

The Pathos and Promise of American Methodist Ecclesiology

MICHAEL G. CARTWRIGHT

To seek and confess the ecclesiological location of one's community is an act of discerning and proclaiming the gospel itself. There is no preaching and living of the gospel without at least an implicit ecclesiological claim being made.

—Geoffrey Wainwright

INTRODUCTION

"We the people of God called United Methodist, have come to a critical turning point in our history." With these words the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church begin their recently released pastoral letter and foundation document, *Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church*.¹ The publication of *Vision for the Church* provides an occasion for reflection on some of the more troublesome as well as promising aspects of contemporary American Methodist ecclesiology.²

My discussion proceeds in three stages. After a brief orientation to the episcopal initiative on "Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples," I will discuss the foundation document *Vision for the Church*, offering constructive criticisms where necessary. This commentary leads into the second part of the article where I trace the emergence of the problem of American Methodist ecclesiology from 1813 to 1908. Then, in the last two sections of the article, I try to situate *Vision for the Church* in relation to these and other more recent developments. I will ultimately argue that *Vision for the Church* reflects—but does not resolve—the ongoing ecclesiological problems of American Methodism, and thereby also reflects the pathos and promise of United Methodist peoplehood.

Michael G. Cartwright teaches in the department of philosophy and religious studies at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania.

ORIENTATION TO THE EPISCOPAL INITIATIVE

In considering the rationale for *Vision for the Church*, two of the most obvious concerns of the bishops are the dramatic decline in church membership, and the increased financial burden of congregations (p. 9). Yet it would be a mistake to think that these problems constitute the primary reasons for the pastoral letter. As the second sentence of the pastoral letter frankly states: "The world in which our heritage of faith seemed secure is passing away" (p. 9). This is no small admission, although many observers would note that such acknowledgement is long overdue.³

The bishops indicate in the Preface to the foundation document, that their summons is not for another "program initiative." They wisely resist the temptation to content themselves with a "'quick fix' for the troubles we face...." Instead, they issue "an urgent call to every United Methodist congregation to join in the process of seeking God's vision for the church" (p. 6). And as the bishops repeatedly state, United Methodism must seek a "new vision" for itself as it approaches the new millennium.

The rationale for *Vision for the Church* bears a striking resemblance to the earlier pastoral letter, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and the Just Peace* (1985). Both documents employ "crisis" rhetoric as part of the rationale for summoning the people of God called United Methodist to renewed concern for discipleship.⁴ And just as the bishops called for a "new theology of a just peace"⁵ in the first pastoral letter, they are now calling for a new vision for the church (p. 6). Although it is not immediately clear whether the bishops are consciously setting a pattern, there can be no doubt that some new patterns are emerging, and this in turn may have important implications for reenvisioning the teaching function in United Methodism with respect to the office of bishop.⁶

On both occasions, the bishops have implicitly appealed to "the signs of the times," although this biblical phrase was not actually used in the earlier pastoral letter. It is noteworthy that the bishops should openly use this phrase in their latest pastoral letter because this is the phrase made famous by Pope John XXIII, when (January 25, 1959), he called for the Second Vatican Council, the council which enacted dramatic liturgical and ecclesiological changes, redefining the relationship of the Catholic Church to the world.

Granted that the bishops have no intention of calling for the equivalent of Vatican II within United Methodism, it is noteworthy that this document was introduced at a major "Gathering" of over 3,200 pastors and laypeople on "Vital Congregations and Faithful Disciples" (October 31-November 4, 1990). After "two years of study, prayer and conferences" the council of bishops has commended its "vision of vital congregation and faithful discipleship" (p. 5) to the "connexion" of United Methodist congregations for their consideration and response. Apparently, the bishops are serious about initiating (re-initiating?) the kind of *conciliar* reflection that fits the polity of United Methodism.

In this case, the process being commended to the people called United Methodists may be as significant as the summons itself. The Preface states that the bishops' call is to local congregations in "unique local situation[s]" to join them

in the search for God's vision for the church (p. 5). The bishops have deliberately refrained from spelling out the implications of their summons to discipleship. Rather, they have chosen to risk calling for an open-ended discussion of a "new vision" accompanied by a "disciplined quest" for "ways to make that vision a reality" (p. 6).

The question of what it might mean to undertake such a "disciplined quest" will be addressed later in this article. But here I want to note one other feature of *Vision for the Church* that marks a departure from *In Defense of Creation*. In the earlier document, with very few exceptions, appeals to Christian Scripture and Christian tradition were confined to a discussion of "The Heritage of Faith."⁷ In this latest document, not only is there the equivalent of a chapter on the Christian heritage, there is also much more use of the language of the Christian faith. Not only do the bishops frequently appeal to the Bible, and to Christian traditions (ancient and modern), the document itself is informed by the language of prayer and supplication.

In fact, although the bishops do not actually call attention to it, much of their rhetoric throughout the document parallels that of the prayer for the Ephesian church: "I pray that your inward eyes might be illumined, so that you will know the hope to which you are called" (Eph. 1:18). Thus, like the deutero-Pauline writer, the bishops can be said to have located the "problem" of vision within the dialectic of promise and fulfillment, and thereby the question of ecclesial vocation is placed within the larger framework of the narrative of God's redemptive action in history.⁸ In other words, in the present document, the bishops can be interpreted as trying to *reestablish* the identity of United Methodism not only by recovering the "stream of Wesleyan Heritage" but also by retelling the biblical narratives of God's way with Israel and the Church. Nowhere is this more obvious than in their repeated use of the phrase "people of God" and the analogous "people of God called United Methodists" (p. 13). Yet, this shift also raises another question: Does the bishops' use of biblical language actually forge a genuine link between the biblical vision of peoplehood and contemporary United Methodism, or does such usage simply reflect our nostalgia for a time when our heritage of faith *did* seem secure?

EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE OF VISION FOR THE CHURCH

I suspect that most readers perusing *Vision for the Church* for the first time will be struck by the liturgical focus of the document: chapter headings have been replaced by the elements of worship; comments of various United Methodist congregations are arranged in the form of litanies; laments and aspirations of the churches in the "connexion" are collated in the form of prayers and praise. In fact, the pattern of worship is explicitly commended as "the pattern for seeking new vision in the church today" (p. 11).

In the Overview to the document, the bishops emphasize the purposeful character of this arrangement by linking it to the search for the "authentic identity" and "distinctive voice" of The United Methodist Church:

In the pattern of our worship, we have a distinctive way of thinking, praying, and living our way toward God's vision for the church. Worship is the focal point of our fellowship together in congregations. Worship is at the heart of the whole Christian life....If worship is the pattern for all Christian living, then worship is also the pattern for seeking new vision for the church today (p. 11).

Here, the bishops are undoubtedly following the lead of several theologians and ethicists—some of whom are United Methodists—who have stressed the importance of the liturgical context for Christian theology and Christian ethics.⁹ This emphasis may also reflect renewed interest in worship across the “connexion.”

Unfortunately, designating worship as the organizing principle of a discussion does not necessarily mean that worship *informs* the perspective being offered. This point also strikes at the heart of the document's flaws. For example, the prayers and hopes of individual congregations are collated and presented as a kind of offering to God (pp. 28-32, 100-110). Yet, rhetorically, these collations do not illustrate the common pattern of worship in the United Methodist tradition as much as they glorify the *diversity* of United Methodism. The ostensive purpose of the prayers and praise is to emphasize what we have in common, but this purpose is belied by the primary celebration of diversity within The United Methodist Church. The celebration of diversity lacks the kind of theological interpretation of Christian unity which might have validated the intent of the bishops. The emphasis on diversity might not have been a bad thing to do if the theological context made clear that the diversity is the product of the giftedness of the Spirit who makes us one, but even this point is not interpreted.

From a different angle, the bishops' discussion of Holy Communion is strangely out of kilter with the aforementioned claim about the importance of the pattern of worship for the congregation's pattern of mission. The bishops assert:

Holy Communion is the center of congregational life. Through it the people become a congregation, united in one body as the Body of Christ in the world, fed as one people in order to offer the bread of life to the world (pp. 135-136).

Here, the bishops seem to want to ascribe a deeper significance to the place of the Eucharist in congregational life than many of the congregational testimonials would allow. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to say that the testimonials could be interpreted to validate any assertion about the *centrality* of anything at all with respect to the liturgy. Ironically, the discrepancy between contemporary practice and the bishops' statement of what should be the case may undermine their own attempt to “gather” the people called Methodist around the common pattern of worship.

Still worse, the bishops' claim about the eucharistic center of congregational life is not even supported by their own document, for the largest single section of the document—like the greater part of many worship services in contemporary

United Methodism—is given over to “Hearing the Word of God” (pp. 51-85). By contrast, the entire section on the Eucharist takes up less than seven pages (pp. 133-139). A charitable reading of the bishops’ intent in this central section would note that the bishops obviously had to choose some place to stick in other materials, and they simply chose this section as the least worst place to put in their model of congregational analysis.¹⁰ I would accept that line of reasoning, but I do not think we can excuse the bishops for having undercut (however unintentional or inadvertent it may have been) the sacramental thrust of the last section of *Vision for the Church*.

Another puzzling aspect of *Vision for the Church* is the way the Wesleyan heritage is evoked in the document. On the one hand, we can say that there is an entire section of “Hearing the Word” devoted to the “stream of the Wesleyan Heritage.” Yet, upon closer examination, one discerns only a stark outline of the *ordo salutis*.¹¹ Indeed, some aspects of Wesley’s “scriptural way of salvation” are inadequately presented. Most notably, the section on “A Serious Seeking” (pp. 69-70) presents a mere sketch of what it meant to be a “seeker” in the context of the Wesleyan Revival.

More importantly, it is not clear what the bishops are doing when they allude to the origins and practice of “The General Rules of the United Societies” (pp. 67, 70-71). The fact that these allusions to the General Rules are not accompanied by significant commentary that clarifies the relationship of the General Rules to contemporary United Methodist doctrine and practice suggests that the bishops either think that no commentary is needed, or that they do not know what they would want to say if they were to offer such commentary. In the place of such explanations, the bishops make a rather startling claim: “**What unites the United Methodists is our common discipline of holiness and our shared movement for reforming the church and the continents.**”¹² Although this comment appears in a paragraph where the Book of Discipline is the focus of discussion, the statement cries out for clarification. Have the bishops confused the indicative mood with the subjunctive, or do they really believe that contemporary United Methodists have a “common discipline” of holy living?

Although the related discussion of “Holy Living” is much more fully treated, it is disappointing to note that the bishops spend much of their time *qualifying* the reason for the General Rules, and very little space explicating their significance for the mission of the church. Yet if Robert Cushman is correct in claiming that the General Rules are critical to any “full account” of Methodist doctrinal standards,¹³ then perhaps the discussion of discipline and mission should be refocused. And if we remember that the context of application of the General Rules was in the class meetings of the early Methodists, then we come closer to seeing how the General Rules provided the framework within which salvation was pursued as “a communal endeavor.”¹⁴ Further, the system of class meetings within the United Societies provided the communal context within which persons “seeking after salvation” could discern their place on the path from conviction of sin to assurance of salvation and on to glorification.¹⁵

By focusing rather narrowly on the soteriological significance of the disci-

plines for holy living without taking into account their communal embodiment in the United Societies, the bishops have missed an opportunity to call attention to the ecclesiological significance of the “General Rules of the United Societies.”¹⁶ And here is where we find an important clue to the problem with which the bishops are wrestling throughout *Vision for the Church*. Try as they might, the bishops are unable to articulate the connection between “the disciplined quest” and the mission of the church; in the end, they are simply not able to overcome the negative connotations of “discipline” for contemporary American United Methodists.

In contrast, the early Wesleyan conception of discipline, as described in the “General Rules of the United Societies” among other places, is at one and the same time more robust and more dialectical. In John Wesley’s usage, discipline “does not denote a military drill or other coercive pedagogical measures. Instead it refers to a manner of obedience....[It] means the manner of living that the student receives from his teacher....We live in discipleship to Jesus.”¹⁷ This is the conception of discipleship that was embodied in the General Rules, and it is this vision of disciplined peoplehood that had already been lost by the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹⁸

THE LOSS OF PEOPLEHOOD IN AMERICAN METHODISM

Reading the fragments of ecclesiological reflection in early American Methodism, one is struck by the strong sense of God’s providence and the intimate awareness of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet, early American Methodists were also keenly aware of the fragility of their apostolate; they were conscious of the ambiguity—even provisionality—of the fledgling Methodist Episcopal Church in America. In the “Valedictory Address” of 1813, Bishop Francis Asbury looked back over more than forty years of ministry, and concluded: “We were a Church, and no Church.”¹⁹ Although the meaning of Asbury’s statement is not immediately clear, Frederick Norwood has interpreted it as an expression of the nineteenth-century struggle of American Methodists to “decide whether they would be a great church or a holy people.”²⁰ As I hope to show, this statement not only encapsulates the pathos of the nineteenth-century American Methodist vision for the church; it also can point us toward some of the more promising aspects of the early Methodist vision for the church, and quite possibly also point the way toward a reconstructed ecclesiology for contemporary United Methodism.

“We were a Church, and no Church.” The ambiguity in the statement is intriguing, especially when we consider that Asbury himself is *not* the first to have uttered it. Apparently, some unnamed persons found it amusing that the same preachers (prior to the “ordinations” of Asbury and Coke) who called Christians in America to a higher standard of Christian discipleship could not provide “the people called Methodists” with the sacraments. In fact, as the full text of the address makes clear, the early American Methodists were even more frustrated by their own inability to provide the sacraments than they were embarrassed about their obvious lack of ecclesiastical organization.

As Asbury's "Valedictory" also indicates, closely connected to this problem was the question of the validity of Methodist ordination. The latter question was not an issue that Asbury cared to argue.²¹ From his point of view, the validity of Methodist orders is "proven by the success of the Methodist Church in the discharge of its mission to convert the unconverted and to spread scriptural holiness. They are a people whom God owns."²² Just as Asbury did not offer the kind of doctrine of ministry that would have been accepted within The Church of England of his day, neither should we expect to find a carefully articulated ecclesiology in his writings. For him, ecclesiology is *demonstrated* by the presence of a "called people" whose ongoing apostolate coincides with their active pursuit of holiness. Like Wesley before him, Asbury was well aware of the sneers of those who deemed the Methodists unworthy of the status of a "church," yet he dared to use that description within the context of the claim of Methodist peoplehood.²³

The latter point is crucial for anyone attempting to make sense of the place of ecclesiology within early American Methodism precisely because leaders such as Asbury, McKendree and Bangs struggled with the *ambiguity* of the Methodist *apostolate*. On the one hand, they wanted to defend American Methodism from the charge that the ordinations of Methodist deacons and elders were invalid. On the other hand, early American Methodists also regarded their "peoplehood" as a validation of their status as a church. At the same time they took seriously the *provisionality* of their mission for they shared Wesley's vision of *reforming* Christ's Church by being an evangelical presence calling the church catholic to be the Church of Christ.

But as we all know, the American context of mission was not the same as the situation of Methodists in Britain. In the discussion which follows, I shall not attempt to rehearse the "theological transition" that occurred between the founding of Methodism and the early twentieth century.²⁴ Nor will I attempt to chart the demise of the class meetings within American Methodism, although I have no doubt that both of these shifts had an important impact on American Methodist ecclesiological reflection. Rather, what I propose to do is to depict the loss of "peoplehood" within American Methodism, by analyzing three important documents written between 1820 and 1908, each of which reflects important changes in the "ecclesial location"²⁵ of Methodism in American culture, and each of which attempts to respond to challenges that threaten to undermine the coherence of the ministry and mission of "the people called Methodists."

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, American Methodists found themselves pressed to respond to the challenge about the validity of Methodist ordination, which from the point of view of The Protestant Episcopal Church constituted a serious problem for the Methodist claim to be a "church" on an equal par with The Church of England. In 1820, when Nathan Bangs published his essay *A Vindication of Methodist Episcopacy*,²⁶ the only thing that set it apart from the other published treatises in the war of pamphlets between Methodists and their detractors in The Protestant Episcopal Church was the fact that he earnestly attempted to offer carefully stated responses to the arguments of the erudite, if condescending, "Pro Ecclesia" (the pen name of a writer in the Episcopal

Churchman). Little did Bangs know that his "Vindication" would turn out to be but the first of many "numbers" he wrote over the next decade.

From Bangs's perspective, his actions were defensive, "simply to ward off the blow which the writer had aimed at our church and there let the matter rest." But as one "number" led to another, Bangs found himself drawn to the task of doing "the subject justice, and to sift the question as far as I was able to the bottom."²⁷ Eventually Bangs put together more than thirty such "numbers" which first appeared serially in the *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) over the signature "Ecclesia." In the process, Bangs not only addressed questions raised by the anonymous "Pro Ecclesia," he also addressed questions that had begun to be raised within the Methodist "societies" in America. The fact that three Northeastern annual conferences requested that these articles be collected in a book is testimony to the high level of interest generated by Bangs's essays. Published in 1837 under the title of *An Original Church of Christ*,²⁸ this set of essays constitutes the first *book-length* discussion of ecclesiological issues in the history of American Methodism.

An Original Church of Christ is addressed to three different audiences. The majority of the book (chaps. 1-29) is an apologetic argument seeking to persuade "Pro Ecclesia" of the *validity* of the Methodist ordination, a question which for The Protestant Episcopal Church was tantamount to defining the validity of the Church itself. The last two chapters are addressed, respectively, to the itinerant ministers (chap. 30), and to the laity (chap. 31). The clergy are charged with the enforcement of disciplined living when they faithfully fulfill their task as itinerants "led by Divine Providence into new fields of labor." Bangs would not have the clergy consumed with the maintenance of ministry; their task is missional and their practice is to be disciplined by holy living. Like Bishop Asbury, Bangs has no interest in specifying a doctrine of ministry apart from the *apostolicity* of Methodist peoplehood. In this respect, Bangs's exhortations in the penultimate chapter are consistent with his defense of Methodist ordination found throughout the rest of the book.

Bangs's comments to the laity in the closing chapter of *An Original Church of Christ* are notably different than his comments in the previous chapters. Here he recounts the saga of Methodist beginnings, focusing attention on God's providential "design" in raising up a "holy people." This was the object of the "first heralds" who went "'out into the highways and hedges'...raising up those who 'were no people to become the people of God.'"²⁹ Bangs tries in several different ways to describe the heritage of "peoplehood" to American Methodists. His reminders suggest that something is already in danger of being lost and Bangs is clearly worried about it. He exhorts the laity to receive the ministers who are sent to them as "ambassadors" of Christ, and he stresses the many ways in which the clergy are *dependent* on the laity.³⁰ Finally, he calls attention to the dangers which face the church at this juncture, particularly the danger of being "corrupted by riches."³¹

Throughout this final chapter, Bangs exhorts the laity to be a "holy people," pointing to "The General Rules of the United Societies" as the guide to holy living.

Interestingly enough, Bangs does not single out any of the General Rules.³² Rather, he repeatedly refers to them as a whole, at times virtually identifying the discipline of “holy living” with the General Rules. And he also links doctrine to the discipline of the church. Bangs’s comments in this final chapter suggest that the *practice* of the General Rules should suffice for whatever ecclesiological clarification is needed by those *within* the Methodist societies. But it is also clear that Bangs is assuming that the General Rules serve as the internal discipline for the outward mission of The Methodist Episcopal Church.

In the concluding paragraph of *An Original Church of Christ*, Bangs sounds a note that will be heard again throughout the nineteenth century, albeit with modulated tones: “We believe...that God has made the Methodists...instruments of reviving and spreading pure Christianity among mankind.”³³ This providential purpose provided the theological rationale for the Methodist claim to be “church” in the sense that it has been constituted as a “people” with a distinct mission. Significantly, Bangs also urges the membership of The Methodist Episcopal Church not to succumb to sectarianism while indicating that it is better to be perceived as peculiar than to watch Christianity die. At one and the same time, “the people called Methodists” are to exhibit a “catholic spirit” while also maintaining those very practices that have branded Methodists as a “peculiar people,” namely the practices described in the General Rules.³⁴

Less than two decades later, Moses Henkle published his own set of “numbers” entitled *Primary Platform of Methodism*³⁵ which he described somewhat humbly as an attempt “to discover, restore and enforce, a faithful observance of the ‘ancient land-marks’ of Methodist Christianity.”³⁶ In certain respects this work can be seen as a response to a need present in The Methodist Episcopal Church, South.³⁷ But in another sense, we can say that Henkle’s book reflected the reaffirmation of the importance of the General Rules in the context of the controversy over slavery.³⁸

Predictably, the longest discussion of Henkle’s *Primary Platform of Methodism* focuses on slavery. Of course, the General Rules were already fairly explicit about this issue: “By avoiding evil of every kind: especially that which is most generally practiced, Such as...*The buying and selling of men, women, and children, with an intention to enslave them.*” But the leaders of the Southern church felt that some of the circumstances they faced were exceptional, particularly the case of Bishop James O. Andrew, who technically had neither bought nor sold slaves, but who had inherited them upon the death of his wife and was prohibited by the laws of the state of Georgia from selling them. Henkle goes to great lengths to understand the arguments of fellow Southerners regarding the distinction between the “abuses” of slavery and the institution itself.³⁹ In the end, he upholds the view that slavery is incompatible with the General Rules.

This “exposition of the General Rules” is poignant not only because it reflects the division between the Northern and Southern churches but because the author is also conscious that the General Rules—“an *heir-loom*”⁴⁰ of ecumenical (British and American) Methodism—constitute one of the few bridges that could serve to unite the divided Wesleyan movements. More important for our purposes is

the fact that Henkle recognizes that American Methodism has reached an impasse:

We have, evidently, reached a point—a crisis—where, if the peculiarities of Methodism in which our fathers gloried, are to be maintained, and transmitted...to posterity, they must be fully and fairly explained, and defended, to the satisfaction of reasonable men and Christians.⁴¹

Henkle's study of the General Rules is remarkable, then, for its attempt to *retrieve* the vision of peoplehood that is already in the process of being eclipsed by the collapse of the class meeting, the primary embodiment of "the Methodist societies." That Henkle's exposition should come to be regarded as the greatest, if not the last,⁴² commentary on the General Rules in the history of American Methodism is but another reminder of the *pathos* of American Methodist ecclesiology.

Fifty years after the last edition of Henkle's *Primary Platform of Methodism* was published, we find an even stronger sense that Methodist doctrine and mission have been *separated* from the practices of a holy people. Whereas doctrine *and* polity were understood to be interactive in the early nineteenth century, by the beginning of the twentieth century, it is not only possible to summarize Methodist doctrine *apart* from the General Rules of Methodism,⁴³ it has become a well-defined practice within both branches of American Methodism.⁴⁴ And in the process, the Methodist vision for the church loses much of its *ambiguity* and *provisionality*.

In large part, the separation of doctrine from discipline forms the backdrop of Bishop Eugene R. Hendrix's 1908 article "The Creed of Ecumenical Methodism: Where Can It Be Found?"⁴⁵ In Hendrix's article we find what is at one and the same time a restatement of the nineteenth-century "consensus" of Methodist doctrine *and* a recognition that the consensus needs a new vehicle for its expression. Occasioned by the decision of the General Conference of 1906 (partially at Hendrix's instigation) to "invite Ecumenical Methodism to print what it preached, to make its spoken gospel a printed gospel, and to formulate and publish its fundamental beliefs,"⁴⁶ Hendrix's article sought to prepare the way for a new statement of faith to be considered at the 1921 Ecumenical Conference of Methodism.

For the most part, Hendrix's article reflects the nineteenth-century "consensus" of Methodist doctrine, in the best sense of the word. However, there are also clear traces of a peculiarly Methodist disease: triumphalism. Not only did Hendrix claim that from the beginning "some of the best work of Methodist teaching was seen in its influence in modifying the doctrines of other Churches in England and America,"⁴⁷ he pointedly claimed that Methodism had led the way in stressing the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, a teaching which both the Presbyterian churches and the Congregationalists were beginning to emphasize at the dawn of the twentieth century.⁴⁸

One of the most notable features of Hendrix's essay was his declaration that

the source of any future “ecumenical creed of Methodism” would *not be found* in the Twenty-five Articles. Rather, “it is to be found in what Methodism has added to them in her eventful history.”⁴⁹ Among other things, Hendrix calls attention to the preaching of the Wesleys, their pragmatic bent, “the universal atonement and the duty of all men to repent and believe.”⁵⁰ But perhaps the most significant feature of Hendrix’s essay is the fact that the General Rules are hardly mentioned. In fact, the only mention of the General Rules is for the purpose of calling attention to the fact that the Articles of Religion were *not required* as a condition for membership in the United Societies.⁵¹ How far we have come from the vision for the church found in Nathan Bangs’s *An Original Church of Christ!* Whereas the General Rules once served an explanatory function within the vision of Methodism as a “called out” people, now they serve a very different purpose: to explain the perceived *irrelevance* of the Articles of Religion.

More telling however, is the sense of distance between the vision of “peoplehood” still present at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the more triumphalistic rhetoric of the Protestant establishment, traces of which are present in Hendrix’s amiable jibes at Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The very fact that Southern Methodists can initiate such a quest for a “new creed” for ecumenical Methodism suggests that they have long since foregone practices which once were constitutive of Methodist peoplehood.⁵² Significantly, Hendrix’s article appeared at a time when both the Northern and Southern churches were undergoing a shift. Probationary membership, the status accorded to those who were “seriously seeking” salvation had been eliminated, thereby rendering the General Rules an “heir-loom” to be regarded with nostalgic fondness, but clearly *detached* from the Methodist vision for the church at the turn of the century.

Also absent from Hendrix’s essay is the familiar saga of Methodist beginnings with its narrative of God’s providential activity in the “rise of Methodism” in Britain and America. The aforementioned reference to Methodism’s “eventful history” actually serves the purpose of undergirding a categorical distinction between Methodist doctrine and moral practice. Although Hendrix is not unconcerned about morality, he repeatedly glorifies the simplicity⁵³ of Methodist doctrine, associating the latter with the office of preaching.⁵⁴ Further, Hendrix calls attention to the success of Methodist preaching in the American context, particularly as Methodism has engaged other denominations. For Hendrix, the validity of the Methodist vision of the Church is based not so much upon the existence of a “called out” people whose practice of the General Rules serves to order their provisional vision of the Church as it is upon the superiority of “preached” doctrine found in Methodist churches. To recall Asbury’s cryptic comment, American Methodists at the beginning of the twentieth century now are quite confident that they are a Church; what is no longer clear is whether American Methodists recall that once upon a time they were “no Church.”

Although the shift I have described is subtle, I would argue that it is fairly significant. The fact that we discover Bishop Eugene R. Hendrix articulating a doctrinal vision of ecumenical Methodism is rather poignant because probably no one else did as much to foster ecumenism within The Methodist Episcopal

Church, South during the first two decades of the twentieth century. But Bishop Hendrix's ecumenical vision was cast within the conceptual separation of doctrine and moral practice that arose during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, an era when Methodist triumphalism gradually began to supplant the saga of Methodist peoplehood found in the writings of Henkle, Bangs and Asbury.⁵⁵ Hendrix's contribution to these developments was to call attention to the ecumenical value of Methodist doctrine at a time when Methodist peoplehood had already been lost, and "denominationalism" was taking over.⁵⁶

Shortly, under the influence of the "social gospel," the "Social Creed" (1908, 1952) would complete the process of supplanting the General Rules as a primary focus of moral discipline for "the people called Methodists." By the time the 1972 *Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church is published, the "Social Principles" have taken center stage, and the "General Rules of the United Societies" have been placed in a section called "Foundation Documents." Where the General Rules once represented a kind of *embodiment* of Methodist peoplehood (in the moral as well as the spiritual senses), after 1972 there is a striking sense of distance.

An adequate analysis of the eclipse of "peoplehood" in American Methodism would need to give a fuller discussion of the rise of Methodist "triumphalism" in the latter part of the nineteenth century as part of the Protestant establishment. The splits with the holiness and Pentecostal movements as well as the late nineteenth-century rejection of women's ordination would also have to be discussed, especially as in different ways these divisions within Methodism contributed to the emergence of the Methodist Church as a "mainline Protestant" denomination.

One would also need to discuss important developments in twentieth-century American Methodism: the mergers of 1939 and 1966-68, the Theological Statements of 1972 and 1988, the Good News Movement and the Mission Society for United Methodists, as well as the role of the boards and agencies of the church. One would also need to assess the influence of various theological movements: the rise of fundamentalism, neo-orthodoxy, black theology, feminist theologies, Latin American liberation theologies and third-world theologies.

Finally, one would need to assess the social dislocations in "mainline American religion"⁵⁷ which led to the council of bishops' recognition that "[t]he world in which our heritage of faith seemed secure is passing away" (p. v). For if this recent recognition constitutes the crisis in response to which *Vision for the Church* was written, there can be no question that the loss of peoplehood in American Methodism is an ongoing phenomenon. The question now before us is whether this loss can be interpreted ecclesiologically. Can we give an account of these nineteenth-century developments, acknowledging the ambiguity that even then "We were a Church, and no Church"? Obviously, whatever answer we might give to this question would have to interpret Asbury's retrospective assessment with a great sense of irony. Therein we find a clue to the pathos of contemporary United Methodism.

THE PATHOS OF ECCLESIOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY UNITED METHODISM

I have highlighted the *historical* dimension of the problem of United Methodist ecclesiology for several reasons, not the least of which is that tracing the broader outlines of these issues contributes to a fuller assessment of the bishops' pastoral *Vision for the Church* and its significance for future reflection about the United Methodist vision of the church. But I have also done so because American Methodism has a very limited sense of its own history. We have not bothered to acknowledge, much less probe the shifts in perspective that have occurred over the last two centuries. Not only do most United Methodists (clergy and laity) not understand the profound shifts that transpired during the nineteenth century, we are also oblivious to narrative shifts that have occurred in the twenty-five years since the merger of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren. As a result, we oscillate between visions for the church, without taking seriously what is lost in the process of transition.

Russell Richey has recently objected that the statement on "Our Distinctive Heritage" in the 1988 *Book of Discipline* offers a narrative account of decline from original purity which "is not mere history but in some sense ecclesiology."⁵⁸ In other words, it seeks to build a case for reform in the church *without* taking seriously the question of whether the interpretation being commended to United Methodists is historically accurate.⁵⁹ Richey calls this form of argument "jeremiadic history" (history in the form of a sermon) and cautions that United Methodists ought to reconsider this kind of commentary, especially given the implications for how we regard such documents as the Articles of Religion and the General Rules.

Richey's objection is well-taken, and I have no doubt that United Methodists have engaged in "jeremiadic" appeals too often to convince one another of the integrity of our *peoplehood*, much less convince non-United Methodists that we are "an original church of Christ." In this respect, the contemporary "war of pamphlets" between conservative or evangelical United Methodists and their so-called liberal counterparts can be seen as two different forms of "jeremiadic" history. The one side takes seriously Wesleyan soteriology, and argues for a "return" to the basic doctrines of early Methodism; the other side takes seriously Wesley's "Catholic spirit," and argues for tolerance of diversity within the denomination. But neither side appears to be interested in recovering the vision of Methodist peoplehood found in the writings of Asbury, Bangs and Henkle.

Although I would want to extend Richey's argument in directions he does not pursue, I think his basic claim is correct. This having been said, however, I would also argue that it is not possible to have an ecclesiology which is not, in some sense, *storied*. In this sense, the problem is not that we do not know what criteria on which to base an accurate account of our history; the problem is we are no longer sure we have enough in common to call ourselves a "people." Put differently, what gave the ecclesiologies of Bangs and Henkle their moral force in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century is the vivid sense of God's providential purpose for the "people called Methodists." Thus, Bangs's intent in *An Original Church of Christ* was to demonstrate that The Protestant Episcopal Church is not the *only* people

of God with an apostolate. Repeatedly, he insists on saying: "If they are Israelites, so are we."⁶⁰

The council of bishops is to be applauded for having called United Methodists to renew our vision as a people, but it may be that the more important question to prayerfully ponder is: can we *have* a "vision for the church," if we can no longer tell a story the substance of which is that we have been "called out" as a people with a purpose?

THE PROMISE OF UNITED METHODIST ECCLESIOLOGY

I have deliberately lingered over the *pathos* of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United Methodist ecclesiology because I think we must take seriously the problems that plague our communion at its present juncture in history. Also, I have tried to spell out the severity of this problem because I remain convinced that Albert Outler and Geoffrey Wainwright were correct when they called attention to the historic status of Methodism as an "evangelical order" within the Church Catholic.⁶¹ That is to say that the promise of the early Methodist vision for the church lay in its very *provisionality*. In this sense, whatever the differences in context, early American Methodist theologians like Nathan Bangs can be seen to share John Wesley's vision of reforming the Church Catholic by constituting "societies" that would reform the churches. In this respect, early Methodism's stress on the gathered community made the vision of the church catholic visible *without* claiming to be the only visible manifestation of Christianity in the world.

If there is any "promise" left in the "people called Methodists," I believe it lies in what Geoffrey Wainwright has described as our "ecumenical vocation" as a holy people.⁶² In this sense, I believe the bishops' call to reenvision the focus of our vision, is very important, for in the process it may be that our recent (and belated) acknowledgment that United Methodism has been "disestablished" in American culture can provide the opportunity for a renewed appreciation for the locus of the gospel itself. For as Geoffrey Wainwright rightly states, "[to] seek and confess the ecclesiological location of one's community is an act of discerning and proclaiming the gospel itself. There is no preaching and living of the gospel without at least an implicit ecclesiological claim being made."⁶³

Thus, from my perspective, the most significant thing in *Vision for the Church* is the council of bishops' call for the church to confess its nostalgia for the past:

LET US CONFESS BEFORE GOD OUR NOSTALGIA FOR THE PROTESTANT ESTABLISHMENT, especially in North America. We long for "the good old days" when Protestant churches were full and community leaders attended them. We pine for the days when what was good for the nation was good for the church, and vice versa (p. 39).

Although I would have liked to see the bishops be more forthright in disavowing the triumphalism of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American Methodism, nevertheless, they have called attention to the way in which the

United Methodist vision for the church has become enculturated.

As the bishops also acknowledge, United Methodists “are not accustomed to the possibility that being Christian might make us marginal people in our society” (p. 39). Now that we are waking up to the fact that the world of the Protestant Empire has passed away, we find ourselves faced with uncertain prospects for the future. The council of bishops are to be commended for helping United Methodism acknowledge this reality. **“Truly we stand at a critical turning point in Christian history. The only place to turn is to Jesus Christ, and to a radically new understanding of what Jesus asks of us”** (p. 20). These words should haunt as well as comfort the “people called Methodists.”

I also believe that the bishops have put their finger on several important issues, even where they have not developed the points thoroughly. To begin with, there is the issue of *presence* or *gathering*. One way to interpret *Vision for the Church* is the bishops’ attempt to recover “Christian conference” as a means of grace. That is, the bishops have accorded to the congregations as *gatherings* a significance that has largely been lost in the twentieth century. Moreover, indirectly, the bishops have called attention to their own gatherings as a form of “Christian conference,” thereby contributing both to the *ecclesiological* significance of the council of bishops, and to the recovery of the teaching office in United Methodism.⁶⁴

If this construal of the bishops’ purpose is correct, then I would argue that such recovery can be achieved only through a recovery of the other means of grace. In other words, the social significance of “Christian conference” is tied to practices like prayer, fasting and the Eucharist. None of this would mean that United Methodism is any less “ecumenical” (in both the wider and narrower senses) than Bishop Hendrix envisioned earlier this century. But what becomes clear again when such social practices are recovered is the sense in which United Methodism may yet have contributions to make—dare we continue to claim a “vocation”?— within the church catholic.

Thus, my disagreement with the council of bishops’ vision for the church stems from the fact that I believe they have seriously underestimated the distinctiveness of the heritage of the people called Methodists. I would hope that in the 1990s, United Methodism would recover a sense of the ambiguity of our vision for the church. In some sense, I would argue that, at its best, American Methodism has recognized the ironic truth of Asbury’s comment: “We were a Church, and no Church.” At our worst, we have resolved the ambiguity by triumphalist attempts to justify our place in American history, forgetting that before our sojourn here, we were no church.

But we are not left with ambiguity alone. Stressing the declarative confidence of the first four words of Asbury’s statement about early American Methodism, I would go further and argue that the strength of United Methodist ecclesiology derives from the very *provisionality* of our vocation. In a sense, we can say that the richness of our vision of peoplehood derives from our awareness of the fragility of our existence as a people of God in the world. Like the early Methodists, contemporary United Methodists acknowledge that we are not the only “people of God”; there are others who also have been called to manifest the social holiness

of the *ekklesia*. But we, more than others, should know that if we fail in our mission God can and will call another people into existence.

The council of bishops has rightly called attention to deep-seated fear that strikes at the heart of the corporate life of our “connexion” as United Methodists:

LET US CONFESS BEFORE GOD THAT WE ARE AFRAID TO DIE.
Many of our congregations are so caught up in trying to survive, that we have forgotten how to live. And the way to live is, as Jesus said, to risk death. We do not want to hear these words (p. 43).

I wish that the candor of the bishops at this point had been matched by an equally candid assessment of the late-nineteenth-century roots of our contemporary vision for the church. Had they done so, I am confident that there would be even more for United Methodists to confess than the bishops have called to our attention.

I do not believe that The United Methodist Church is condemned to die in order to live again, but I would submit that we must *reconstruct* what it would mean to be a “people of God” in the world. Although I am sympathetic to evangelical proposals for the renewal of United Methodism, I would caution that we cannot act as if all we have to do is “return” to the practices of early Methodism. We cannot act as if the struggles of Asbury, Bangs, Henkle and Hendrix did not take place. Contemporary United Methodism must take very seriously that we have inherited a vision for the church that presumes a conceptual separation between doctrine and discipline. As a result, any recovery of Methodist “peoplehood” will have to confront both the loss of discipline and the substitution of “denominationalism” for the vision for the church in twentieth-century United Methodism.

Obviously, this reconstruction would also require that we articulate our ecclesiology more than we have felt it necessary to do in the past. We need to interpret our vision of peoplehood not only in times of crisis, but in the day-to-day existence of living out the gospel. Otherwise we will continue to deny the reality of the death that many of our congregations have already undergone. To be willing to admit that we have undergone death is the first step toward a recovery of the language of *passion*—suffering—and that, in turn might enable us to recover the “resurrection of the body” as a corporate experience, and not simply as words with no social significance.

CONCLUSION

Some readers may object that it is unfair to subject the bishops’ pastoral letter to ecclesiological scrutiny. After all, “bishops are not theologians,” some would say, while still other ministers and laity would remind us that bishops really are the equivalent of conference managers. Yet, if either or both of these claims are held to be true, then I believe the situation becomes even more desperate; for what

do United Methodists take the office of the episcopacy to be if it is not to articulate the purpose of the church's ministry? Is that not one of the purposes of a "scriptural" *episkopos*?

I would like to believe that my criticisms of *Vision for the Church* arise out of my agreement with the bishops' initial claim, namely that our church finds itself in a crisis situation. But the bishops have not identified the *source* of our pathos as a church, nor do I believe they have identified the basis of our *promise* as an evangelical order within the church catholic. Thus, I fear that the most promising features of *Vision for the Church* will be coopted precisely because the bishops have not offered an adequate theological and historical analysis.

One place for the contemporary United Methodist Church to begin would be to take the bishops' call seriously, and set aside a time to offer up prayer for our "connexion" and its constituent conferences⁶⁵ in the hope of reaffirming our historical mission as an "evangelical order" within the church catholic. I would suggest that we take the prayer for the Ephesians as our model: "I pray your inward eyes might be illumined so that you would know the hope to which you are called" (Eph. 1:18). In this verse, we find a rich paradox: ecclesial vocation is at one and the same time a matter of recognizing the source of our hope as the locus of our vocation. Perhaps, then, we will begin to relearn something that the early Methodists—like the writer of Ephesians—knew intimately: that the work of God in calling the people of God into existence is what gives meaning to history. Of course, that is a vision for the church that cannot simply be proclaimed; it must be enacted by those communities of faith that have heard God's call and dare to offer a living witness, whatever their location.⁶⁶

Notes

1. Graded Press, 1990. This is an official resource for The United Methodist Church prepared by the General Board of Discipleship through the Division of Church School Publications.

Subsequent references to the text of the foundation document will use the subtitle, *Vision for the Church*. Where necessary, page numbers will be included in the body of the text.

2. In this paper, I shall not be giving a restrictive definition to the word ecclesiology. In general, it refers to the ordered theological reflection on the doctrine of the church.

3. During the past five years, several important studies have documented the radical shifts in "mainline American religion." For example, see Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) and Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

For an anecdotal testimony to such change, see Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989) pp. 15-19. Admittedly, many readers will not identify with the particular narrative that the authors use to depict the "changed world" in which we live, but their assessment concurs with the statement of the United Methodist bishops.

4. *In Defense of Creation* (Nashville, Graded Press, 1985), p. 11. Compare the language of the first paragraphs of each pastoral letter for examples of such crisis language.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
6. It is probably too early to tell whether the appearance of these two documents constitutes a shift in the role of the bishops in exercising "the teaching office" within United Methodism, but clearly, there is a marked difference in the frequency with which pastoral letters are written. As Kenneth Rowe has documented, up until 1985, the council of bishops had only issued a pastoral letter on one occasion (late nineteenth century). See Rowe's unpublished paper, "Reluctant Prophets: Methodist Bishops and Social Policy," given at the Wesley Studies group of the American Academy of Religion, November 24, 1986.
7. *In Defense of Creation*, pp. 23-37.
8. In this respect, the bishops are not only clearer about who they are addressing than they were in their 1985 initiative which resulted in the foundation document *In Defense of Creation*, but also much more attention is given in the present document to the paradoxical relationship of vision and vocation, and implicitly to the consequences of the latter for faithful discipleship.
9. See for example Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); and more recently, Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).
10. Space considerations prevent me from offering a thorough evaluation of the model of congregational analysis adopted by the council of bishops. However, I would note that the model adopted by the bishops is fully presented in James F. Hopewell's study *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). While I would not deny the value of this model for analyzing congregations, the problems of United Methodism will not be solved by turning to congregational analysis alone. At their best, books like Kennon Callahan's *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) and Herb Miller's recently published *The Vital Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) contain commonsensical pastoral advice; at their worst, these books appear to suggest that the pursuit of congregational revitalization occurs in an ecclesiological vacuum. I confess that I find it disturbing that several annual conferences have established revitalization programs using these books without taking into account the ways both books *avoid* discussion of ecclesiological issues.
11. The best summary is actually not in the primary text of *Vision for the Church*, but is found in one of the supplementary readings by Albert Outler (see p. 60).
12. Emphasis in original document. In the first draft of *Vision for the Church*, this statement was cast in the past tense, as an historical comment about the Wesleyan movement. The fact that the bishops have altered the tense suggests that the bishops wanted to link contemporary United Methodism with its past.
13. Robert Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity: Studies in Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), pp. 20-25. Space does not permit me to comment on the recent debate about the doctrinal standards of early American Methodism. Among other arguments, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, "At Full Liberty: Standards of Doctrine in Early American Methodism," *Quarterly Review* 5 (Fall 1985): 6-27; Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1988).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
15. I am indebted to Prof. Steven Harper of Asbury Theological Seminary for helping me to clarify this issue at the Christmas Conference of the Society of John Wesley

Scholars, December 1987, during a discussion of his paper on "John Wesley: Spiritual Guide."

16. I would want to go further than either Harper or Cushman have gone to assert that the General Rules also serve an explanatory function for a reconstructed "full account" of Wesley's ecclesiology, but that is the topic of another project.

17. Helmut Nausner, *The Meaning of Wesley's General Rules: An Interpretation*, trans. J. Steven O'Malley, *The Asbury Theological Journal* 44 (Spring 1989): 46-47.

18. Rather than offering a detailed account of particular features of the eighteenth-century Wesleyan movement within The Church of England, I presume that readers know the basic outlines of Wesley's *ordo salutis* as well as his struggle to remain part of The Church of England while continuing to nurture the fledgling Methodist "societies" on both sides of the Atlantic. I also assume what I might argue if I had more time and space; namely, that one of the primary factors enabling the "people called Methodists" to become the "people called Methodists" in early Methodism was the practice of the General Rules through the class meetings and gatherings of the societies.

19. Francis Asbury, "Valedictory Address" to Bishop McKendree, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, Letters, ed. J. Manning Potts, et al. (Nashville, Abingdon, 1958), 3:476-477.

20. Cited in Fredrick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), p. 132.

21. In the midst of recounting the saga of Methodist beginnings, Asbury interrupts himself to ask a rhetorical question: "Do any ancient or modern Churches stand on any better ground than we do with respect to ordination with John Wesley's apostolic right?" (*The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3:477).

22. David C. Steinmetz, "Asbury's Doctrine of Ministry," in *Memory and Mission: Theological Reflections on the Christian Past* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), pp. 93-94. This article was originally published in the *Duke Divinity School Review* 40 (1975): 10-17.

23. By "peoplehood" I mean the sense in which the early Methodists felt that they had been "called out" by God to embody an evangelical mission on behalf of the wider church.

24. Robert Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790-1935* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965; repr., Lanham, MD: University Press, 1983).

25. Geoffrey Wainwright uses this term in *The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 190.

26. Originally published by the book committee at the Methodist Book Room in Baltimore, Maryland, Bangs also included this essay in the preface of his book-length study of *An Original Church of Christ* (New York: Mason and Lane, 1837), p. 6-11.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 12

28. Bangs quotes three of the resolutions passed by the Baltimore, New York, New England and Troy conferences. The resolution of the Baltimore annual conference notes the "agitated controversy on the subject of the Episcopacy" (p. 13). From these and other internal references in Bangs's *The Original Church of Christ*, I have deduced that this dispute was confined to the Northeastern region, where The Protestant Episcopal Church had retained some strength in the early nineteenth century.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 374.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

32. At only one point does Bangs mention the issue of drunkenness, commenting that on this one point the General Rules should be restored to "the state in which Wesley left it" (p. 366). Apparently, Bangs believed that General Conference had altered the substance of the General Rules *prior* to the institution of the Restrictive Rules.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 381-382. Here I am summarizing the general sense of Bangs's more protracted concluding commentary.
35. Moses Henkle, *Primary Platform of Methodism, or Exposition of the General Rules* (Nashville, TN: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1859).
36. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
37. These essays originally appeared in the *Nashville Christian Advocate*, and were originally conceived "as merely introductory to general expositions of Methodism" by Henkle who was then the editor. But as Bangs had earlier discovered, once he began exploring the topic, the "introduction" turned out to constitute a book. At the request of "eight or ten" of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South annual conferences, Henkle consented to publish them in book form.
38. In 1840, the British Methodists issued an "Address of the British Conference to the Bishops and Members of the General Conference" on the subject of slavery. The response of the General Conference not only reaffirms opposition to slavery but also implicitly calls attention to the constitutional status and authority of the General Rules. As Robert Cushman has noted, "This incident may have prompted the movement which followed, first in The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1846, and then in the *Doctrines and Discipline* of the northern church in 1848. In both, the General Rules of the United Societies were placed immediately following the Articles of Religion whereas, before, they had preceded the articles" (*John Wesley's Experimental Divinity*, p. 25).
39. For an example of a pro-slavery argument that firmly distinguishes between the "abuses" of slavery and the institution as such, see Thornton Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (Richmond, VA: J. W. Randolph, 1856).
40. Henkle, *Primary Platform of Methodism*, p. 7.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
42. For example, see Hilary T. Hudson's *The Methodist Armor: Or A Popular Exposition of the Doctrines, Particular Usages and Ecclesiastical Machinery of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville: The Publishing House of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1882), pp. 54-90. Hudson's book went through nine editions between 1882 and 1921.
43. For an example of this partitioning of doctrine and polity, see Wilber F. Tillett and James Atkins, *The Doctrines and Polity of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville: The Publishing House of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1903). The first part of the book, by Tillett, is devoted to doctrine. Atkins commentary on the General Rules takes shape as the first chapter of the second part entitled "The Polity of The Methodist Episcopal Church South" (pp. 92-117).
44. At an earlier point in time, of course, the bishops had authorized printing the doctrine and discipline separately.
45. Bishop E. R. Hendrix, "The Creed of Ecumenical Methodism: Where Can It Be Found?" (Nashville: The Publishing House of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1908), reprinted from *The Methodist Review* [April, 1907].
46. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-20. Notice that what is important is the "doctrine" of the Holy Spirit as it applies to personal experience. Absent from Hendrix's discussion is the role of the Holy Spirit in calling into existence a people, analogous to the constitution of the Church at Pentecost.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
52. Across the Atlantic ocean, Hendrix's article was received by British Methodists with polite interest as well as some curiosity about what shape an American proposal

for a new creed would take. See "A Creed for World-wide Methodism" taken from the "July Number" of the *London Quarterly Review* (printed with Hendrix's article in the form of a pamphlet, 1908).

Here we encounter in a faint form what Geoffrey Wainwright has elsewhere described as the difference between the *diachronic* tendency of British Methodism and the *synchronic* tendency of American Methodism. British Methodist ecclesiology has tended to think of Methodism in a much more *provisional* sense, whereas American Methodism, until recently, has tended to glory in its success in transforming American culture. For a fuller discussion of this difference see Wainwright, *The Ecumenical Moment*, pp. 189-221, especially pp. 191-221.

53. Hendrix, "The Creed of Ecumenical Methodism," p. 14.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

55. Here I should note that a fuller discussion of these issues would trace the separation between doctrine and practice that first emerged in the context of the debate about slavery, and later cropped up in the midst of the debate over the ordination of women, and the related conflicts of "mainstream Methodism" with the holiness and pentecostal movements.

56. Here I cannot offer a full analysis of the ways in which "denominationalism" contributed to the loss of Methodist peoplehood in the American context. However, to the degree that the existence of denominations undermines the "visible unity" of the Church, by implying divisions, we have to lament the cooptation of United Methodism by those who would appeal to the "invisible unity" presumed within denominationalism. For a useful study of the emergence of this trend in American Protestantism, see *Denominationalism*, edited by Russell Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

57. For a useful sociological analysis of the disestablishment of Protestantism in American culture, see Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*.

58. Russell E. Richey, "The Role of History in the Discipline" *Quarterly Review* 9 (Winter 1989): 16.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

60. Bangs, *The Original Church of Christ*, p. 380.

61. Albert C. Outler, "Do Methodists have a Doctrine of the Church?" in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), pp. 11-28. Geoffrey Wainwright adopts Outler's conception of Methodism as an "evangelical order within the Church Catholic" and expands on it slightly in his essay "Ecclesial Location and Ecumenical Vocation" (in *The Ecumenical Moment*, pp. 189-221.)

62. Wainwright, "Ecclesial Location and Ecumenical Vocation."

63. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

64. For discussion of the question of the "teaching office" within the United Methodism see L. Gregory Jones, "Toward a Recovery of Theological Discourse in United Methodism" *Quarterly Review* 9 (Summer 1989): 16-34; and Thomas A. Langford, "The Teaching Office in The United Methodist Church" *Quarterly Review* 10 (Fall 1990): 4-17.

65. In fact, several annual conferences have recently considered proposals to set aside a day *before* the beginning of annual conference to pray for the work of the conference. Although in at least one case an annual conference decided that it could not take the time to undertake this "disciplined quest," surely this is the right question to ask!

66. I am grateful to Provost Andrew T. Ford and the faculty development committee of Allegheny College for a research grant which enabled me to do research at the United Methodist Archives and library at Drew University in the Summer of 1989. I am also grateful to Dennis Campbell, Ted Campbell, Mary Wilder Cartwright, L. Gregory Jones, Stanley Hauerwas, Thomas Langford, Joe Mangina, Russell Richey and Geoffrey Wainwright for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

