

The Methodist Way: A Summary

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Perhaps you have recently heard someone speaking about “The Methodist Way” and wonder, “What’s that about?” If you haven’t yet heard about “The Methodist Way,” you will soon and from all levels of our connection. This paper seeks to summarize what “The Methodist Way” is all about. We will first give credit where credit is due, then share several orienting comments and finally, summarize each of the five core practices.

Credit where credit is due:

While the practices referred to as “The Methodist Way” are as ancient as Scripture and characteristic of the Methodist movement across England and America in the 18th century, the current language came from Bishop Bruce Ough searching Scripture for images to define congregational health for the Ohio West Conference. He identified four qualities: “Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Faith-forming Relationships, and Risk-Taking Service.” Bishop Robert Schnase of Missouri Annual Conference picked up these phrases, with slight changes, and added “Extravagant Generosity.” He went on to write a book, soon to be published, that addresses each of these core practices which together fulfill a congregation’s mission to “make disciples for a transformed world.”

In November 2007, at a historic first meeting of the Cabinets of all Annual Conferences in the United States, “The Methodist Way” will be shared as a clear and practical way of conceiving the process of making disciples in a local congregation. Already sensing the need plainly to name a faithful congregation’s foundational practices and establish a common language in the Florida Annual Conference, a number of leaders have chosen to adopt Bishop Schnase’s descriptions of the disciple-making activities essential for every congregation. Again with slight changes, we will be using:

Cultivating a congregation of passionate worshipers

Extending radical hospitality to our community and the next generation

Forming persons in Christ through deep and intentional discipling

Sending out into the community disciples as salty servants

Pouring ourselves out in extravagant generosity

Several orienting comments:

These five activities, collectively known as “The Methodist Way,” describe the core process every congregation must follow in order to fulfill the Great Commission given them by Christ (Matthew 28:19-20) and the charter given them by their annual conference (see ¶201, 202 and 203 of The Book of

Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2004). These core disciplines are not primarily techniques that can be learned or styles that can be adopted in order to be “successful.” (See Acts 8:9-24 where Simon the Sorcerer brazenly offers to buy from Peter the power to change lives through laying on hands!) These practices are part and parcel of what it means to be the Body of Christ in a local community. They are a natural and essential outgrowth of disciples being in Christ-centered community and joining Him in mission. ***None of the practices is optional; all are definitional.*** By implementing these practices well, congregations fulfill their mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Failing to implement them well, congregations are not only inauthentic, they deteriorate and decline.

These are not one-size-fits-all, trans-historical practices that can be plucked up from one vital congregation and plopped down into another. In that we have a God who chose to meet us incarnate in a particular person within a particular historical context, so we must meet others in ministry in ways that are contextually sensitive. While we can certainly learn from one another, what is authentic and what “works” has to be discerned spiritually and determined experimentally by congregations in different contexts. As David could not wear Saul’s armor to fight Goliath (I Samuel 17:32-40), ***one congregation can not just “put on” what “works” for another congregation.*** The collection of persons making up one congregation is different from other congregations and the community they are called to serve is also different. The practices must be fleshed out in ways appropriate for a particular congregation and community.

These practices are for the purposes of making disciples and transforming the world. In other words, they are intentional practices that have expected results. What “works” is what effectively bears fruit in a particular congregation and community. The fruit these practices are expected to bear is the forming of persons and communities in the nature and ways of Christ. People are to become followers of Jesus Christ, yoked to him as apprentices while their lives change from the inside out (Matthew 11:28-10). Congregations are called to have light and salt impact on the communities in which they are located (Matthew 5:13-16). The expectation of Jesus for us to be both faithful and fruitful is especially clear in John 15:

“I am the true vine, and my father is the gardener. He cut off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. . . If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. . . This is to my father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. . . You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.” (Excerpts from John 15:1-18)

Finally, there is nothing uniquely United Methodist about the practices referred to as “The Methodist Way.” They firmly have their roots in Scripture. They clearly were practiced well when the Methodist movement swept across England and America. But these practices are also practiced well when any congregation lives up to their Kingdom potential making disciples for a transformed world.

What “The Methodist Way” does is assist United Methodists in being very clear about the specific behaviors, activities and practices which are essential to disciple making. As Bishop Robert Schnase put it, ***these five core discipling practices “move us from abstract intentions to practical and personal directions for ministry. Once our mission becomes practical and personal, it becomes memorable and achievable.”***

The Methodist Way:
Cultivating a congregation of passionate worshipers

The defining well-spring of a congregation’s life together is their worship. Christ calls us out of the world to gather around Him as a congregation of passionate worshipers. We are a church who worships God as revealed to us through Jesus Christ. Before we do anything, this is our basic identity: we are Jesus’ disciples who gather because of what God has done and is doing in us and in the world. We gather with attitudes of trust and gratitude, of openness and obedience. We gather to be formed as God’s people through praise, prayer, Word and Sacrament.

What is passionate about our worship is not that it is done in a particular order or technique or style. What is passionate about our worship is the relationship of faith we have toward Christ as we gather to worship. Having said this, what we do in worship at the functional level – the particular acts of worship, how we attend to God’s Word, how we celebrate the sacred acts of baptism and Eucharist, the music we use, the space in which we gather, the media we employ, how we are led – can either encourage or be a distraction from our passionate worship.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and not we ourselves, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. (Psalm 100)

According to Paul Chilcote, most revitalization movements have been characterized by six primary signs of the Spirit’s renewing work. “The renewal of the Christian community is often characterized by the rediscovery of the *living Word*, the rekindling of *saving faith*, the promotion of *holistic spirituality*, the development of various forms of *accountable discipleship*, the community’s reorientation around *formative worship*, and the affirmation of a *missional vocation* as the church’s primary reasons for being.” (The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal. Paul Chilcote, ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 25). The Methodist movement involved a significant renewal in worship. “In an age when both preaching and sacrament were at low ebb in the life of the church, the Wesleyan emphasis on pulpit and table was like a two-edged sword; this conjunction was a potent agent in the spread of the revival. And when Charles Wesley’s hymns were added, the Wesley’s revolutionized worship.” (33)

What are the ways we should be shaping people's faith so that they enter into experiences of worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23)? What are the ways we should be shaping our experiences of worship so as to cultivate and encourage passionate worship today?

The Methodist Way:

Extending radical hospitality to our community and the next generation

As followers of one who easily and gladly welcomed children, tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans and indeed, sinners of all sorts into his fellowship – how can we not do likewise? He even assured us: "Just as you do it to one of the least of these, you do it to me." (Matthew 25:40) So how can we ever allow our congregations to be closed gatherings of like-minded, like-acting, like-looking and like-living persons? The book of Acts is the story of how the Spirit bulldozed down every dividing social, ethnic and religious wall separating people from one another. "You are all [children] of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 6:28-28)

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting our sins against us. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (I Cor. 5:18-20)

"Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive and care for those who are strangers, so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those whom we do not yet know, a love that motivates us to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate to the needs and receive the talents of newcomers. . . Hospitality is a mark of Christian discipleship, a quality of Christian community, a concrete expression of our commitment to grow in Christ-likeness by seeing ourselves as part of the community of faith, "not to be served, but to serve." (Matthew 20:28) (Quoted from Bishop Robert Schnase's unpublished manuscript.)

Radical Hospitality is not just about directional signs and sparkling nurseries, information kiosks and parking lot attendants – though these functional ways of helping persons feel welcomed are important, should be studied and employed. **Hospitality really begins with a congregation's heart toward those outside their membership.** Thus, radical hospitality goes beyond "come and get it" evangelism willing to welcome those who come to our church facilities to check things out. Radical hospitality includes "go and get them" evangelism (Luke 14:24) that actively finds ways to reach people who will never come inside our church buildings otherwise.

In order to reach those persons who would never darken a door of a church and, if they did, would not feel in sync with what they experienced inside, John Wesley stepped out of his comfort zone and risked taking up the practice of field preaching. In his journal on Thursday, March 29, 1739 Wesley wrote:

“I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which [Mr. Whitfield] set me an example on Sunday; I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.” Then four days later: “At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city to about three thousand people.”

Through field and itinerate preaching, the Methodist movement was able to reach a wider audience than the church ever reached before, including the poor and working class. Early Methodist preachers effectively carried the Gospel of grace to the people where they were, rather than waiting for the people to come to them.

We have only to look at the contrast in the demographics of our congregation and our community to get a read on whether we are in fact offering radical hospitality. Are the same percentage of single parents and young persons in our congregation as in our community? Does our congregation reflect the ethnic makeup of our community? How can we offer the Gospel so freely given to us to those not yet in our congregations? What are the ways in which we must learn to step out of our comfort zones and to risk being “more vile” in order fruitfully to “proclaim in the highways the glad tidings of salvation” to the people of our Florida communities?

The Methodist Way:

Forming persons in Christ through deep and intentional discipling

Imagine the joy of parents when their child is born. How joyful would these same parents be years later if their child remains a baby never growing up? Observers as diverse as William Willimon, Reggie McNeal, George Barna and Dallas Willard have remarked that ***for decades Western congregations have not made discipleship a condition of church member. Consequently, there are many church members who have never made a commitment to following Jesus and to becoming more like Him. For them, everything hinges on whether they have accepted God’s cross-earned forgiveness. Years go by and they are no more like Christ than when they accepted Him as their Savior – but not their Lord.*** While the Bible certainly celebrates the born-again gift of justification, it also stresses the transformational need of sanctification. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is clear: Jesus said to “Go and make disciples . . . and teach them to obey all that I have commanded you.” ***In other words, you can’t really be a Christian apart from a commitment to walk with Christ obediently as you allow the Holy Spirit to reshape your life from the inside out (Romans 12:2).*** We have confused church membership with

discipling. We have offered new member classes and given out membership directories. We have assumed that if people will just get involved in our programs, they will grow in Christ. It has not worked. According to sociologists George Barna and George Gallup, there are no significant differences in values and life-style between those in America who go to church and those who do not.

Many people now come into our congregations with little or no real knowledge about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. They need basic knowledge about Scripture, about living a Christian life-style and about the disciplines that will sustain their spiritual life. The Holy Spirit usually does the work of sanctification most effectively through relationships. As life is lived in community, faith is shaped during teachable moments – that is, Christ is caught more than taught. People need personal mentoring, coaching, guiding and encouragement by others who are also seeking to follow Jesus. And all of this doesn't just happen; deep discipling takes intentionality, organization and leader commitment.

A consistent hallmark of the Wesleyan tradition has been the conviction that true religion consists not just of right beliefs and right actions, but also involves a heart that is purified by genuine repentance and by true love of God and of one's neighbor. The Methodists believed that God had raised them up to promote holiness in every sphere of life. In order to help people grow in holiness of life, the Wesley's placed persons in classes and societies where they received encouragement and were held accountable as they learned to walk in Christ.

What are the ways that would work best today to help persons in our congregations become mature followers of Jesus Christ? How are we intentional about helping persons grow in forgiving and serving others, in living a God-honoring life-style, in walking with God through difficult times, in having Godly balance to their life? Are our congregational leaders strategizing how best to help persons move from being casual, cultural Christians to becoming sold-out followers of Jesus Christ?

The Methodist Way:
Sending out into the community disciples as salty servants

Eugene Peterson's The Message renders Matthew 5:13 exceptionally well: "Let me tell you why you are here," says Jesus. "You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage."

Surrounded by white-water change, many congregations have circled the wagons and turned inward in a siege mentality. All but gone is sacrificial service to the least, the last and the lost beyond their church doors. All but gone is costly action aimed at blessing their community for Christ. Consequently, the community goes on their way as if Christ and His Church are without consequent or value to them. Inside the church, the bounteous God-given gifts, abilities and passions of many persons lay fallow, untapped for the Kingdom. People are all

spiritually dressed up with no place to go and nothing to do that seems to make a Christ-like difference in the world.

Jesus was clear that his followers are to be servants: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant . . . just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26-28) Service flows naturally and inescapably from the teachings and example of Jesus. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:23-24)

Salty Service makes a difference in people’s lives – both those being served and those serving. Salty Service makes us “doers and not hearers only” (James 1.27). Salty Service connects the lives of disciples with the ongoing work of Christ in the world. Salty Service restores credibility to those who would share a Gospel of love to a doubting world.

“Christ pulls people out of themselves and into the lives of others where they would never have gone on their own,” says Bishop Schnase. “What have you done in the last six months to make a positive difference in the lives of others that you would not have done if it were not for your relationship to Christ?” Similarly, Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson in The Externally Focused Church (Loveland, Colorado: Group Publishing, 2004) ask: **“If your church vanished, would your community weep?”**

Albert Outler describes evangelism in the Wesleyan spirit as Wesley teaching his followers to be a “band of martyrs and servants,” emptying themselves as servants, giving themselves freely for others. . . . It was this “visible martyrdom and servanthood,” says Outler, “that rammed home the *evangelion* he preached.” Outler reminds us that in the Wesleyan spirit, evangelism and social action are inextricably joined. **“The world hears the Gospel when it sees it,” he says, “when its witnesses are clearly committed to a more fully human future, in this world and the next.”** “emphasis added” (Lovett H. Weems, Jr. Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999. 37-8)

How are our church leaders intentionally preparing “God’s people for works of service” (Ephesians 4:12) so that our talk of God’s love does not sound like “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (I Corinthians 13:1)? How is Christ calling his disciples today to feed and cloth, visit and house him? (Matthew 25:31-46) How is Christ calling us to bless our communities in His name in order to earn the right to be considered when we speak of His love?

The Methodist Way:
Pouring ourselves out for Christ in extravagant generosity

A retired minister once remarked, “The last part of a person’s life that Christ seems to gain Lordship over is their checkbook.” Bishop Schnase evidently agreed when he decided to add this fifth practice to “The Methodist way.” In the last forty years, financial support in mainline denominations, including United

Methodism, has dropped from 3.1% of income to 2.6% while America has become even more affluent. George Barna states: “Believers frequently donate money to their church – but they don’t donate very much.” He goes on to add that about 8% of attendees actually tithe and twice that number (16%) actually give nothing. (Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine followers of Christ Colorado Springs, Colorado: WaterBrook Press, 2001, 73-74)

John Wesley had a threefold dictum regarding good stewardship: 1) make all you can by working hard at an honest and honorable trade; 2) save all you can, never squandering money; and 3) give all you can by supporting your immediate family, the household of faith and then to all who are in need. In the sermon “The Use of Money” -- more frequently preached than all other sermons except “Justification by Faith” – Wesley said that if you make all you can and save all you can but do not give all you can, you may be a living person, but you will be a dead Christian. Wesley insisted that for the wealthy, holiness, spiritual vitality, love of God and even faith are directly linked to generosity to the poor. It was for him not just a matter of the poor going hungry; also at stake was the harmful effect of not fulfilling acts of mercy on the souls of the rich. The lack of generosity, he believed would result is a spiritual downward spiral (spiritual de-formation) involving pride, greed and materialism which could seriously undermine our love of neighbor and of God. (See Rebekah Miles’ “Works of Mercy as Spiritual Formation: Why Wesley Feared for the Souls of the Rich” in Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal, Paul Chilcote, ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 98-110)

Jesus sets for us the example of a steward who knows that all we have comes from God, who trusts God to sustain His needs and who therefore is freed up to pour himself out in generosity to others – even to the point of the cross. How can we help one another be freed from grasping at things to sustain our lives? How can we help one another be freed up to pour ourselves out in acts of extravagant generosity?

Conclusion

It has become axiomatic in organizational change literature that, “You can’t hit a target you can’t see.” As our connection of congregations increasingly seeks to improve the eroding effectiveness of our ministries among the people of Florida, it is important that we are crystal clear what “good ministry” means. Some say we have too long defined “success” institutionally – even bureaucratically: paying apportionments, showing up at district meetings and getting our completed forms in on time. Others have said that Christ’s mission is for us to “make disciples,” which is certainly better, but leaves most of us wondering what that really means. “The Methodist Way” with its five core practices is one practical way to describe what “making disciples” really looks like in action. It provides us with a much needed common language by which we can encourage and hold one another accountable for fulfilling our Kingdom potential, in hopes that one day Christ can greet each of us saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

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