried to make sense of the violence that unfolded.

While available data research on polarization may not show a direct causal link to political violence, it may help explain the recent reaction to the assisination attempt on Former President Trump in early July.[29] In the coverage of the event, both the Conservative Right and Far Progressive Left provided contemporary analysis from their political encampments that demonized opponents and justified problematic behavior from fellow partisans. The Conservative Right rallied around Trump, with many (including Trump himself) claiming divine providence for why he survived the assisination attempt)."'It was God alone who prevented the unthinkable from happening,' Trump wrote in the immediate aftermath of the shooting."[30] This sentiment was also shared by both clergy and political leaders, who continue to assert that Trump is a divinely chosen leader for the United States. This perspective, however, does not even attempt to offer a theological explanation for why God did not also save the Trump supporter who was also killed at the rally.

The Far Progressive Left started circulating conspiracy theories with some theorizing that the attempt had been staged. "Some social media users even falsely claimed that Trump faked the blood coming from his ear with a 'blood pill.'"[31]This commentary analyzed the lack of reaction of the crowd around Trump, and his ability to offer a sign of power as he was taken off the stage by the Secret Service.[32] The Far Progressive Left also failed to explain how a staged shooting would leave one supporter dead and others critically injured.

While President Biden called a press conference in order to call for unity in the country while denouncing that political violence is never the answer, the two camps continued to stay in their politically divisive corners on social media. Pastors and churches were largely in the middle, with many United Methodists bishops calling for prayers for Trump, the nation and unity.

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[27] Gramlich, J., 2022. *A look back at Americans' reactions to the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol*
[28] Ibid.
[29] Kleinfeld, R., 2023. *Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says*
[30] Holmes, K., Treene, A. and Contorno, S., 2024. *An unusually reflective Trump suggests divine intervention in aftermath of rally shooting*
[31] Sanders, K., 2024 *Fact-checking the wild conspiracy theories related to the attempted Trump assassination*
[32] Klepper, D., 2024. *'One screen, two movies': Conflicting conspiracy theories emerge from the Trump rally shooting.*

We could hope that the seriousness of this moment would automatically lead to reconnection and new conversation between those in polarized factions in the church. But until we engage in new behaviors and new practices, there is little reason for optimism.

Polarization in the church and the political worlds that makes it difficult to find connection also erodes trust in otherwise non-political contexts. Discussions around Biblical calls to work for justice, welcome the immigrant, and to feed the hungry have become political issues rather than spiritual ones. Further research shows that people are concerned with having political conversations with those that have a different opinion than they do. "Around six-in-ten U.S. adults (61%) say having political conversations with people they disagree with is generally "stressful and frustrating," [33] These statistics reveal a stark reality - individuals are not only distrustful of people from another political persuasion, but are also afraid to engage in conversation with one another. A lack of connection could lead to deepened polarization in the United States.

As historian Martin E. Marty writes, conversation is important in order to ensure that politics and religion are used for the common good. As Marty writes, conversation provides "unexpected insights and unanticipated resources from the other side. Conversation encourages risk, allows for experiment, and promises fresh angles of vision."[34] He goes on to say that the United States will not thrive without conversations with one another. Perhaps as we engage in authentic conversations with those who have faced racial injustice, or hear the story of a recent immigrant or eat a meal with someone who has faced issues of poverty we will start to break through the politicizing of issues. Through transforming conversations we have the opportunity to see the humans that are impacted by these issues. And by remembering the call of the Gospel, maybe these conversations will prompt a renewal within the church and recapture the radicalness of the original Wesleyan movement.

Snyder and the Current Struggle

In Snyder's vision for church renewal, a return to the early Wesleyan model of small groups is central to healing and growth. Snyder asserts that an embrace of Wesley's organizational structure led to deepened connections inside those in class, society and band meetings, as well as opportunities to be participants to be agents in fellow group members' transformation. As Snyder explains, "*the renewing movement uses some form of small group structure."*[35] Congregations in The United Methodist Church have long been encouraged to have a robust small group ministry,

[33] Pew Research Center, 2023. Americans' feelings about politics, polarization and the tone of political discourse.
[34] Marty, M.E. and Moore, J., 2000. Politics, religion, and the common good: advancing a distinctly American conversation about religion's role in our shared life, p.20.
[35] Snyder, 138

and the small group framework for talking about faith and life with one another is often a nominal goal for the ministry. But Snyders encourages us to go further. "*The renewal structure is mission-oriented…*it will stress practical ethics, attempting to combine faith and love, belief with everyday life."[36] The question for us, then, if we are to follow Snyder's plan, is: How can small groups move beyond simple relationship building to promote a mission centered on practical ethics, and re-embrace personal and social holiness?

Of course, our modern world is a little different than John Welsey's 1700s; there are elements of the early Wesleyan model that are difficult to replicate in today's United Methodist Church without some intention. One key challenge we must address is the homogeneity of many of our congregations. Simply put: 21st century congregations often lack the racial and socioeconomic diversity that was a hallmark of early Methodist small groups.

The Missouri Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church recently sought to deepen churches' awareness of the need for proactive race and culture work, and to provide support for congregations willing to participate in diversity conversations. A part of that initiative, the Conference commissioned a 2021 survey of 2,541 respondents self-selected to share insights about the approximately 144,000 United Methodists in Missouri, USA.

Using the Missouri Annual Conference as a case study, respondents revealed important demographic information as well as caveats regarding the United Methodist Church, the Missouri Annual Conference and the state of Missouri:

- "In line with the UMC as a whole, the survey population was heavily skewed toward older people. More than half of respondents were 65 and older (52.16%) and nearly 87% were over 45. Only 3.52% were under 35. Among the general population, however, only 17.7% of Missourians are over 65, and 34.9% are 18-45.*"
- "Like the UMC, survey respondents were overwhelmingly white (83.56%). The next largest groups were Black/African American (8.59%) and "prefer not to say" (3.89%). Missouri is about 84% white, so the official white response is not out of line with the context. Non-white survey response, however, is lower than the state's populations: 12% of Missourians are Black, and 4.5% are Hispanic."
- "Women are over-represented relative to the general population in many denominations, including the UMC. 55.16% of respondents were female, and 41.43% were male."[37]

What this reveals is that the Missouri Annual Conference, and the United Methodist Church overall, is older, whiter and more female than the larger population. What these statistics do not tell us, though ,is the socio-economic and class breakdown or educational background of

[36] Ibid., 139

[37] Annandale, N. and Dorminy, M., 2021. *Missouri Race and Culture Survey.*

members to make informed comparisons with the groups of Wesley's day.

Though the research is lacking in some aspects, it is illuminating in others. Of the respondents surveyed, a majority of participants noted a commitment to anti-racism work.

- "85% said it is important to them that the conference work against racism."
- "For example, about 65% of respondents ages 18-34 said this was very important, while only 57% of those 55 and older said so. Similarly, about 89% of African American respondents said dismantling racism is very important, while only 57% of white respondents agreed."
- When it comes to discussing racism, 90% of participants indicated a willingness to engage in difficult conversations regarding race. However,"only about 9% of respondents are uncomfortable discussing equity and justice, nearly 27% and nearly 30% are uncomfortable talking about white privilege and white supremacy, respectively."[38]

One insight we can take from this survey is that while participants may indicate a desire to dismantle racism in the Missouri Annual Conference, there is also discomfort associated with discussing issues related to being white in a Conference and state that is overwhelmingly white. A few quotes from the research report highlight this hesitation. "We should be very careful how we approach this subject. It can easily offend people," wrote one participant. Rural respondents were also very cognizant of how conversations about race would intersect with the larger, polarized media landscape of the United States. "The language we use is a nonstarter in the rural conservative church. It feels like one more wedge between the church and them. Find language they don't hear Tucker Carlson [a former Fox News television host] screaming about."[39]

The Wesleyan band, class, and society model was used as a way to break down barriers between individuals so that through authentic community lives might be transformed. To use this model effectively, we must be willing to be uncomfortable in conversations as we listen and share from our experiences. In hearing one participant share of an experience within the local church of "a man who would greet people at the front door of a church wearing a Confederate Flag hat…When I asked about the hat, the PPR committee told me that was 'my family's problem' because my family "did not respect his heritage."[40] Perhaps one such story, shared using the Wesleyan model to open conversations about experiences of racism in the local church, might break through discomfort and lead to human connection.

Reimagining Snyder's Framework

[38] Annandale, N. and Dorminy, M., 2021. *Missouri Race and Culture Survey.*
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

If we are to apply Snyder's exact framework for living into the radicalism of Wesley's class, band, and society meetings, the efforts would likely fall short in today's polarized environment. In many communities, people with similar backgrounds and similar wealth profiles would be in conversation with one another, which would not lead to the transforming conversations of the early movement.

However, the Wesleyan model may be able to break through this polarization if we reimagine the way that we use the connection within the United Methodist Church. Within the larger United Methodist connection, we have access to the diversity of the early Methodist movement. There are churches found within inner urban cores, churches in suburban contexts, and churches in rural areas. We have churches that serve recent immigrants, the poor and imprisoned, and the upper class. Sometimes, these congregations are just miles — or city blocks — from each other. Without an intentional change in approach, self-segregated homogenous communities will stay separate, and stay polarized.

As the research shows the polarization between these specific contexts, we have to submise that this polarization is reflected within connectionalism. For example, this diversity of contexts and ministry is present within my own Missouri Annual Conference, and yet we are not often in authentic conversation with one another. We have drifted far from Wesley's call for Christian Conferencing.

Participants may at first resist authentic conversation with one another, "given the way persons in the public arena regularly attack one another," so that participants want to create an"idea of the small group as a safe haven from criticism is attractive."[41] Looking back to the Missouri Annual Conference case study, it may be difficult at first to ask participants to engage in conversations that may broach difficult topics such as white privilege. "But (avoidance) comes at a heavy price: the loss of the kind of conversation that leads most readily to spiritual growth."[42] If we are going to break through the polarization of the United States today, we must be willing to step into groups and conversations as diverse as the small groups of the Wesleyan past.

Perhaps this call is exactly what we need at this time. What would it look like for the United Methodist Connection to lean into the diversity that exists within the connection — if not in individual congregations — to create small groups with the goal of authentic Christian Conferencing that Wesley envisioned more than 200 years ago? What would it look like for the diversity represented in our congregations to be present in transformational dialogue that might disrupt today's polarization in the way that the early groups did?

Reimagined and new small groups could center around the questions of the early Wesleyan

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[41] Knight, H.H., 2001. *Eight life-enriching practices of United Methodists,* p.79
[42] Ibid., 79

questions of self examination, to use these questions as a process by which the individuals in these groups could continue to be transformed by grace. These questions would, as Wesley had intended, help individuals grow in their personal holiness.

There is also the potential to engage in transformational conversations that help promote social holiness. Questions such as, "Do I pray about the money I spend?" and, "Am I defeated in any part of my life?" could illuminate differences of personal and social realities.[43]

In Snyder's vision for these groups, this model would put a high priority on connectional opportunities that lead to authentic connection. "As a community, the renewal movement prizes face-to-face relationships, mutuality, and interdependence."[44] Through deep sharing, and the creation of mutually interdependent relationships, perhaps the model that Welsey envisioned would take new shape. But, "believers must be ready to take some agreed responsibility for their own lives and for the lives of their sisters and brothers in the faith."[45] This will take an engagement in conversations that make us uncomfortable. It will be tackling topics that cross the barriers of race, gender, socio-economic realities, and urban and rule divides. While difficult, these groups have the potential to lead to personal and social transformation, and will help the church move through this moment of crisis as a unified body, living into the vision of the primitive church and of the renewing spirit of the Methodist movement.

Conclusion

John Wesley's vision of renewal through connection with God and with one another transformed the church. His small group model was replicated by many communities of faith, and created space for individuals to be in authentic and accountable relationships with others. This model has the potential to create space for transformational conversations if we are willing to break out of our homogeneous groups, and to create relationships with those from different backgrounds. Like Wesley and his early adapters, we need to intentionally create space to form relationships with those of different races, various socioeconomic backgrounds, and across urban, suburban and rural contexts.

The potential for this transformation goes beyond the church. Wesley's model was used to influence the political sphere as well. Because of connections and skills developed in small groups , early Methodists became involved in advocacy efforts to support those often overlooked by society. Indeed, "many of the Methodists who became involved in political action did so out of a sense of divine mission."[46] As they did, they not only addressed a crisis within the church,

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[43] United Methodist Communications, 2024. *John Wesley's 22 questions of self examination.*
[44] Snyder, p.139
[45] Ibid., p.160-161
[46] Wesley, J., 1998. *Political writings of John Wesley. Primary sources in political thought.* p.10

but also a crisis in the larger society.

Beyond political involvement, the Methodist movement also influenced the way that political parties organized in both England and the United States. In England, this small group model and "its taut, complex structure devised by Wesleywas subsequently adopted by the Chartist movement and, eventually, by the Labour Party itself."[47] Wesley's push for personal and social holiness ended up influencing more than just the Methodist movement, but England as a whole.

The United States is currently in a similar space as when the Wesleyan movement found a new foothold in Bristol. The wealth gap is growing, families are still struggling to afford food in the face of inflation, and employees' wages cannot keep up with expenses.[48] In engaging in transformation conversations, there is the potential for this new movement to break through the polarization to find a new unity that connects people both inside and outside of the church.

In a study conducted by Stefano Balietti, Lise Getoor, Daniel G. Goldstein and Duncan J. Watts in 202, researchers found that one way that we can reduce political polarization in the United States is to engage in conversation with those who think differently than us. "Informal political discussions with peers can increase trust in democracy and improve understanding of self and others."[49] But, as the Missouri Case Study cited above highlights, this work can only work if we have the courage and a hospital space in which to engage in conversations on difficult topics. The research shows that this is hard for two reasons: we are afraid to engage in something that might cause conflict, and we generally engage in conversations with friends of similar backgrounds as our own.[50] "According to the incidental model, friendship networks arise mostly out of some combination of shared social contexts (e.g., school, work, or church…)" and conversations in these networks are mostly apolitical, though they occasionally stray into politics. Given this reality, perhaps this transformational model would help us break out of our comfort zone, and have conversations with those who are not like us.

This same research offers a proposal for breaking down barriers similar to that of Wesley's earlier model. But this time, instead of face-to-face conversations, participants read essays of other participants to get to know a bit of their stories. In so doing, the study was able to affirm the "Common Ingroup Identity Model" that contends that cooperative interactions between out-group members leads to recategorization as members of a larger, more inclusive in-group, which, in turn, can reduce out-group prejudice."[51] By engaging in interactions with one another, we can

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[47] Wesley, J., 1998. *Political writings of John Wesley. Primary sources in political thought*. p.10

[48] Goodkind, N., 2023. *American inequality is rising despite higher wages*

[49] Balietti, S., Getoor, L., Goldstein, D. and Watts, D.. *Reducing opinion polarization: Effects of exposure to similar people with differing political views*

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

reduce disconnection and polarization, and create spaces for unity. In fact, the research has indicated that “similar effects can be generated through imagined contact or via priming with unifying themes.” Indeed, just imagining cooperating with a member of the other party can actually start to break down polarization.

As the research affirms, the Wesleyan small group model can create positive spaces and conversations that transform lives, congregations, and even the political reality in the United States. Perhaps, like the early Methodist movement, we can be radical in the ways that we reach out to one another regardless of barriers to create authentic and renewing relationships. And as our lives are changed, perhaps we can help the church and our nation address this poly-crisis moment in a positive way that leads to the transformation of the world to which Christ calls us.

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