Conferencing: A Means of Grace in Process

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+ **A Way of Being Church**

Russell Richey has noted that conferencing is a distinctively American Methodist manner of being the church, and that conferencing is at the spiritual center of who we are, how we are energized for mission and how we define ourselves.[1]

I want to sketch ways of conferencing in the Methodist Church, and later the United Methodist Church. Each has been an adaptation to the past and each has been a contribution to the future.

- The early Methodist Conferences
- Robert's "Rules of Order"
- Spiritual Discernment (or "Holy Conferencing")
- Negotiation (Mediation and Dialogue).

Each of these has strengths and weaknesses and the effectiveness of any of these practices is by influenced by the leader who presides. For example, one can, in any of these models, abuse the privilege of presidency.

The *early Methodist conferences* provide a template for the ongoing doctrinal and disciplinary work. *Robert's Rules" has* its origin in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1876, as an adaptation of congressional practices for ordinary groups. *Spiritual discernment* has been a core practice in the history of Christian spirituality, for both individuals and groups, across a number of traditions. And *negotiation* often originates in a legal context, with examples in political processes (Northern Ireland), amidst violence and disasters (Post 9/11, BP Oil Spill) and in religious denominations (in the U.S., the Episcopal, Presbyterian and United Methodist Church).

My motivation to undertake this reflection is that I have been influenced by each of these models. Earlier in ministry I studied with both Danny Morris and Chuck Olsen, authors of books on individual and corporate discernment.[2] I led a church that made

[1] Russell E. Richey, The Methodist Conference in America (Nashville: Abingdon: 1996), p. 14.
[2] Discerning God's Will Together (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999).

its decisions through principles of discernment. I have also encountered legitimate skepticism about the practice of discernment, and have witnessed its abuse. Two notable traditions with Christian spirituality for discernment are the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises (which will be explored here) and the Quaker Clearness Committee. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is also a potential framework for discernment.

Early Methodist Conferencing

The first Methodist Conferences (1744ff.) were focused on three questions:

- *what to teach,*
- *how to teach*
- and *what to do.*[3]

John Wesley and to a lesser extent Charles was the theological source and authority of the early Methodist movement. The origins of these conferences were in Oxford and then Bristol, concurrent with the revival, taking place first annually and then quarterly. The purpose of these conferences was the development of a connectional form of accountability.[4]

The successor to Wesley's growing authority came to be lodged in these first conferences. These were very small gatherings, called together by the founder, for the purpose of articulating a common theological understanding and a working definition of authority.

They gathered, Wesley would write later, "to consider how we should proceed to save our own souls and those who heard us."[5] The term conference, he would further state, "meant not so much the conversation we had together as the persons that conferred". These early conferences were small in number or scale, all anglo, and all male, with a very clear authority structure. There are thus limitations to a kind of nostalgia for the early Methodist meetings. Yet they give us guidance in how the movement transitioned beyond the initial experience of grace to an expanding mission with an accompanying structure.

Immediately the conversation turned to the matter of inclusion (could laity be present?) and how members were bound to agreements to which they themselves were not persuaded as individuals. The work quickly turned to questions of doctrine and later

[3] John Wesley, edited by Albert Outler. New York: Oxford Press, 1964. P. 136.
[4] See Richard Heitzenreiter, Wesley and the People Called Methodists (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 119, p. 158).
[5] Outler, Ibid.

discipline, which included the rules and how the work would be distributed (this echoed the early church's conversation in Acts 6). There is a recurring focus on what it means to be a holiness movement, how this is understood and misunderstood, and how it can be practiced at the local level. Missional questions also arose, related to field preaching and engagement with the poor.

The shift to American Methodist conferences (1784ff.) is very much shaped by the leadership of Francis Asbury. I want to name four tensions here:

- the relationship between episcopacy and democracy;
- the relationship between a church and a society
- the relationship between the doctrinal and the practical;
- and the relationship between evangelism and antislavery.

Each of these tensions, present from the very beginnings of American Methodism, is very much with us now. Laceye Warner has also noted the pressures on our forms of conferences given numerical decline in the United States and numerical growth in international contexts.[6]

We are struggling at present with how antiracism is integral to discipleship and sanctification, how power should be distributed, with solutions that are pragmatic but raise perplexing theological issues, and how discipline can be both contextual and global.

Robert's "Rules of Order"

As a bishop the act of presiding at annual and general conferences is deeply shaped by Robert's "Rules" and parliamentary procedure. I experienced training with Leonard Young in preparation for two general conferences. The strength of this method is that it is clear and a wise leader's role is to be fair and to care for the body as it does its work. A weakness is that the rules can seem arcane to most participants and can be manipulated by insiders. And since the motivation for participation in the body is (often) religious, parliamentary procedure can seem disconnected from that.

The origin of Robert's "Rules of Order" can be traced to General Henry M. Robert, who in 1876 simplified legislative procedures of the House of Representatives of the United States and adapted them for use in meetings of ordinary groups. As a form of parliamentary procedure, these rules are based on two assumptions—that the majority will allow the minority to speak, and that the minority will abide by the will of the majority.

[6] Laceye Warner, The Method of our Mission (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), chapter seven.

Fundamental values with Robert's Rules are fairness and equality among participants, the wisdom of the gathered assembly, the expectation of disagreement, and the need for business to be conducted and to flow in an orderly manner. The role of the presider is to be impartial—not to show favoritism, to be consistent and to bring clarity to the body about the work at hand.

Within the rules there is great specificity about motions (or matters of substance) before the body and their priority or precedence, what can be amended or not, what can be debated or not, the threshold of voting (majority or 2/3), what can be interrupted and what can be reconsidered. Obviously, power imbalances occur between those who know the rules (and can navigate their complexity) and those who do not.

Along with the Book of Discipline and the Rules of Order of the General Conference, Robert's Rules of Order form the basis for the legislative work carried out by delegates. Theologically, the assumptions underneath the practice of conferencing in this way are that God speaks through the common voice of the faithful, that God speaks at times through the prophetic voices of the marginalized, and that the work of God is to be done in good order and without confusion.

Spiritual Discernment

Over time a dissatisfaction with Robert's Rules has emerged, for the above named reasons. The natural emergent question then was to seek an alternative. A more "spiritual" way of doing the work was one option, and leaders in some contexts began to look to the tradition for guidance.

One of the resources that many Christians find helpful is the Jesuit practice of spiritual discernment. Jesuits are a religious order within the Catholic Church, and their lives are shaped by the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. John Wesley was an enthusiastic reader of the Spiritual Exercises and Pope Francis is a Jesuit.

The Jesuit model of discernment, which is five hundred years old, is very simple, and it is based upon asking fundamental questions.

- Does this decision lead me to a sense of peace, freedom and consolation?
- Am I excited and energized?
- Does it seem that a door is opening?
- Or does this decision lead me to the sense of sadness, depression and desolation?
- Am I despondent and discouraged?
- And does it seem that a door is closing?

The Holy Spirit, according to the Jesuit tradition, is always on the side of consolation. When God places a gift within us, there is rejoicing when that gift is discovered and released. This spiritual practice takes time for a sense of feeling to settle over a person; and this feeling also comes when the individual claims the gift and moves forward, at least mentally, in the direction of that gift and away from others.

Discernment is the practice of seeking to make decisions that are consistent with the will of God. Spiritual discernment is not relevant to actions that are moral or immoral. And spiritual discernment is always enhanced when our own internal testing of a decision is weighed alongside the wisdom and insight of a trusted spiritual friend. This is the value of corporate discernment.

Many of us have had the experience of needing to make a difficult decision. At times the right path is not obvious, and at other times we may not trust our instincts or intuitions. The choice may not be between good and bad; it may be more nuanced, between two paths that have their own merits, neither better or worse than the other. How do we make these decisions? And, in the context of conferencing, how do we make these decisions in groups?

Negotiation

As a bishop I felt along the way a growing need for a deeper and different kind of training in relation to conferencing.

I sensed that a simple deference to the early tradition was rooted in a kind of nostalgia. Robert's Rules did seem foreign to the work of God in listening for the movement of the Holy Spirit. And yet spiritual discernment as a practice was met with both enthusiasm and suspicion.

I often found myself in conversations (small and larger) with attorneys, activists, media, advocates and persons who had initiated complaint processes against each other, and how had done harm to each other. This became more clear as I served as one of the moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward (UMC). I attended the Harvard Program on Negotiation and later was a participant in the Protocol for Grace and Reconciliation through Separation with Kenneth Feinberg. A strength of negotiation is that it listens to the needs and desires of all parties, seeks clarity and mutual benefit, and generates creative options. At its best it avoids winners and losers and prevents further harm. A key issue and potential problem is the dynamic and distribution of power, which is also present in the other two methods.

Questions at the heart of how the work is done are:

- What are the interests (needs, concerns, fears) of those present?[7]
- How do we manage our differences?
- How do we experience and interpret hierarchy and equality?
- How are unity and uniformity, convergence and divergence present?
- How do we allow for decentralization?
- And how do we know and articulate the will of God?
- Is conferencing an end in itself, or is it for a larger purpose? (What to teach…)

Conferencing Again

In his work on conferences, Richey again speaks of our three forms of conferences as having distinctive purposes:

- charge conferences were about *revival*,
- annual conferences were about *fraternity*,
- and general conferences were about *polity*.[8]

To update the language, I would describe these purposes as *spirituality, community* and *governance*. And here I would locate the movement of grace and the needs of the mission within both spirituality and community.

Conferencing will continue to take place, as we discern and design the mission, distribute resources, seek to understand what it means to be in relationship to God and each other, and reckon with our biases and histories. Former bureaucracies and mechanisms will necessarily give way to more organic and flattened organizational frameworks. We will desire community and yet continue to need the goods that institutions provide. How we determine all of this is the work of authorized leaders, and my interest is in doing this work more faithfully, effectively, and intentionally.

+ **Facets of Conferencing: Scale and Size, Trust, Cultural and Convicted Humility, Ecclesial Praxis**

In our origins Methodist conferences were smaller and more homogeneous in composition. So what then can we translate from that historic reality? How can conferencing serve as an alternative to both extreme individualism and extreme centralization? Or, to say it another way, how is conferencing a needed mediating

[7] See Nancy Rogers, Robert Bordone, Frank Sander and Craig McEwen, Designing Systems and Processes for Managing Disputes (New York: Wolters Kluwer, 2019), pp. 69ff.
[8] Richey, pp. 22ff.

practice (between the individual/group and the institution) that maximizes the promise of diversity and choice while minimizing the danger of polarization and division. [9]

This is relevant to David Brooks' work on rebuilding *social trust*. In The Atlantic he writes:

"The key to making decentralized pluralism work still comes down to one question: Do we have the energy to build new organizations that address our problems, the way the Brits did in the 1830s and Americans did in the 1890s? Personal trust can exist informally between two friends who rely on each other, but social trust is built within organizations in which people are bound together to do joint work, in which they struggle together long enough for trust to gradually develop, in which they develop shared understandings of what is expected of each other, in which they are enmeshed in rules and standards of behavior that keep them trustworthy when their commitments might otherwise falter. Social trust is built within the nitty-gritty work of organizational life: going to meetings, driving people places, planning events, sitting with the ailing, rejoicing with the joyous, showing up for the unfortunate. Over the past 60 years, we have given up on the Rotary Club and the American Legion and other civic organizations and replaced them with Twitter and Instagram. Ultimately, our ability to rebuild trust depends on our ability to join and stick to organizations."[10]

Conferencing is in one respect a way of organizing institutional life. This becomes difficult in the church as we have harmed each other and as we have been harmed. The suspicion of Robert's Rules of Order is related to unspoken power dynamics. As a tool it may be better suited to technical work. Adaptive work involves change, loss, and risk, and is best done as a work of the heart or inspiration [11]

We naturally place more trust in ourselves and in the groups nearer to our experience and correspondingly less trust in institutions. Can we reimagine conferencing as the struggle we enter into with one another for a greater purpose and with greater trust?

The homogeneous character of the early conferences (white, male) created what Robert Putnam describes as "bonded social capital".[12] Conferencing in the 21st century necessarily crosses boundaries and elicits self-criticism. Two concepts may be helpful.

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[9] Yuval Levin, The Fractured Republic (New York: Basic Books, 2017), p. 183.
[10] David Brooks, "America is Having a Moral Convulsion", The Atlantic, October 5, 2020.
[11] See Ronald Heifetz, Abraham Grashow and Martin Linsky, The Practice of Adaptive Leadership (Cambridge: Harvard Business Press, 2009), pp. 264ff.
[12] The Institute for Social Capital.

The first is Cultural Humility, which recognizes both a cultural arrogance (such as the way Robert's Rules are at times employed) and is a journey of self-criticism, recognition of power imbalances and privileges and only then the reciprocity of giving and receiving in the context of accountability.[13]

The second, Convicted Humility, is a concept that came to the Commission on a Way Forward through conversation with the Committee on Faith and Order, both bodies of the United Methodist Church. It has been defined in this way:

"We seek to advocate a stance we have called convicted humility. This is an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of corrections. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together. In that spirit, we wish to lift up the shared core commitments which define the Wesleyan movement, and ground our search for wisdom and holiness." (Final Report to the 2019 General Conference of the United Methodist Church).

A posture grounded in cultural and convicted humilty is a prerequisite for engagement in the dialogue that informs converencing. Gregory Ellison speaks of the strategic movements of an increased proximity, an empathic listening and an humble inquiry, which respond to human fears and insecurities.[14] This creates the conditions for safety and sanctuary, and allow us to progress toward an ecclesial praxis centered in God. And here there are complexities; for example, the suspicion, in a culture of mistrust, about a leader or a body who speaks or claims to speak for God. Yet we are called to clearly state that conferencing is guidance centered in the living God, as an expression of a living tradition. Conferencing is for the sake of mission, and is in service to a missional God. This God enters the particularity of history and calls us to leadership in particular historical contexts. Our proximity to suffering or injustice is rooted in the character and reality of a God who is in proximity to these same realities, in the incarnation (John 1. 14) and in the kenosis of Jesus (Philippians 2. 7).

I would begin with the need for communion. Recall Wesley's words about the purpose of the originating practice of conferencing, "to save our own souls and those that heard us". Relationally, this has to do with the need for *soul friendship*, to know God and and to be known, to be in God's presence which is love in the presence of the love of a friend or colleague. Where this happens in groups there is koinonia, a deep sharing of life.

[13] Ismael Ruiz-Millán:" Cultural humility can help us become better leaders and better Christians" in Faith and Leadership, February 5, 2019.
[14] Gregory C. Ellison, Fearless Dialogues (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), pp. 88ff.

This can occur in fellowship groups, in circles of trust, in Bible Study groups or among prayer partners, in friendships that are extended over a long period of time and that navigate the ups and downs of crisis and conflict, yet have a fundamental love that is unconditional.

Ritually, this can take place in corporate worship, especially in Holy Communion.
In its end, the deep sharing of life should result in an equality, the reciprocity of giving and receiving. Equality helps us to see one another in our createdness and uniqueness. This may be the priesthood of believers. It is surely the common good. And it is rooted in the image of God, in each person, which may be damaged through sin or trauma or estrangement. The image of God is related to the prevenient grace of God, something inherent in us that wants to connect with and please God.

The soul's need is to be taken seriously, to allow one's narrative to be heard and honored; in the early Methodist movement this was the power of testimony.

Conferencing as a means of grace is simply the recognition that, along with all of the gifts of solitude and introspection, we are created to be in relationship with one another, and this is related to the nature of God, who is also relationship (Trinity). This is our path to holiness; as Wesley noted, there is no holiness but social holiness.

The work of conferencing more centered in God can be reframed as a rich set of basic spiritual practices (sharing testimony, repentance and confession, bearing with one another in love, patience). Because we trust God, we are called to the work of building trust with each other, from the ground up, in a praxis rooted in love of neighbor through deep listening, especially to their stories and narratives.[15]

The Ecosystems of Conferencing

I am convinced that one of our challenges is the confusion of the purposes of these gatherings/conferences. Many charge conferences have lost their spiritual purpose, and have become attempts to construct polity with an increasingly small (and anxious) leadership base. Many annual conference meetings are dominated by polity and legislative direction, even as the strength of Methodism in a regional area weakens.

Most district superintendents will acknowledge that the majority of the charges in their area of oversight are unhealthy; this was confirmed in the Towers-Watson Report leading to the 2012 General Conference.[16] And most bishops will admit that more and

[15] I commend the TED Talks by Chimamanda Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story", and Bryan Stephenson, "The Power Of Proximity".
[16] www.umccalltoaction.org

more of the annual conference budget is driven by funding for 1) the general church and 2) clergy health and pension costs.

Most everyone would agree that a general conference is a large and unwieldy gathering of United Methodist leaders from the U.S., Africa, the Philippines and Europe, who come together to distribute and redistribute resources and political functions. The unwieldiness was further evident in the inability of the body to gather in a global pandemic in 2020 that required a large number of people in one space and the movement of delegates across national borders. The significant experience of disaffiliation among churches in the United States was itself a redistribution of resources, culminating in a more unified body moving forward with a more united spirit, a clearer vision and reduced financial resources at the 2020/24 General Conference.

All of this is an increasingly complex task, because we are diverse in our interests, beliefs, languages and goals. This is not easily managed or resolved in a period of two days (for an annual conference) or even eight to ten days (for a general conference). And so perhaps we might step back and rethink *our ecosystem of conferences*. As I will suggest later, we are a conferencing (as opposed to a confessional) church. Through conferencing we clarify what to believe, what to teach and what to do—and at our peril we have neglected the first two of these concerns. The persistence of works righteousness can also prompt our doing, often at the expense of our being.

And yet, through conferencing we are open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our members and their churches. In the U.S. churches we are still purging our colonialism (on the left and right) in our journey to truly listen to the voices of leaders in the "central conferences". In addition, we are seeking to listen to marginalized voices that have been muted or suppressed. This is the complexity of our general or global conferences. And this is perplexing.

It could be that we begin by refocusing on the *charge conference*. Most U.S. conferences have decreased the number of district superintendents, and this has led to a dispersed and not always helpful engagement at the local level. The two core activities that must happen in the charge conference are 1) honesty about mission-field questions (with data) and 2) insuring that there is accountability of finance, property and human resources (at a basis level, the relation of supervision to the prevention of abuses). These core activities require grounding in the nature of call, and to note the question of Lovett Weems, to ask with brutal honesty, "*Who is my neighbor?*"

The *annual conference* then takes up matters of identifying and equipping leaders, and creating and sustaining systems for this work. The best annual conferences increasingly have the feel of superb leadership development gatherings, with time set aside for visioning and the struggle to align resources with the future mission instead of the past legacy. Annual conferences, especially the larger ones, are also gatherings of smaller bodies with more divergent aspirations and goals. And here there is significant negotiation, for time, financial resources and influence on the larger purpose.

I have neglected to mention a more fundamental core activity— making disciples of Jesus (UMC Book of Discipline, paragraph 121)--that does not happen in any of the conferences. In our tradition discipling happens in small groups that include support and accountability, and that, over time, build trust. This is the legacy of the class and band meetings in the early Methodist movement, which are in themselves the precursors of the later quarterly and annual conferences.

The *general conference* is about governance. If we learn from healthy organizations across a spectrum (business, education, military, church), we know that leadership is increasingly shared and authority dispersed in a flattened and connected world. And so governance that serves the mission is more permission-giving and flexible. There are 4835 "*shalls*" in the Book of Discipline. The elimination of a few hundred or a few thousand of these could only be the result of an increased trust. The power and pervasiveness of the "shall" arises from and contributes to our lack of trust. The trust will not likely be built (or rebuilt) in any gathering of the Annual or General Conference. That happens at the local level, and the work before United Methodism that is regionalization, where there is the promise of more contextualization.

Regionalization, and the proposal for regional conferences is rooted in the the both/and nature of a connection that allows for contextuality:

"*United Methodists throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission. Integrally holding connectional unity and local freedom, we seek to proclaim and embody the gospel in ways responsible to our specific cultural and social context while maintaining 'a vital web of interactive relationships*.'" (Book of Discipline, ¶ 125).

In describing what conferencing means, from the local church to the general or regional conference, and in the process of rediscovering the ways in which we might become a generative movement, the following affirmations help us toward definition. We are not a confessional church, but one more grounded in conferencing for the purpose of praxis. We are not a congregational church, but one that sees the annual conference as the

"basic unit" and is shaped by connection. We know no holiness but social holiness, which is to say that we cannot be holy (made perfect in love) without one another.

We believe conferencing to be a means of grace—a practice that can lead to confession and strengthen congregations. We know that conferencing is how we negotiate differences and watch over one another in love. We trust that conferencing is for the larger purpose of mission, and a wider and larger network of conferences allows for a greater missional influence, for the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ.

+ Conferencing, Theological Reflection and Reading Scripture

A Very Brief Historical Account

The United Methodist Church was formed in 1968. At the Uniting Conference, a study commission was formed to reflect on the relation between the "Articles of Religion" (Methodist Church) and the "Confession of Faith" (EUB). This report became Part II of the 1972 Book of Discipline of the UMC.

Of substance in the 1972 statement was the description of the "Quadrilateral". Albert Outler had chaired this study commission, and he described the Quadrilateral as a "*distinctive theological method" with "Scripture as the preeminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture".*[17]

In the interim between 1972 and 1988, several conversations and questions emerged.

- What was the role of scripture in the quadrilateral?
- What was the meaning of pluralism, and how was this defined in relation to catholicity?
- What place did the Explanatory Notes and Sermons hold as doctrinal standards?
- Was the "Catholic Spirit" relevant as a concept to the form of theological discussion, or did it extend also to the substance?

In 1984, and in response to requests and petitions, the General Conference established a new commission to revisit the 1972 Statement. This would come to include Doctrinal Heritage, History, Standards and Our Theological Task. This constitutes our present BOD, paragraphs 102-105.

[17] "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral–In John Wesley, in Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church, edited by Thomas Langford (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p. 77.

The Paragraph on Heritage (BOD, 102) reflects on our common ecumenical heritage and our distinctive United Methodist and Wesleyan Heritage. This flows into the relation of doctrine and discipline, the General Rules and Social Principles. The Paragraph on History (BOD, 103) traces the story from British to American Methodism, and then concludes with the more recent Evangelical and United Brethren Churches. The Paragraph on the Doctrinal Standards and General Rules (104) includes the Articles of Religion and the General Rules.

The result of conciliar work done in the 1988 General Conference is captured in "Our Theological Task", which is described as *critical* and *constructive*, *individual* and *communal*, *contextual* and *incarnational,* and *essentially practical.* This paragraph also includes a reflection on the Quadrilateral.

In writing about our theological task, Thomas Langford describes this relationship with this imagery:

"*Doctrine reflects the grasp of the church; theology reflects the reach of the church. To use another analogy: doctrine is the part of the cathedral already completed, exploratory theology is creative architectural vision and preliminary drawings for possible new construction.*"[18]

He continues with this imagery:

"*Doctrine is like a house that a religious community already inhabits. It represents a communal agreement about what is essential to and characteristic of their faith. Theology, or theological exploration, is the proposal of blueprints for remodeling or extending the house."*[19]

The Wesleyan theological tradition can be understood as the process of new construction, as persons find previous dwellings inadequate for the inclusion of those created, loved and called by God, in the full measure of this rich diversity. These voices would include Georgia Harkness, Albert Outler, James Cone, Thomas Oden, Rebecca Chopp, E. Stanley Jones, D. T. Niles, John Cobb, Geoffrey Wainwright and Jose Miguel Bonino.

Our Theological Task may be understood as "*service to the Church by interpreting the world's needs and challenges to the Church and by interpreting the gospel to the world"* (BOD, 105). This is a constructive task, as "*every generation must appropriate*

[18] "Doctrinal Affirmation and Theological Exploration", in Langford, Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church, p. 204.
[19] Ibid.

creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility, and other significant theological concerns" (BOD, 105). The profound work of theologian James Cone in The Cross and the Lynching Tree can be understood through this lens.[20]

I spoke to the Judicial Council in the fall of 2018, on the plans that would come before the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference. A key question was whether understandings of human sexuality are doctrinal or more related to our theological task. I drew heavily from the sections on the contextual, incarnation and practical dimensions of our theological task (105).[21]

The Quadrilateral in Recent Theological Discussion

There has been a vigorous scholarly debate and as a result a more nuanced view of the quadrilateral is constituted by scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Wesley's own heritage saw Scripture as a primary source but not an exclusive source; as an Anglican, this was *prima scriptura*, not *sola scriptura*.

The question is now to see these sources in relation to each other. Many have noted the limitations of seeing them rigidly or even geometrically. Outler would later regret the use of the term, in that it had come to be interpreted literally, even as the historical practice was present in the life and thought of Wesley.

Billy Abraham has criticized the quadrilateral as a vehicle for limiting the authority of scripture. John Cobb has noted that the quadrilateral makes essential space for the (present) reality of human experience and reason in relation to the (past) resources of Scripture and tradition.

Randy Maddox has articulated a conviction that the sources are in dialogue with each other, capturing an insight of Outler's. Maddox and Russ Richey have spoken of the four sources as *conferring* with one another, and as an analogy with our practice of conferencing, as we seek "the most adequate human understandings and appropriations of divine revelation" (Maddox, 60).[22]

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[20] Ossining, New York: Orbis Press, 2013. A theologian working in the Methodist tradition, Cone's question was how the most sophisticated theologians of the cross in the United States could have missed the connection between the cross of Jesus and the lynching tree in America.

[21] https://www.umcnic.org/media/files/way%20forward/COB-Press-Release-JCdecisions-Oct26%20Final.docx.pdf

[22] Randy L. Maddox, "Honoring Conference": Wesleyan Reflections on the Dynamics of Theological Reflection" in *The Renewal of United Methodism: Mission, Ministry, and Connectionalism*, ed. Rex D.

I have been helped by attention to definition of what it means to **confer**:

con—together
ferre—to bring, to bear, to suffer, to endure
To bestow a gift, honor, power or favor
To exchange ideas or perspectives

There is an echo in the leadership of Oscar Romero in his use of the Ignatian Rule, *sentir con iglesia*, which can be translated as "to think with the church", "to feel", "to perceive", "to sense" or "to struggle" with the church; as Edgardo Colon-Emeric notes, it is "an act of social analysis and spiritual discernment".[23]

Could it be that the four sources confer or sense with each other in their integrity, until there is a consensus that honors each to the greatest possible degree, or hears each voice without suppressing it? And could it be that conferencing could be understood as an act of social analysis and spiritual discernment?

The Quadrilateral in the Book of Discipline

As a people seeking to be led by God, our language about scripture in the Doctrinal Standards (104) and Our Theological Task (105) is instructive.

The scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation (Article 5, MC and Article 4, EUB). The Confession of Faith adds that the scripture is received through the Holy Spirit as "the true rule and guide for faith and practice". The ministry of the word is named among the ordinances of God in the General Rules (104), as is searching the scriptures. We understand scripture both critically and devotionally, corporately and individually.

Scripture is both the primary source for doctrine and yet it can be grasped only in relation to tradition, experience and reason. Indeed Scripture includes within itself a diversity of traditions, individual and corporate experiences and the instrumentality of reason.

Tradition is the awareness of historical continuities between the ancient text and the present moment. It honors the reality that the Holy Spirit continues to speak,

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Matthews (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2012), 55–97.

[23] Edgardo Colon-Emeric, Oscar Romero's Theological Vision (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), pp. 187-189, 209-211.

comforting and correcting. There is both a consensus in tradition and an ever expanding attention to voices that have been muted and suppressed.

Experience is both religious and human. Religious experience for Wesley was strongly related to what he described as "sure trust and confidence" in God's gift of forgiveness, salvation and new life. At the same time, experience encompasses the aspirations of all for equality and liberation. And experience is connected to everyday human realities, and how scripture is in dialogue with our common and shared life.

Reason is closely related to our search for clarity and coherence, our conviction that all truth originates in God, and the legitimacy of a questioning mind that seeks to know the mind and will of God.

As a source in the Doctrinal Standards, scripture is described briefly; in the Theological Task, it is understood in a more nuanced and expanded way.

How might the four sources become a more constructive resource in the way we go about conferencing, recognizing that the sources themselves confer with each other? I have come to the inadequacy of seeing scripture in a static way, claiming it's priority and yet ignoring the very real way that the other sources are inherent in the way I understand and begin to speak about scripture. I have also come to an increasing appreciation for the mystery of scripture, for the diversity of traditions that are found within the canon of scripture, and for the astonishing power of the Holy Spirit to bring scripture to human life (in movements for renewal and liberation, for example).

Repurposing the Quadrilateral: Scriptural Imagination and Scriptural Reasoning

Two more recent frameworks for understanding Scripture are helpful in retrieving the quadrilateral from its neglect and scholarly impasse.

The first is the concept of *Scriptural Imagination*. Richard Hays describes a scriptural imagination as:

"*the capacity to see the world through lenses given to us in Scripture—but when we see the world through such lenses, it doesn't just change the way we see the contemporary world but also changes the way we see Scripture. There's a hermeneutical circle between the reading of the text and the reading of the world in which we find ourselves.*"

Note the relationship between scripture and experience in this definition, and the interplay of past and present. Hays and Ellen Davis also note the relationship here between scripture and tradition:

"*faithful interpretation of scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God's redemptive action -- the church."*[24]

These two scholars, one a Methodist and one an Anglican, are well aware of the history of sources that lead to faith and practice. And as biblical scholars, they are transparent in stating the need for other sources (beyond scripture) that lead to more faithful interpretations.

In my own work on scriptural imagination, I have noted our need to "*avoid categories and models that flatten our perspectives and reject identities that we privilege above how we are named in scripture"***:**

"*A scriptural imagination has the power to ground us in broader communal and cultural conversations. It occurs to me that almost every significant question and problem facing us—from poverty to immigration to human sexuality to climate change to privilege—would benefit from men and women who sit before biblical texts, listening for what God might be saying, and who sit just as attentively before the people they (we/I) are (are/am) so quick to label, judge, dismiss, or stereotype. The beautiful hermeneutical circle of which Richard Hays speaks is the Word becoming flesh (John 1:14). When judgment is premature, the Word remains a word. There may be some small merit to others or value within us in the self-expression, but there is no change. When our way of reading scripture never changes, and when our way of seeing the neighbor or the world never changes, the scriptures are not the dynamic Word of God for us. We are not reading them the way the Holy Spirit intended—to convict, to guide us into all truth—and God is not glorified (John 16:8, 13). God is glorified when the church cultivates a scriptural imagination. And when disciples cultivate a scriptural imagination, the world is transformed."*[25]

These broader communal and cultural conversations are precisely the spheres of experience, reason and tradition. The quadrilateral here is in service to the change that God wants to bring about in our lives and in all of creation. It is not intended as a rigid framework that closes off future insight or growth. And this is why the discussion is placed in the section on our theological task.

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[24] "Forming Scriptural Imagination", a conversation at Duke Divinity School with Ellen Davis and Richard Hays. February 14, 2013, accessed via YouTube.

[25] Ken Carter, A Beginner's Guide to Practicing Scriptural Imagination (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2020).

The practice of *scriptural reasoning* involves bringing practitioners or scholars together to study texts from their own traditions, ideally in the original languages. The gathering or conferencing space has been described by Peter Ochs as follows:

[W]e invite members of our society to imagine that the place where we gather to study together is a Tent, like Abraham's or Moses', but built of scriptural images rather than skins or cloth. It is a tent of the imagination, that is, but a real tent nonetheless: we really construct it (through speech, imagination and reasoning); it is built out of materials we really find in the world (narratives from our scriptural traditions), according to time-tested methods of building (the methods of community formation we inherit from our religious traditions); and it really gathers us together (around shared practices of study, united by a common purpose), protects us from the world outside (whatever would distract us from our attention to the texts we study, to one another, and to the work this study propels us to undertake) and yet frees us for responsibility in the world. Our images of this Tent of Meeting derive from our readings of scriptural narratives about the tents, or modes and places of encounter, associated with Muhammad, with Jesus, with Moses, and, above all, with Abraham. Abraham's tent is not the only model, but it is the most vivid, because Abraham is the eponym of our gathering, as a gathering of the three children, or religions, of Abraham and also because the image of Abraham's hospitality to others – rushing, with Sarah, to offer hospitality to his three visitors – is the image we hope guides us in extending hospitality to one another."[26]

While scriptural reasoning is strongly interfaith in its composition, it begins with a "high" view of scripture and an insistence upon seeing the value of the other (this could be called "cultural humility". Its aim is not persuasion but illumination in one's own tradition through the insights of the other participant. And its ultimate goal is not a kind of consensus, but a friendship and a hospitality, even amidst deep and profound differences.

How might scriptural reasoning relate to ecclesial conferencing? It acknowledges the stark differences of belief, practice, life experience even within the body of Christ, and mores within a particular institutional expression. If the goal in a deeply divergent time is not agreement, might it be peace, friendship and hospitality, as a space to do urgent and important work in service to our mission. How might conferencing, in the present moment, be a "tent of meeting" and a "place of encounter"?"

[26] Daniel W. Hardy, Peter Ochs, David F. Ford, 'The Tent of Meeting' (unpublished paper, 2003), accessed in "Deep Calls to Deep: The Practice of Scriptural Reasoning", Cambridge Interfaith Programme.

Conferencing in Convergent and Divergent Contexts

My great-grandfather was a Congregationalist. My grandfather was a Quaker. My mother was a Baptist. I am a Methodist by choice. In my lifetime we became the United Methodist Church, in 1968. I was eleven. Several traditions flowed into it. That is a complex and important story, and we have lived through a time when streams that have converged have now diverged.

We are in a divergent moment. We have left behind a convergent time. We united as a church during that convergent time, the 1960s. Gil Rendle writes that in a convergent time "the questions and answers are the same for everyone."[27] In a convergent culture the person who is different hides or conforms. In a convergent culture immigrants arrive and they blend in. In a divergent culture, they arrive, struggle to maintain their voices and preserve their traditions.

In a divergent culture, we are not asking the same questions and the answers are multiple. In a divergent culture we lead with our differences. This is not about one of us or another. This is the air we breathe.

A connectional church, an annual conference, even a denomination is an exercise in convergence, at the precise time when we place a higher value on divergence. Each is important.

Divergence lifts up voices and convictions that are suppressed or oppressed. There are likely alternative strategies within our smaller groups. Different people have varied hoped for outcomes.

Convergence is mutual support, sharing of resources, the strong and the weak together and what they have to teach each other. It is connection.

I am attempting to describe what is happening all around us, in the United Methodist Church, and in the cultures of the United States. At times we will likely want to be with more like-minded friends (divergence). And at times we will see the strength of what we do together (convergence).

As we live in the tension of the individual and the corporate, the local and the global, we are reminded of voices in previous Oxford Institutes. Brian E. Beck noted, "The goal of

[27] Gil Rendle, Quietly Courageous (New York: Rowan Littlefield, 2019), pp. 33ff.

our discussions is not Methodist convergence, still less uniformity, but mutual enrichment".[28]

The experience of mutual enrichment is a co-operation with God's grace. Christian conferencing is not an end in itself; it is for the spread of scriptural holiness–the love of God and neighbor. It is a means of grace in process, understood and practiced differently over time. Yet it continues to be a practice that is deeply woven into our identity as a people called Methodist, and is profoundly needed if we are to "embody and announce glad tidings in an age of crisis.[29]

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[28] Brian E. Beck, "Prospects for Methodist Teaching and Confessing", p. 18. The Eighth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, 1987.

[29] Beyond the scope of this paper is the relationship between conferencing and consultation in the practice of Methodist itineracy (appointment-making), the emergent work to be done in United Methodist regionalization on a global scale, and the Roman Catholic Church's Synod on Synodality (2021-2024).