

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

# CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL  
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

## **Practical Theology at Work in the United Methodist Church: Restructuring, Reshaping, Reclaiming**

**Pamela D. Couture**

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# CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures  
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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# Practical Theology at Work in the United Methodist Church: Restructuring, Reshaping, Reclaiming

*Pamela D. Couture*

One of the deepest motivators for change in the United Methodist Church (UMC) may be a widely shared sense that the theological values and norms expressed by United Methodists behaviorally and organizationally and the church's verbally articulated theology have gotten significantly out of sync. This felt dissonance between practice and articulated theology suggests that practical theology can help to interpret the United Methodist struggle for change. Practical theologians understand theology to be more than a verbal articulation of beliefs, doctrines, and principles. Practical theologians pay attention to what is said verbally about theological beliefs, but they also watch practices, habits, patterns of behavior, and ways of organizing group life that nonverbally express belief. A special concern for the practical theologian is the way these three aspects of practical theology — articulating, practicing, and organizing — may or may not be consistent with one another.

An interactive practical theological process that pushes and pulls among articulated theology, organizational forms, and practices, habits, and patterns of behavior has deep, and perhaps distinctive, roots in Wesleyanism. In the present struggles, this practical theological process assumes different forms in different projects of the denomination. In this article I will examine the practical theological process of the Connectional Process Team (CPT), so well described in Wood's sociological case study (pp. 534-64), and compare it to practical theological process at work in the Dialogue on Theological Diversity (Dialogue) and the Bishops Initiative on Children and Poverty (Initiative). These three projects have different explicit emphases. CPT has a unique emphasis on organizational structure, what I am calling "restructuring theology," that is not found in the other two projects, though that is not all it is about. The Dialogue has a unique concern for articulated beliefs, what I am calling "re-

claiming theology,” though again, that is not all it is about. The Initiative has a primary concern for changed practices, what I am calling “reshaping theology,” though, as we will see, that concern is not unique to the Initiative. In all three projects we find aspects of restructuring, reclaiming, and reshaping interacting with one another in the practical theological method of the denomination. Each of these ways of doing theology, or expressing the denomination’s understanding of the divine-human relationship, has deep roots in Wesleyanism and earlier theological and philosophic traditions.

### Wesleyan Theology: Restructuring, Reshaping, Reclaiming

Modern theology is understood to be a thought process that yields verbal reflection, usually in the form of written texts. Such texts present logical, reasonable truths that should be convincing to those who read them, having veracity equal to that of a scientifically proven hypothesis. Practical theologians, however, suggest that scientific and theological arguments have embedded in them undeclared norms, values, and metaphors that express ultimate values and understandings of God. In human action, cognitive processes yield expressions of the divine-human relationship that may not be fully articulated in verbal constructions of theology. To understand theology more fully, an examination of practices is necessary. The idea of restructuring, reshaping, and reclaiming theology further expands this definition of theology by isolating three categories of practices: restructuring, reshaping, and reclaiming.

#### *Restructuring Theology*

The idea of “restructuring theology” is that the creation of group life, the connections of groups with one another, the process by which these groups are reformed and re-created, and the way the whole of the organizational web is held together reflect values commonly held or in conflict with one another and facilitate theological practice and theological language that express, nonverbally and verbally, our experience of the divine-human relationship. The struggle with structure as a form of theology may be one of the most distinctive characteristics of Methodist theological life. Russell E. Richey, in *The Methodist Conference in America: A History*, has demonstrated that early North American Methodists took seriously the idea that structure was an expression of their theological values. As they developed the Wesleyan movement beyond the life of its founder, John Wesley, and in a land and political situation very different

from his, early North American Methodists transferred Wesley's personal authority for the Methodist movement to the "conference." Analogous to the experiment with governmental structure for the United States that was emerging simultaneously, this experiment with structure as theology had trials and errors in its evolution. These experiments clarified that Methodist theology could not be expressed in a more centralized council of a few elite members but needed the "conference" with broad membership, an expression of North American struggles for egalitarianism. The conference, however, was more than a structure. It was a time of retreat for worship, celebrating sacraments, examining the spiritual life of the Methodist leaders, and determining their proper relationship to the body as a whole. It provided time for clarifying theological beliefs (such as ecclesiology and sanctification) and ethical practices (such as freeing slaves). Richey summarizes the conference "as a/the distinctive [American] Methodist manner of being the church, a multifaceted, not simply political, mode of spirituality, unity, mission, governance, and fraternity that American Methodists lived and operated better than they interpreted."<sup>1</sup>

### *Reshaping Theology*

Already in Richey's description of "conference" we see the Methodist propensity to take seriously, as theology, the various practices or patterns of behavior, habits, attitudes, and sensibilities that Methodists believe form the spirit and the soul. In this process, belief systems are also reshaped and new practices emerge that reflect reconstructed belief systems that interpret the divine-human relationship. The idea of Methodist practices as distinctive to Wesleyans actually created the name "Methodist," originally a derisive term for the Oxford Holy Club that surrounded the Wesleys at Oxford University. The name scorned the early Wesleyans' methodical examination of their spiritual life and the practices of caring for the poor and the outcast that arose from it. When the movement developed in North America, the name became an attribute of identity, as did various spiritual and social practices associated with it. As Methodism developed, some of the original spiritual and social practices were retained and others were rejected. In some cases the rejection of early practices or adoption of new practices led to schism. In current philosophical, theological, and ethical discussion, this Methodist emphasis on practice merges easily with the surge of interest in character ethics for which the idea of practice is central.

1. Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), p. 14.

Character ethicists and theologians argue that we become who we are (e.g., we become courageous) by engaging in various practices (e.g., courageous acts). Although the Wesleys themselves seem to have had little direct intellectual contact with the Aristotelian tradition from which character ethics emerges, Wesleyans such as Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones draw heavily on the character tradition.

### *Reclaiming Theology*

“Reclaiming theology” retrieves theological heritage, critically reflects upon it, and makes connections with contemporary concerns and faith expressions. When we reclaim theology, we articulate the grounding of our understanding of the divine-human relationship for our faith and the values of faith that give rise to theological practices. “Reclaiming theology” may be less unique to Wesleyan tradition than restructuring or reshaping theologies. In fact, evidence suggests that Wesleyans have an ambivalent relationship to their theological inheritance, as they do to the spiritual and social practices it originally entailed. Still, “reclaiming theology” distinguished the Wesleys and marks recent trends in Wesleyan theology. The Wesleys themselves searched the then extant theological thinking in Anglicanism, Puritanism, and Pietism to clarify their thought, but they also reclaimed writers of the early church, as Randy Maddox has argued in *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*. Part of the struggles for development of a religious movement in North America involved the displacement of some of Wesley’s theological beliefs. Using Wesley’s New Testament notes and sermons as authoritative, Americans were able to pick and choose among aspects of Wesleyan ethics, many times conveniently ignoring aspects such as those that argued against any practice of slavery and criticized mercantilism’s systematic exploitation of the poor. In recent decades Wesleyan theologians such as Albert Outler, Theodore Runyon, Theodore Weber, and Theodore Jennings have specifically reclaimed Wesley much as Wesley reclaimed the early church fathers. In so doing, they have given new life to social justice concerns as distinctive within the Wesleyan tradition. Some Methodist scholars argue that the church should not reclaim Wesley but the sources that Wesley himself reclaimed.

In their present struggle for change, United Methodists do not necessarily invoke these traditions of restructuring, reshaping, or reclaiming, nor do they particularly call upon the early or recent Wesleyans who have continued to give life to these three aspects of the process of Wesleyan practical theology. This method of practical theology, however, is so deeply embedded in the Wesleyan



way of life that Wesleyans engage in it without being aware of it. Albert Outler once identified Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as an embedded method that was distinctive of Wesleyan verbal theology. Restructuring, re-shaping, and reclaiming may be similarly distinctive to methods of Wesleyan practical theology, as they become increasingly important given the concerns of the postmodern era.

In what follows I will ask, "What's the problem that change in the UMC is trying to address?" The three denominational projects mentioned earlier offer different solutions to the problem. They have differently articulated aims, yet in each project we will see that these three aspects of "doing practical theology" interact with each other. In fact, when looked at through the lens of this method of practical theology, persons and groups in different political locations in the UMC end up in strange sorts of companionship.

### **What Is the Problem Motivating Change?**

Are practices, organization, and articulated theology too far out of sync with each other in the UMC? Interviews with seven bishops suggest that this question might offer a window through which to view the problem motivating change in the UMC. They report symptoms of dis-ease: practices of the faith do not produce meaning, organization is burdensome, and consensus around theology cannot be found. The fragmentation of the UMC becomes particularly apparent when it attempts to relate practices, organization, and theology.

What is the bishops' understanding of the motivation for change that emerges from the episcopal interviews? The motivation has to do with searching beneath the symptoms for ways that God is at work. The summary of repeated themes in the bishops' interviews can be concise. The UMC needs a different way of doing things that is driven by the presence of God. Change is occurring because the Spirit of God is working within us. The need for change that is God-centered is coming from local levels of the church, clergy and laity. It is something upon which liberals and conservatives can agree, although they may disagree on what the changes should be.

Several cultural and social trends are contributing to the need for change. Not only throughout the church but also in society globally and culturally, human beings are in transition from a modern to a postmodern way of being human. Organizations are organic, not mechanistic. Rather than being structures with interchangeable parts, they function as a whole while addressing individual needs. A portion of the human need that the modern, mechanistic organizations have produced and that postmodern, organic organizations must now

address is spiritual hunger: an active need for God, religious identity, and making a difference in the world.

United Methodists struggle with this change as a denomination because in different regions United Methodism is in different stages of the decline of Christendom. For example, in the northern and midwestern United States, United Methodism is in a post-Christendom era. The dominance of Christianity is over; Christians are a minority and need to focus on quality of mission rather than quantity of membership. The southeastern and south central states have not made this transition and still minister within the ambiance and resources of Christendom.

These trends make a difference in mission. Some are more inclined toward localism. Where Christendom enables the church to have easier influence and access to resources, persons may be inclined to argue that mission is only local or that mission to the world can be done from the local congregational base. Where Christendom is dead, mission needs to be local but it also needs national and international networks to sustain an informed ministry about the relationship of the local congregations in the United States to Christians elsewhere in the world. Problems with present structure and practice are deeply apparent within this change; problems related to theology are more ambiguous.

What's the problem with structures? Both liberals and conservatives agree that the church is being thwarted by present structures. People feel burdened by organization that does not deliver missional objectives. They want structure that empowers and enables them. People don't experience the resources of the church meeting particular needs. For example, the church's finances and its theology don't meet. The church needs to be a process, not a fortress. It needs to move with the work of the Spirit, not prop up forms of church that the Spirit has left.

The local, churchwide perception that the denominational structures aren't working for mission leads to a struggle between decentralization and centralization that mirrors processes in other public and private institutions. A pressure to decentralize comes from localism, from a lack of trust in systems and leaders of systems, and from the need to develop flexibility to do different things in different places. A pressure to centralize comes from the desires to reduce committees and bureaucracy and to gather resources and be able to deploy them. The tension between decentralization and centralization emerges over the enormous economic resources of the denomination. A central question is whether it is possible to distribute economic power within the church so that the church can inspire people to share economic resources at the same time as enabling the autonomy of local and indigenous people to determine how those resources are spent in mission to their wants and needs.

This tension creates a crisis of authority: how to create authority in an age

of democracy that thwarts the emergence of strong leaders such as those who emerged when the denomination was in a more trusting mood. Within such tensions, is it possible to create structure that allows the denomination to discern and enable the movement of the Spirit of God?

Though the bishops ask these general questions about denominational structure, they do not for the most part offer generalized answers to the problem of denominational structure, except where their role in restructuring discussions requires them to do so. But many bishops do enthusiastically describe solutions to the problems of structure they have created in their own episcopal areas. These stories of restructuring theology in episcopal areas must be told one by one and relate directly to tensions in the denomination over national structures that have, until lately, mandated that each annual conference replicate national structures. Furthermore, the bishops' questions about structures yield questions about practices. Part of the struggle for language in the UMC is a struggle for language where structure and shaping intersect.

What's the problem that calls for reshaping practices? The bishops characterize culturewide and churchwide spiritual hunger: a quest for meaning, a search for ways that faith can yield ways of living, and a desire for hands-on mission. This characterization knows no regional boundaries, but has a different quality as reported by bishops of different regions: there is a special urgency about the need for a renewed spiritual vitality in the regions where Christendom has declined. In those regions bishops are more specific about the qualities they think the church should promote. According to one bishop, the church needs people who are willing to be out on the edge, who will take risks, who will be vulnerable, who are able to take "chops" and stand strong. The church needs preachers, teachers, persons who can develop preventive care networks, persons who are comfortable with ambiguity, paradox, and their theology. The church needs people who can nurture, do, and feed simultaneously. It needs people who can build bridges to the poorest and wealthiest segments of society. In recent decades the church's need for security and for maintaining its forms has often sent such people away. Therefore, the church has a crisis of leadership.

The issues of practice and structure intersect in a concept for which some bishops have adopted the language of "spiritual leadership." Spiritual leaders are pastors, lay leaders, and bishops whose lives are centered on God. They can help the church to be sensitive to the leadership of God and the Holy Spirit and to bring this leadership to complex ethical, moral, justice, and faith issues. The language of spiritual leadership is ambiguous, however. For some it resonates deeply. For others it is newly and somewhat uncomfortably adopted. For still others it is unclear what spiritual leadership is beyond the obvious claim most church leaders would make that their lives are centered on God.

God-talk is pervasive when bishops talk about structure and practice: the presence of God, the example of Jesus, and God's Spirit are frequently invoked. Bishops make some claims that are explicitly theological, such as, "What's needed? Helping people practice and live the faith — not by being a good officer in the church but by helping people to live day by day, to grow in their love of God and neighbor and live their lives in the way that is pleasing to God." However, in our interviews, despite the fact that we invited specifically theological reflections, the bishops usually answered with language of spirituality and religious experience that was interwoven with practical situations. Other than language of pneumatology or Christology, doctrinal language was not used.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that these bishops do not think theological issues are important to the UMC's present struggle for change. Their sparing use of doctrinal language may be reflective of their sensibility for the ecumenical dictum that "doctrine divides, practice unites." In the view of one bishop, an enormous struggle for power over the denomination gets articulated around moral and theological issues. The moral issue is "same-gender sexuality"; the theological issue is "classical Christian theology." Beneath this articulation of moral and theological standards is a struggle for power and control over the denomination. This bishop believes that in cataclysmic struggle the denomination will find itself structurally and spiritually.

This reticence to use the language of doctrinal theology is not evident, however, in the three projects of the denomination whose practical theology we will now examine: the attempt at restructuring offered by the Connectional Process Team, the focus toward reshaping evident in the Initiative on Children and Poverty, and the reclaiming theology that marks the Dialogue on Theological Diversity.

### Practical Theology in the CPT: Restructuring Theology

The Connectional Process Team was established at the 1996 General Conference to continue the work done by the Connectional Issues Study of the General Council on Ministries and the Global Nature of the Church, work that held implications for restructuring in the UMC. The CPT mandate was to "manage, guide, and promote a transformational direction for the UMC." The specific directives given to the CPT asked in part for proposals for restructuring and were popularly understood to be substantially *aimed* toward restructuring. The CPT's work involved questions about restructuring in a way that the Dialogue and Initiative do not. In preparation for the 2000 General Conference, the CPT published a lengthy report.

As a committee widely understood to be developing a restructuring proposal for the denomination, the CPT is distinctive in that it rejected restructuring as the primary mode of organizing religious work in the UMC. Early on it decided that restructuring had to follow, not precede, the reconstruction of United Methodist identity, relationships, and ways of providing information.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the document says at least as much about reshaping practices and reclaiming Wesleyan identity as it does about structure. Its first three major sections follow a general pattern of recommending a set of practices and then proposing structures that will support those practices. It deviates from this pattern when it reclaims theology and Wesleyan tradition at key points. The last two major sections are more directly about structure. The pattern of the document itself shows the subtlety and complexity of the transformation that the team recommends.

In the introduction the “restructuring” expectation of the CPT is clear: “In light of our study, conversations, and prayer, we have examined all of the *activities, functions, and structures* of the church today by asking one simple but central question: Will this help us invite, nurture, and empower disciples of Jesus Christ through local churches and faith communities throughout the world?” (emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup>

Between the statements that focus the aim of the task and the aim of the work, however, the CPT specifically relies upon “reclaiming” language to elaborate the definition of a “transformational direction.” A “transformation,” according to the report, only occurs through the work of God’s love, creating, sustaining, guiding, redeeming, and perfecting. This love is apparent through the person of Jesus Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the community of the church, where practices of preaching and sacramental life enable the church to reach out to the world. Therefore, the team bases its recommendations on its discernment of the work of the Holy Spirit. It recommends five “transformational directions”: (1) “Center on Christian Formation,” (2) “Call Forth Covenant Leadership,” (3) “Empower the Connection for Ministry,” (4) “Strengthen Our Global Connections and Ecumenical Relationships,” and (5) “Encourage Doctrinal and Theological Discourse.” In discussing these five transformational directions, the team makes recommendations for structural overhaul of the UMC. The fuller story of this work is described in Wood’s case study. Ultimately, the 2000 General Conference in May 2000 affirmed the transformational directions but rejected

2. Based on interviews with Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher and Eileen Williams. These three ideas were taken from workshops provided to the Board of Discipleship by Margaret Wheatley.

3. All quotations within this section are from “Connectional Process Team Report,” *Daily Christian Advocate, Advance Edition: Journal of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church* 1, sect. 1 (2000): 5-21.

the restructuring proposals that went with them. Even though its specific structural proposals were rejected, the document is interesting for its practical theological method and the subtleties of the solutions it actually proposes.

As a document about structure, the CPT report responds to many of the concerns about structure reported by the bishops. Its primary *structural solutions* to the UMC's discontents propose emphasizing leadership development, streamlining committee structures, reducing bureaucracy, creating flexible networking structures, replacing legislative and legal procedures with discernment and consensus, and displacing the centrality of the United States as the hub of ministry throughout the world. The CPT's attempt to respond to these concerns show that a number of questions remain. Leadership development is qualified by the adjectives "spiritual," "prophetic," "covenant," and "servant," distinguishing the church leader from the leader in general. However, are these kinds of leadership synonymous, and if not, how are they related to one another? Streamlined committees become "councils," and membership in councils is reduced in number. While streamlining addresses the contemporary concern for overburdening apparatus, how would such councils enact the traditional values of broad participation and egalitarian representation in decision making through large membership conferences? Bureaucracy may be reduced by reorganizing the size and number of general boards, agencies, and commissions, but does such reorganization also dismantle a decade-long construction of influence of United Methodism in the world? Discernment and consensus building attempts to eliminate the win/lose quality of the legislative process and aims toward the direct recognition of God and neighbor in decision making, but does it provide a means through which genuine conflict can surface? A Global Conference with equal representation from around the world distributes the political and economic power broadly, but does it de-contextualize and standardize the legal and economic decisions by which Methodists in different parts of the world would then be required to live? As a part of its concern for the practice of justice within its church life, the denomination has relied on specific representation and regularized procedures to guarantee a balance of power in decision making. But have United Methodists attended too little to the wisdom that determines that some problems can't be solved without certain people in the conversation? In other words, they may think their structures are burdensome as they attempt to live values deeply embedded in their tradition. As discontented as they are with that overgrowth, when given the opportunity for change they may also be aware that new structures bring equally vexing new problems while eliminating the solutions to the former problems. Were United Methodists not convinced that the new structures would have carried the strengths of the tradition as well as the present structures do? Or would new structures have diverted the power battle at

work in the denomination, a power battle in which many General Conference delegates are heavily invested? It is easier to battle for power in a denomination when familiar structures are firmly in place.

The primary concern in the document is the development of clergy, lay, and episcopal “spiritual leaders.” The clearest definition of a “spiritual leader” appears in the section recommending the development of “lay servant leaders in local churches”:

A spiritual servant leader, through God’s love, brings the hope of transformation to people’s lives and then walks with them on their journey. Spiritual leaders reach out to persons in the servant spirit of Jesus whose love knows no barrier of race, culture, gender, class, or other human circumstance. These covenant leaders are open and listening to God and to all with whom they connect, calling upon us to see God’s direction and purpose rather than our own.

How are these spiritual leaders to be developed? Through “reshaping,” through practices of spiritual formation that reinvigorate early Wesleyan practices that aim to form believers toward personal and social holiness. These practices create “inward and outward spirituality” through “acts of devotion and acts of compassion.” They reclaim Wesleyan tradition in that they were present in the early Wesleyan class meetings and in the Wesleyan outreach based on Wesley’s proclamation that “the world is my parish.”

How important is “reshaping theology” to the CPT document? The first “transformational direction” it recommends is “Center on Christian Formation.” It begins by “reclaiming” Christian formation as “grounded in God’s grace” and focuses the goal of Christian formation on salvation, justification, and sanctification through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and through God’s gracious activity in our everyday lives. However, it immediately recommends that “persons develop and nurture *the practices that shape them* into the image of Christ” (emphasis mine). A significant portion of the remaining document specifically outlines practices that aim at this kind of reshaping experience, connecting the reshaping practices to groups within the organizational network of the denomination.

What kinds of groups and practices does the document recommend?

- Methodist followers who do “acts of devotion (prayer, Bible reading, inward examination) and acts of compassion (the simple things we do out of kindness to our neighbor)”;
- Methodist followers who do “acts of worship (the ministries of word and

- sacrament that we exercise together) and acts of justice (ministries that implement God's righteousness and denounce justice)";
- local churches that create "cluster groups, and classes that provide mutual support and accountability in ministry" that ask traditional Wesleyan questions that inquire diligently about the well-being of each other's souls and bodies, such as "Is it well with your soul? Are you engaged in fasting and prayer? What are you doing to reach out to others? How are you witnessing in your home and workplace? Are you well economically? Are you without work? Are you hungry? Are you facing a crisis?";
  - covenant groups that engage in mutual care and support in groups that form around common interests;
  - clergy orders that participate in common Bible study and prayer, sharing both good and difficult experiences, responding to current challenges, and exercising mutual accountability;
  - spiritual leaders who "practice the disciplines, point to God's saving grace, gather persons for the study of Scripture, teach and model the teachings of Jesus Christ, help persons discover their potential to serve in the name of Jesus Christ, and walk with them on their journeys";
  - local covenant leaders who teach, visit the sick, preach, do works of compassion and justice, prophesy the vision of God's reign;
  - bishops who "guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine and discipline of the church . . . who provid[e] prophetic spiritual leadership, [gather] the community of faith for worship and sacraments, and le[a]d the church to seek Christian unity and justice for all people";
  - bishops who "focus their time and energy on spiritual and prophetic leadership within their annual conferences and in the world. Spiritual leadership is supported by the disciplines of prayer, Scripture study, private and public worship, fasting, and Christian conferencing. Prophetic leadership includes listening to the world, to human suffering and sin, and raising the voice of justice and hope";
  - seminaries that "stress piety and learning in their mission/vision statements . . . to emphasize Christ-centered preaching and dynamic worship . . . and . . . moral and ethical values";
  - councils of "spiritual and prophetic lay and clergy leaders who will gather for discernment, discussion, decision-making, and disciple-making" working in "mutual trust and respect, the style of which will be collegial, Spirit-driven, and responsive to the common purpose of making disciples and serving God's world . . . model relational community and practice the spiritual disciplines and Christian conferencing";
  - ministries of the church that include "proclaiming the gospel, worship-



ing, teaching, studying, and nurturing. Disciples are sent to share the Good News, to be present with the poor and marginalized, to care for the creation, and to work for peace and justice”;

- annual conferences that “discover, recruit, train, certify, appoint, supervise, sustain, and support accountable servant leaders”;
- a Global Christian Conference that includes “connecting, renewing, discerning, and deciding”; and
- covenant councils that involve “openness and a willingness to listen to others and to God as we seek God’s direction and purpose rather than our own.”

One of the most dramatic structural proposals of the document, the restructuring of the general boards and agencies of the church, in part follows the model of reorganizing around practices. Presently, the general boards and agencies include Global Missions, Church and Society, Higher Education and Ministry, Discipleship, and Finance and Administration, and general commissions include Status and Role of Women, Religion and Race, Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. Under the CPT proposal these general boards, agencies, and commissions would be asked to redesign and align their work with attention to Nurture, Outreach, and Witness Ministries; Leadership Development; Congregational Development; Administration and Finance; and Communication and Interpretation. The latter four are described by general areas of work, but Nurture, Outreach, and Witness Ministries are described by the following practices:

- Nurture: “The Biblical Foundations of the Christian faith, our Wesleyan/Evangelical heritage, and acts of piety and devotion are central to this area. The nurturing ministries of the church shall give attention to the educational, worship, and stewardship components of ministry.”
- Outreach: “Acts of mercy and compassion and social holiness are central to this area and include local and larger community ministries of compassion and advocacy, church and societal issues, global ministries concerns, health and welfare ministries, Christian unity and interreligious concerns, religion and race, and the status and role of women.”
- Witness: “Fully living out our discipleship by embracing the stewardship of all of life, proclaiming the good news of Christ to the world, and providing hospitality to all persons is central to this area. It includes evangelistic outreach to persons, membership care, spiritual formation, communications, lay speaking ministries, and witnessing through the sharing of personal and congregational stories of Christian faith and service.”

Furthermore, these proposals for reorganizing this work, so closely connected to reshaping, also reclaim explicitly theological language. The theological language is not developed as it would be in a doctrinal or systematic article or pastoral letter. Even so, appeals are made to a wide variety of theological themes: God's love, grace, justification, sanctification, regeneration, salvation, revelation, the image of God and the image of Christ, God's reign, the church, covenant, the ministry of all Christians, and acts of mercy, piety, and compassion. Moreover, a major section of the document, a "transformational direction," is entitled "Encourage Doctrinal and Theological Discourse."

This document teaches much about the relationships among restructuring, reshaping, and reclaiming theology. The relationship among these three aspects of practical theology is consistently strong where the document is most concerned with Christian formation through "works of piety." It is consistently strong where the primary proposals refer to the restructuring of the denomination in ways that most affect the church in the United States. But it is equally interesting to note the places where restructuring, reshaping, and reclaiming become disconnected. The CPT intended to convey the idea that spiritual leadership is created by an interdependent, integrated practice of the means of grace, traditionally understood as piety and mercy.<sup>4</sup> The document falls short of conveying this integration, however, in specific ways. The reshaping language refers to practices of piety such as prayer, Bible reading, etc., very specifically. It refers to practices of compassion, mercy, or justice in the more general, conceptual language of "ministry." In other words, the document tells us more about the actual practices related to "piety" that form spiritual leaders and less about practices related to "mercy" that form spiritual leaders. In fact, the use of the phrase "spiritual and prophetic" leader leaves one thinking that one is either a spiritual leader or a prophetic leader rather than recognizing that spiritual leaders are prophetic leaders (and vice versa) and suggesting a series of concrete practices that equally shape the "prophetic" aspect of leadership. The reshaping language that refers to explicit practices is thinnest in places where the document speaks of nonsexist, nonracist, ecumenical, interfaith, and global relationships. To emphasize the interdependence of piety and mercy in spiritual leadership, the document would have had to specify a series of practices that are parallel to practices of piety, traditional Wesleyan ministries such as visiting prisoners, the poor, and the sick; providing education and economic relief; and doing this in face-to-face relationships rather than through agencies.<sup>5</sup> Instead,

4. This intention was strongly expressed in the interview with Christopher and Williams.

5. See Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, trans. John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

the document relies more heavily on restructuring to carry these relationships rather than suggesting an equally concrete set of practices that move the church toward these aims. Similarly, the reshaping language is thin when the document recommends theological and doctrinal discourse. The document suggests in what structures such discourse might be done, but does not offer a concrete set of practices that help the church do a better job at talking out its theological differences. That, however, is the explicit task of the Dialogue on Theological Diversity.

Two difficulties identified in our interviews with the bishops were apparent in CPT discussions that led to the CPT report. The struggle for power that was alluded to by the bishops appeared in the CPT process as a difference of opinion over the most reliable way of distributing power. Over several decades United Methodists have developed a system for distributing power across geography, racial/ethnic groups, and gender groups. This system insured a diversity of heretofore absent voices that could represent the concerns of various denominational groups. The system was deemed to provide the best grounds for making just decisions. Some have wondered whether this system both burdens the denomination with bureaucracy and fails to bring into the conversation all persons who really need to be present. As more streamlined systems were implemented in some annual conferences and became a part of the CPT report for restructuring, many anxious voices were raised about the potential failure of a streamlined system to guarantee diverse participation.

Furthermore, the struggle for language that was identified in the interviews with the bishops also appeared in the CPT discussion, especially around the use of the words "global" and "table." For some the word "global" had expansive connotations. The "global" church is a sign of United Methodist interconnection across the world. For others the word brought associations of colonial religion and imperialist economic exploitation. Likewise, the word "table," as the place where conversation among diverse elements of the church could occur, had eucharistic associations for all. For some, making the connection between the practice of Eucharist and table conversation was positive, taking worship into life. For others such a connection contaminated and cheapened the notion of Eucharist and needed to be avoided. The difficulty over the language of "global" reflects similar problems in discussions of theology and the social sciences. The tension over the language of "table" reflects difficulties in the discipline of theology itself, where some persons reserve "theology" for systematic reflection on practice and others see theology being done and communicated in practice.

The "transformational directions" that the CPT recommends and that were considered by the General Council on Ministry in its work through 2004

are not just recommendations for restructuring, but recommendations for reclaiming practices that are distinctive to the Wesleyan tradition and are deeply rooted in Wesleyan theology. It will be interesting to find out whether the next stage of work on these directions recommends specific, concrete practices in areas where the CPT report is not as full. Building on the CPT's recommendations, the council might in the next stage develop a model of spiritual formation that engages the practices involved in the wide range of traditional and emerging ministries in the UMC.

### Practical Theology in the Dialogue on Theological Diversity: Reclaiming Theology

The Dialogue on Theological Diversity was conducted under the auspices of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. The Dialogue brought together twenty-four leaders "chosen for their competence in reflecting on the doctrine of the church and its contemporary theological task." The leaders also represented the range of theological viewpoints found in the UMC. In addition to a number of working papers, it produced a document entitled "In Search of Unity: A Conversation with Recommendations for the Unity of the United Methodist Church."<sup>6</sup>

The letter that introduces the document addresses the "reclaiming" aim of the Dialogue by saying, "Controversies over social issues have led to the realization that a deeper layer of tension exists concerning the role and authority of Scripture and divine revelation." The implications for "restructuring" follow: "Today, some persons suggest that a split could occur in The United Methodist Church because of the depth of the conflict and the disturbing choices people feel compelled to make." The document appeals at several points to "reshaping" in two forms: the reshaping of the person's dispositions toward unity by the Holy Spirit, and the reshaping of United Methodist discourse about theological differences toward civility. In fact, the most widely adopted part of the document may be its "Guidelines for Civility in the United Methodist Church," an "action step" that works toward reshaping the practices and attitudes of people engaged in conflict in the church. Furthermore, the Dialogue itself took place in a context of worship, a setting where an explicit appeal to the Holy Spirit for the shaping of hearts toward the Spirit's guidance could be made.

"In Search of Unity" is framed in the "reclaiming" language of ecclesiology. It begins with the ecclesial claim: "The church is a gift of the Triune God

6. This section was written in consultation with Bruce Robbins.

through the working of the Holy Spirit.” This doctrinal statement leads to an immediate intersection between reclaiming and reshaping: “[T]he Holy Spirit works in our hearts to create a disposition to seek unity.” The church is a gift of God not to be taken for granted. The search for unity in the church emerges from desires and dispositions, created by the Holy Spirit, that yield practices and ways of living together that could foster unity rather than disruption. This beginning is significant. It implies that human beings cannot do their work for unity through rational theological argument alone. Unity-friendly dispositions, habits, and practices are required.

The document describes a church whose strengths include its practices of worship, sacraments, and ministries of love and justice; its theological heritage; and its structures of conference and itinerancy. These strengths meet three categories of challenges. Again, we find an intertwining of doctrinal theology and reshaped practice. The first category of challenge, “Challenges Stemming from the Fall from Original Righteousness,” identifies a series of relational problems in the church, beginning with “our impatience with one another, our tendency to believe rumor and innuendo.” The second category, “Challenges to the Quality of Our Existence Together,” provides a list of ecclesial disagreements, beginning with “our inability to agree on how to relate our commitment to justice and to God’s sovereign purposes for creation to the task of making disciples.” The third category, “Challenges That Harbor the Danger of Explicit Disunity or Schism,” outlines differences in reclaiming theology, such as “the nature of the Trinitarian faith,” that usually lead to differences on divisive social issues, particularly “homosexuality as illustrative of our divergence.” The theological themes identified as those most disagreed upon are “authority of Scripture and divine revelation.” The document implies that any one of these categories of differences may provide the soil for discord, but differences in reclaiming theology as they are connected to divisive social issues are seen as significantly more threatening than interpersonal differences.

The document seems to argue explicitly that theological differences are most threatening. However, despite the benefit of working papers developed prior to the document, it does not outline the nature of the doctrinal theological differences at any length. Rather, it concentrates on a practical ecclesial problem, originally listed as one item in “Challenges to the Quality of Our Existence Together,” in which the potential for schism lies. The problem is “a lack of agreement on the boundaries of assent and dissent.” It describes “incompatibilists” or “compatibilists,” each of which may be found in conservative and liberal wings of the church. Incompatibilists believe that the boundaries of the church do not allow for dissenting viewpoints related to theology and homosexuality. Compatibilists believe that the church should allow disagreement. This honest

description of the conflict that could lead to schism suggests that the knottiest problem is not interpersonal crabbiness or theological difference but instead a conflict about how much homogeneity the church should require. If that is true, the greatest problem is not one of reclaiming theology (even when it reclaims ecclesial statements about the nature of the church that all might agree upon in the abstract) or of reshaping theology (a disposition toward unity and practice of civility), but of restructuring theology (how we are organized and what that organization communicates about our understanding of the divine). Though the aim of the Dialogue is doctrinal discussion, this honest description of the conflict is perhaps its most insightful and original contribution. Furthermore, the deep belief in the necessity of theological practices in the midst of conflict is evident. God must be invoked through reshaping practices so that human beings can be their best selves with one another through "persistent prayer, fasting, rigorous thought, and compassion through Christ-like dialogue. This is not a pious comment but a lasting judgment derived from our conviction that it is God who holds us together in the church and not we ourselves." Only then is genuine discernment about the way forward possible.

Clearly, this Dialogue is, as the document states, a first step. At least three of the series of action proposals were acted upon prior to the 2000 General Conference. As requested, the Council of Bishops did enter its own theological dialogue. In fact, it spent the majority of its plenary time during the last quadrennium conducting its own dialogue and practicing the "Guidelines for Civility," which has been widely distributed and used in the church, and moreover, sent to the CPT for consideration in its discussion. General Conference 2000 recommended that similar Dialogues continue in a variety of venues, indicating that many other recommendations of the Dialogue may find life in the next quadrennium.

What are the implications of the Dialogue in relation to the CPT report? It coheres nicely with the emphasis on devotional practice in the first three sections of the CPT report and specifies particular practices that are important to theological dialogue, practices that might have made the fifth portion of the CPT, "Encourage Theological and Doctrinal Discourse," more consistent with its whole. By placing this fifth section alongside "In Search of Unity," an interesting question comes to the fore. The CPT report specifically calls on theological schools to help to clarify the thought of the church, but "In Search of Unity" shows that clear, abstract, theological thinking is not enough. Instead, to entertain doctrinal differences groups need to be equally schooled in processes of dialogue that are in conflict with academic discourse in the twenty-first century. In academia, including the theological academy, a student often learns that "clear and critical thinking" is created by offering a few appreciative comments

about another person's theology and then attacking any weakness in the argument with a vengeance and producing one's own correct, reasoned position with which any other "reasonable" person would agree. "Clear and critical thinking" rarely means genuinely understanding and appreciating a person whose viewpoint differs, finding the strengths in that person's position as well as in one's own position, and finding ways toward a third collaborative alternative of which neither side was previously aware. "Clear and critical thinking" often concentrates on understanding why the other side is wrong, not why the other side is right. Classroom combat is about ideas. One can always reconsider on the following day, though one rarely does. The academic model allows for classroom combat to be followed by sociability away from the classroom. As students spend less time with one another away from the classroom, however, the academic model of combat and conviviality deteriorates. This kind of academic formation may not serve us well in the setting of the church, where the combat is not just about ideas but about personal integrity, ultimate faith claims to live by, and economic resources. The Dialogue suggests that, as the abstractions of doctrine are debated, specific sets of practices of civility that support dialogue across theological difference may be an important aspect of the "formation in spiritual leadership" that theological education has to offer.

### **Practical Theology in the Bishops Initiative on Children and Poverty: Reshaping Theology**

Part of the function of the office of the bishop in the UMC is teaching. An "episcopal initiative" results when the Council of Bishops decides that a particular subject is so important to the life of the church that it will collectively study and teach about it over a period of years. In recent decades the environment and congregational life have been subjects of episcopal initiatives. The Bishops Initiative on Children and Poverty was launched in 1996 and continues as an initiative through at least 2004. Previous initiatives worked toward producing a study guide for the church. The method of this initiative was different: it produced a short "foundation" document in 1996 and then sought to support the efforts of bishops to organize the Initiative as they saw fit in their local episcopal areas.

"Reshaping" is the first of three specific goals elaborated in the foundation document:

The crisis among children and the impoverished and our theological and historical mandates demand more than additional programs or emphases.

*Nothing less than the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among "the least of these" is required. The evaluation of everything the Church is and does in the light of the impact on children and the impoverished is the goal. The anticipated result is the development of forms of congregational and connectional life and mission that will more faithfully reflect and serve the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Communities of faith shaped by God's presence with the most vulnerable represent alternatives to the values and visions of the prevailing culture. (emphasis mine)*<sup>7</sup>

The kind of "reshaping" that is envisioned is elaborated in the foundation document. The document begins with a social scientific description of the global situation of children and poverty. It is to this situation that United Methodists are asked to respond in imitation of the acts of God. The document demonstrates why they are called to respond to children and poverty by tracing the theme of God's response to children and the poor through the Old and New Testaments and in early Methodist mission and ministry. It returns to the contemporary situation, arguing that for the first time the world has the resources to solve the problem of poverty and that the lack of desire to do so is a spiritual problem. The document imagines people and a church who are "reshaped" by ministering in and among the children and the poor.

The practices it commends are intertwined with the theology it reclaims. The primary theological issue, the document asserts, is the nature and action of God. The primary practice it recommends is the imitation of this God. The second section of the document, "Theological, Historical, and Missional Mandate," portrays the character of the biblical God as one who defends the vulnerable, particularly the widow, the orphan, and the resident alien; who considers practices of justice, compassion, and mercy toward the poor to be more important than cultic practices; who requires tithing as a means of caring for the poor; who in Jesus Christ associates himself with the outcast and declares that "what you do to the least of these is what you do to me."

The document then shows the continuity between this biblical God and the God Wesley worshiped, preached, and imitated. In so doing, it stresses the practices of the original Wesleyan movement. Wesley practiced, as required of his preachers, regular visiting of the poor; design of facilities that welcomed the poor; instruction for the poor and for children in religion, worship, fasting, and academics; spending time with children; and providing holistically for the edu-

7. All quotations in this section are from the original foundational document for the Bishops Initiative on Children and Poverty, "Children and Poverty, an Episcopal Initiative: Biblical and Theological Foundations," in Deb Smith, *Community with Children and the Poor: A Guide for Congregational Study* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2003).



cation, health, and economic sufficiency of the poor and children, for the freedom of slaves, and for compassion for prisoners and the condemned. Implicitly, it recommends that Wesleyans find contemporary practices that parallel these early Wesleyan essentials.

The document claims that the failure of vision and moral will to solve the crisis of children and poverty is a spiritual crisis. The symptoms of spiritual crisis are the church's and the society's sense of powerlessness; boredom; poverty of vision, community, and hope; and the attitude that wealth is "mine" rather than a trust from God. The practices of building care and community with children and the poor are a means of grace. Therefore, they lead to a spiritual answer to the crisis. What can be gained spiritually by such reshaping is articulated in a "reclaiming" statement early in the document:

The statistics alone do not tell the full story of what is happening to the world's children. Children are victims of many poverties. Spiritual poverty is more difficult to measure, but its devastating effects on the affluent and the impoverished are evident. To be deprived of love, hope, and transcendent meaning is to be robbed of the abundant life that Christ intends for all. All children have a basic need and right to know that they are loved infinitely by God and that God seeks for them a life of joy, hope, and meaning. Children need to experience their identity and worth as both recipients and means of God's grace. What is happening to the world's children represents a sinful devaluing of God's gracious gift of life and a thwarting of God's justice for all humanity.

Like the CPT report, the Initiative foundation document diagnoses the church's problem as a crisis in its spiritual life. It recommends a series of practices that are equally aimed at the creation of spirituality, but very different from those recommended by the CPT. Where the CPT is strong on practices that aim toward building a relationship with God and with neighbors within the life of the church, the Initiative emphasizes building a relationship with neighbors within and especially outside the church in order to find a relationship with God. Just as "In Search of Unity" offers a set of practices that broaden the fifth section of the CPT report, the Initiative offers a set of practices that could broaden the practices recommended for the creation of "spiritual/prophetic/servant/covenant leadership." Like "In Search of Unity" and unlike the CPT report, the foundation document is more a launching document after a first stage of discussion than a document of recommendations. Practices that might build global, ecumenical, and interfaith community are implied by the way the issue of children and poverty is described in the first

section of the document; they are not recommended. However, the practices recommended in this document and in documents that succeeded it, including "Hope for the Children of Africa" and "A Church for All God's Children," provide further interpretation of the kinds of practices that might enrich the fourth section of the CPT report and its understanding of spirituality and leadership. The same is true in reverse: acts of compassion and acts of devotion are not linearly related (though for Wesley, when they temporally conflict, the demands of mercy allow the believer to put aside devotional practice). They are organically and integrally connected with one another; each depends upon the other. Since interconnected practices of mercy and piety informed both the development of doctrine in the early church and the Wesleyan movement, one wonders how a fuller reshaping of spiritual leadership through common practices of mercy and piety might inform the new communities that will be created by additional dialogues on theological diversity called for by the 2000 General Conference.

Though the Initiative foundation document does not recommend restructuring *per se*, it calls for evaluation of the organization of the church as it responds to God who is among the children and the poor. Where the structure of the church blocks such a response, it would need to be restructured. Since the Initiative is the work of the Council of Bishops, it is not surprising that its implementation reflects some of the bishops' structural concerns. Reflecting their concern for "burdensome organization and bureaucracy," it created no new programs of organizations. Respecting the growing need for contextualization, it relied on each bishop to implement it as he or she saw fit in his or her episcopal area. It focused simultaneously on advocacy and meeting particular needs.

Its struggles and its successes also reflected conditions in the UMC. At some points the Initiative was criticized for being "just another social action program," at others for being "apple pie — who can be against it?" Persons in the church whose programs had long advocated for children against poverty were at times miffed by the bishops' involvement in their "turf," and others distrusted the bishops, doubting they would continue the Initiative until real gains were made. According to the bishops' own evaluation, the hardest problem the Initiative faces is creating practices with the poor, middle class, and wealthy that build community across class boundaries. In that sense the work of the Initiative reveals the fragmentation of postmodern society. But it also works against fragmenting trends in that it represents an unusually collaborative project among the Council of Bishops, the general boards and agencies of the church, faculty from theological schools, agency consultants from within and beyond the UMC, and local groups and congregations.

## Conclusion

A close reading of the restructuring, reshaping, and reclaiming aspects of each of these practical theological projects shows that these three aspects are integrally related to each other, even when one aspect is the ostensible aim. It also shows that the most creative theological energy seems to be not in the arena of structure or doctrine but in reshaping the United Methodist way of life through a variety of practices that are related to spiritual development. No one project, however, has a full articulation of what these practices are. The practices recommended by these three projects in the UMC complement one another. Furthermore, a study of the practices enjoined in additional projects (e.g., little is said here about the practice of the arts in a practical theological project) might be necessary for the church to grasp holistic theological practice and spiritual development. The practices that emerge as “spiritually quickening” in these three projects, however, offer a broad vision of a devotional, compassionate, and articulate spirituality of faith and works toward which the UMC might be developing.

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