

Experiência Intercultural no Sistema Conexional Metodista

Michael Nausner

Resumo

Este artigo explica como experiências com fronteiras culturais podem ser compreendidas como fontes primárias para a formação cristã e como a estrutura conexional do metodismo global tem o potencial de proporcionar uma forma eclesiástica adequada para estas experiências essenciais.

Palavras-chave

Fronteiras – cultura – experiência – estrutura conexional – itinerância.

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Intercultural Experience in the Methodist Connection

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Abstract

This article explicates how cultural boundary experiences can be understood as prime sites for Christian formation and how the connective structure of global Methodism has the potential of giving adequate ecclesial shape to these formative experiences.

Key words

Boundary – culture – experience – connectionalism
– intinerancy

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Experiencia intercultural en el sistema conexional metodista

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Resumen

Este artículo explica como experiencias con fronteras culturales pueden ser entendidas como fuentes principales para la formación cristiana y como la estructura conexional del metodismo global tiene el potencial de proporcionar un formato eclesiástico adecuado a estas experiencias esenciales.

Palabras-clave

Fronteras – cultura – experiencia – estructura – conexional – itinerancia

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To ponder cultural boundary experiences in light of the ecclesial model of the Methodist connection means taking the cultural context of ecclesiological and overall theological reflection seriously. Oftentimes it is out of cultural boundary experiences that theological reflection arises.

In this article I want to explicate my understanding how cultural boundary experiences can be understood as prime sites for the Christian formation of individuals and communities alike and how the connectional structure of global Methodism has the potential of giving adequate ecclesial shape to these formative experiences.

The article thus evolves around the three concepts boundary, experience, and connection. Two classical topics of Methodist discourse – experience and connection –, are here related with a topic less frequently discussed – the topic of the boundary. It is the experience of our boundaries that tangibly connects us with the reality we live in. By experiencing our boundaries as connections we come to our own both as communities and as individuals. A profound ambiguity belongs to the experience of boundaries. On the one hand it is an experience of restriction. At our boundaries we are reminded of our human limitations. On the other hand boundaries prove to be places of connection, since they are also zones where we become aware of our utter dependence on something that transcends us. It is this utter dependence that Schleiermacher almost two hundred years ago defined as piety (Frömmigkeit). Boundary experiences have the potential of evoking such feelings of utter depend-

ence, such experiences of relatedness to God.¹ Unlike Schleiermacher, however, I want to more intimately relate existential and religious boundary experiences to each other.² And for a similar reason I depart from much of Methodist discourse that circles exclusively around experience as an inner feeling, as explicitly “Christian experience, the experience of being redeemed, or knowing oneself to be forgiven.”³

I think Methodism’s emphasis on experience (as one of the four items in the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral – scripture, tradition, reason, experience) needs to be as much informed by boundary experiences in ordinary people’s lives as by the religious experiences in the “inner circle” of Methodists. By reflecting boundary experiences of individuals and communities in the life of the church, the Methodist notion of connection takes on new meaning.

What do I mean when I talk about the importance for the Methodist connection to pay attention to cultural boundary

¹Das Gemeinsame aller noch so verschiedenen Äußerungen der Frömmigkeit ... ist dieses, daß wir uns unserer selbst als schlechthin abhängig, oder, was dasselbe sagen will, als in Beziehung mit Gott bewußt sind.“ – SCHLEIERMACHER, Friedrich Ernst Daniel. *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche in seinem Zusammenhange dargestellt*. Zweite Auflage 1830/31. In: BOLLI, Heinz (Ed.). *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*. Nachwort von Karl Barth. Hamburg und München: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1968, p. 26.

² Schleiermacher distinguishes between relations to the *world* involving both feelings of freedom and dependence from relatedness to *God* that consists of utter dependence alone. – Cf: SCHLEIERMACHER, *Der christliche Glaube*, p. 29-31.

³ MARSH, Clive. *Appealing to Experience: What Does it Mean?* In: MARSH, Clive, BECK, Brian, SHIER-JONES, Angela, Helen Wareing (Ed.). *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. New York, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 119.

experiences? I want to approach this question by first addressing the meaning of boundary talk for theology and second by connecting boundary talk to the Methodist emphasis on experience. Finally I will formulate some conclusions regarding the Methodist commitment to a connectio- nal ecclesiology.

Boundary

The importance of boundaries for theological insight has been highlighted by Paul Tillich almost eighty years ago, when he pointed out that "the boundary is the best place for acquiring knowl- edge."⁴ In addition to his emphasis on the epistemological significance of the boundary, in his autobiographical sketch *On the Boundary*⁵ he describes himself as continuously torn between diverging forces. "The experience of the infinite bordering on the finite," he writes, "sui- ted my inclination toward the boundary situation."⁶ Tillich here tellingly correlates religious and existential boundary experi- ences, which implies that the realm of religious experience cannot be isolated from its existential and cultural context.

This understanding of the thickness and productiveness of the boundary is lost in much of Protestant theology that tries to strictly isolate the human from the divine in defense of transcendence. Eberhard Jüngel, for example, in his es- say *In Praise of the Boundary* affirms that

"the human being is in a unique way a boundary being"⁷ and that boundaries are "shapes of developing relations."⁸ But these productive and relational as- pects of human boundaries are lost in his continuous interpretation of these bound- aries as imposed limitations (*Begren- zungen*) on human life (ontological bound- aries, the divine Word, the "unspeaka- ble," death,...).⁹

Boundary experiences most fre- quently are described as experiences of limitation. When a person comes to his or her own limits in terms of physical or psychic capacity, when a person experi- ences loss or separation, when a person approaches death, we talk about bound- ary experiences. I believe that such boundary experiences are indeed privile- ged occasions for the experience of faith. Being confronted at our boundaries with our own limitations, we are challenged to either trust something beyond our limita- tions or not.

Various boundary experiences are significant as potential occasions for an encounter with God. Here I want to focus on the experience of cultural encounter as one of the key examples for boundary experiences in a globalized world and in pluralistic societies. Cultural (and ethnic) boundaries, however they are inter- preted, are over and over again seen to be contested zones in an increasingly inter-

⁴ TILLICH, Paul. *Religiöse Verwirklichung*. Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1930, p. 11.

⁵ TILLICH, Paul. *On the Boundary*. An Autobiographical Sketch. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁷ „Der Mensch ist in einem unvergleichlichen Sinne ein Wesen der Grenze.“ - JÜNGEL, Eberhard. *Lob der Grenze*. In: JÜNGEL, Eberhard. *Entsprechungen: Gott – Wahrheit – Mensch*, München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1980, p. 372. [Vol. 88, Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie]

⁸ "Formen sich vollziehender Verhältnisse" - *Ibid.*, p. 373.

⁹ Cf. JÜNGEL, *Grenzen des Menschseins*, p. 355-361.

cultural global situation. It is therefore a great chance for a global church family such as the Methodist movement and its connection to allow such cultural boundary experiences to become occasions of mutual enrichment and ultimately faith experience.

Only recently has the significance of boundary analysis in cultural anthropology been acknowledged as a resource for theology.¹⁰ One of the most important insights for theologians concerned with Christian community and ecclesiology is the emphasis of postmodern cultural anthropologists on the fluidity of cultural boundaries. Any description of cultural communities as clearly bounded wholes is a construction that is not able to account for various forms of overlapping, mixture, and hybridity.¹¹ If one understands Christian community as in certain respects analogous with cultural entities, one needs to be wary of drawing clear boundaries between Christians and non-Christians. And not only that: It is probably not in the center of the Christian community but exactly at these boundaries as productive zones of encounter that the most important part of Christian

formation is happening.¹² Kathryn Tanner expresses this insight succinctly when she writes: "The distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed by the boundary as at it; Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural processes occurring at the boundary."¹³ The cultural boundary itself becomes the site of Christian formation.¹⁴ In this sense the Christian community needs over and over again to become a space where different people can have a sense of belonging. It means to be at home with others. Otherwise it risks participating in those European exclusionary tendencies that the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his essay *Cosmopolitanism* has formulated so strikingly: "(B)eing at home with oneself," Derrida writes, "supposes a reception or inclusion of the other which one seeks to appropriate, control, and master accor-

¹⁰ TANNER, Kathryn. *Theories of Culture*. A New Agenda for Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

¹¹ The theological consequences of taking such cultural analyses – and especially postcolonial theory – seriously have recently been reflected on in books like: KELLER, Catherine; NAUSNER, Michael; RIVERA, Mayra. *Postcolonial Theologies*. Divinity and Empire. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004; PUI-LAN, Kwok. *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005; JOH, Wonhee Anne. *Heart of the Cross*. A Postcolonial Christology. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006; RIEGER, Joerg. *Christ and Empire*. From Paul to Postcolonial Times. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007; RIVERA, Mayra. *A Touch of Transcendence*. A Postcolonial Theology of God. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

¹² US Latina/o theology is an example for a theology that takes the location at the boundary as a starting point. It understands itself as a connecting theology, *a teología de/en conjunto*. Contextuality is part and parcel of that theology. And it is the location at the boundary "at which one experiences that human beings always already are in relation and exchange with each other." It is a "theology at the boundary, i.e. a theology of humans and for humans ... who want to live their life- and faith experience from the perspective of boundary walkers." – FARNET-BETANCOURT, Raúl (Ed.). *Glaube an der Grenze*. Die US-amerikanische Latino-Theologie. Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2002. 14,15. (my translation) Virgilio Elizondo transfers this focus on the boundary into Christology by describing Jesus as a "borderland reject" in solidarity with people hurt and crushed by cultural boundaries. – ELIZONDO, Virgilio. *Gallilean Journey*. The Mexican-American Promise. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983, 2000, p. 54ff.

¹³ TANNER, *Theories of Culture*, p. 115.

¹⁴ What this analysis of the boundary as the site of cultural formation might entail for Christian theology, I have examined in my dissertation. – Cf. NAUSNER, Michael. *Subjects In-Between*. A Theological Boundary Hermeneutics. Madison, NJ: Drew University, 2005.

ding to different modalities of violence."¹⁵ It is in the oftentimes uneasy encounter with cultural difference at its own boundary that the Christian community comes to its own and fulfills its mission, and not by integrating more and more people into its own cultural standards of belonging.

In Germany, where I now have lived since 2005, the risk of attempting an appropriating integration of otherness into the Christian church is real. Ever since a conservative politician years ago challenged foreigners to adapt to German Leitkultur (English: leading or core culture), a fierce discussion has erupted as to the nature of this Leitkultur, whether it is something desirable or whether it exists at all. But the damage is done and I have a sense that this talk of Leitkultur, connected as it seems to be to an old elitist understanding of high culture, tempts many Germans to understand integration as a matter of pulling otherness within the bounds of one's own culture for the purpose of assimilating it as much as possible to this imaginary Leitkultur. Churches as integrated parts of German culture are far from immune against such an understanding of cultural integration.¹⁶

Philosopher Ronnie Peplow has illustrated the exclusionary function of the Leitkultur discourse by pointing out that it conflates "occidental, Christian and German values." Any Christian community, and not least the global Methodist connection, needs to be wary of such a conflation. Peplow goes on to distinguish between different ways of describing the cultural/ethnic situation in Germany. Leitkultur, he asserts, is used parallel with the concept of multiculturalism, (assuming clear cut boundaries between cultural entities existing next to each other) which he rejects since "every human being also belongs to a minority."¹⁷ He opts instead for the concept of interculturalism that mirrors the "in-between" that emerges in cultural contacts. There is an "overlapping that belongs to both cultures and still is unthinkable without the other. The opening to the other and the blending are key characteristics in this in-between that is no cultural no-man's land but in which new cultural forms are emerging."¹⁸ The way in which Peplow describes the in-between of intercultural relations is how I understand the cultural boundary at which necessarily identity changing experiences are made.¹⁹

¹⁵ The essay *Cosmopolitanism* originates in a speech that Derrida gave to the International Parliament of Writers in Strasbourg, a city whose border identity he highlighted in his speech – DERRIDA, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. London, New York: Routledge, 2001. p. 17.

¹⁶ This can be seen, for example, in a recent publication of EKD Text 86 "Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft" (Clarity and good neighborly relations) on Christians and Muslims in Germany. There the Christian church is described as a the seedbed and guarantor of the lawful order of the modern constitutional state, which implies that Islam still has a long way to go to reach the level of Christianity and therefore needs to work hard if it wants to hope for integration. With such a sense of cultural ownership, it is clear that a real negotiation at the Christian-Muslim boundary is not intended here. – Klarheit

und gute Nachbarschaft. <
http://www.ekd.de/download/ekd_texte_86.pdf >;
p. 23ff.

¹⁷ Ronnie M. Peplow. *Interkulturelle Dialogik*. In: SCHMIED-KOWARZIK, Wolfriedrich. *Verstehen und Verständigung*. Ethnologie, Xenologie, interkulturelle Philosophie. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002, p. 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63. (My translation)

¹⁹ One of the most complex descriptions of these boundary dynamics of cultural encounter can be found in: BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994.

Emmanuel Y. Lartey has argued in a similar way for an “intercultural approach” in pastoral theology out of his own experience of being “shaped and influenced by multiple cultures and traditions.”²⁰ In such a situation a multicultural understanding of interethnic relations that presupposes distinct cultures existing next to each other does not suffice. Instead “(w)e need to move from a multicultural to an intercultural community,” Lartey asserts, “from a static description of the existence of many to a dynamic recognition of interaction, mutual influence, and interconnectedness.”²¹ In such an intercultural community of interconnections absolutely distinct cultural spheres cannot be identified any more. Rather the cultural boundary zones, the in-between spaces of encounter emerge as prime sites of the shaping of identity.

For Christian discipleship not so much the distinguishing capacity of boundaries is of ultimate concern but rather the kind of experiences that are occurring at these boundaries. This is in tune with the traditional Methodist emphasis on experience as a key source for Christian formation and therefore also for theological reflection. The question of course needs to be asked: What does it mean when Methodists appeal to experience?²²

Experience

It may mean that one follows the distinctly Wesleyan emphasis of experience on a very basic epistemological level. Theodore Runyon has pointed out the methodological innovation in “Wesley’s explicit introduction of an empirical component into theological argumentation,” whereby “the influence on Wesley of the philosopher John Locke is seen, for Locke had argued for taking empirical evidence and experience seriously as a source for arriving at judgments.”²³ It is, however, not Wesley’s reliance on the epistemology of Lockean philosophy that first comes to mind when we speak of the Methodist emphasis on experience, but rather an emphasis on inner religious experience, Wesley’s own experience of the “warmed heart” and conversion experiences in general.

And it is significant to bear in mind that Wesley himself did not make much of the frequently quoted Aldersgate experience. Doubts and temptations followed this experience, which is why historians have pointed out “that Aldersgate should not be given the place of preeminence accorded to it in Methodist lore.”²⁴ And I myself wonder if one should not count among the “nontheological factors at Aldersgate”²⁵ Wesley’s multiple and at times traumatic cultural boundary experiences in Georgia. In his journal from 1735 to 1738 he records encounters with

²⁰ LARTEY, Emmanuel Y. *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*. Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006. 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, front cover.

²² Cf. MARSH, Clive. *Appealing to Experience: What Does it Mean?* In: MARSH, Clive, Brian Beck, SHIER-JONES, Angela, Helen Wareing (Ed.). *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. New York, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 118–130.

²³ RUNYON, Theodore. *The New Creation*. John Wesley’s Theology Today. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998, p. 23.

²⁴ RUNYON, *The New Creation*, p. 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Europeans of different tongues and religions, but above all encounters with slaves and native Americans. These experiences were still very much alive when he had just arrived back from Georgia in early 1738 and must have had a tremendous impact on his emotional life at the time of his Aldersgate experience.

My concern, however, is not to settle the question what Wesley might have experienced in the 1730s, but rather to highlight the theological significance of cultural boundary experiences for the contemporary global Methodist connection. Regarding the Methodist emphasis on experience in general Clive Marsh has pointed out a certain ambivalence and therefore the need to clarify in what way this emphasis is related to everyday experience, since "there are two ways of talking about experience in Christian theology: one is 'life experience' which is then theologically interpreted; the other is a particular kind of life experience which may be called 'religious experience.'"²⁶ To strictly separate 'life experience' from 'religious experience' is a temptation that any contextually inclined theology needs to avoid. I therefore agree with Marsh that Methodist theology often has focused on experience as an inner experience in religious settings and therefore "shares the weaknesses of ... (modern) theologies in leaving unexplored what makes the everyday experiences theological, around which understandings of redemption by God are woven."²⁷ The theological significance of

everyday life experience needs more exploration. I consider cultural boundary experiences to be one important aspect of everyday life experience. In today's increasingly globalized world there lies an increasing 'ordinariness' in the encounter with culturally different people. I perceive these encounters to be prime instances of the sort of boundary experience that lets us participate in God's cosmic redemptive work that manifests itself in the connective structure of the Methodist movement.

The experience in these contact zones to culturally different people can save us from mistaking the homogeneity of cultural belonging for Christian community itself. It can save us from our blindness to the culturally limited expressions of our Christian life. This Christian life, as Marsh reminds us, is nothing less than participation in Christ,²⁸ and the experience of such participation that at the same time is a cosmic participation must lead us beyond the bounds of our own cultural group. Our participation in Christ is more than a cozy belonging to a group of likeminded people, which is why we need be in touch with culturally different people to fulfill our Christian calling, even if this at times entails the participation in Christ's suffering as well.

Cultural boundary experiences, then, remind our congregations theologically speaking of the scope of our participation in the body of Christ, Christ's worldwide church. They are therefore crucial in order not to succumb to a narrow understanding of church as a comfortable home

²⁶ MARSH, *Appealing to Experience*, p. 119.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 122. (Emphasis added)

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

or a family, which seems to me to be a constant temptation in many Methodist churches today. The challenge to our congregations then is to create an atmosphere of trust at these boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the citizen and the foreigner, between the culturally adjusted and the culturally alien.

I do not want to neglect the fact that more often than not cultural boundary experiences give rise to fierce conflict whether they occur in church settings or elsewhere. Our newspapers are full of reports of such cultural conflicts. It is the more urgent for Christian churches not to simply accept contact zones as battle lines lest they become promoters of cultural apartheid. I want to summarize how such cultural experiences can be seen as crucial for a Christian life and the Methodist connection by adapting some of Theodore Runyon's marks of orthopathy or right experience.²⁹

I understand this experience as a sense of belonging to a wider community than I myself can overview and as participation in God's continuous new creation. Cultural boundary experience reminds us that any experience of God "must come from a source that is external to us."³⁰ It transcends subjectivism. To meet the culturally other is a chance to realize that "genuine experience of God is not my experience ... It is a shared reality ... This experience of the Other explodes the privatistic notion of experience that has characterized popular Western thou-

ght."³¹ So does any encounter with the culturally different.

Not only are we connected through these encounters with a wider community, we are thereby also transformed as subjects. The experience of meeting the culturally other is not something the subject produces so to speak. The subject is rather modified by it. It "opens up new vistas, a whole new world of spiritual reality" and subsequently "places our actions in the context of God's renewal of the cosmos."³² If our spiritual renewal is part of the renewal of the whole creation, if "any genuine experience of God has cosmic dimensions,"³³ something is necessarily missing if it builds on a monocultural experience. Cultural boundary experiences then in a connectional church should not be seen as additional possibilities but rather as belonging to the core of what the church as Christ's global community is all about.

Cultural boundary experience of course does not necessarily equal an experience of the divine. Not everything in the encounter with the culturally other is spiritually enriching. There needs to be a rational component to these experiences. The faith experience we make at the cultural boundary "is always open to comparison with, and correction by, other faith experiences ... and is not threatened by this rational process of 'testing the spirits' to see 'whether they are of God' (1 John 4:1)."³⁴ Together with the culturally different we are called to explore

²⁹ Cf. RUNYON, *The New Creation*, p. 160-167.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

how in this encounter God's connecting presence might be realized, since such cultural boundary experiences are privileged places for an encounter with God in a connectional church.

Connectionalism

If experience is a term that needs continuous rethinking, this is true for the term connection as well. It is a term that like no other term expresses the ecclesial identity of the Methodist movement. And it reflects what to my mind is true for individual and corporate identity alike: Identity cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but is always also a matter of whom one is connected with.

The countless cultural boundaries that crisscross the global Methodist connection need to be understood on all levels as chances for ecclesial richness above all and not as limitations. In the task of recognizing and valuing these boundaries as chances for encounter international congregations in urban settings (and increasingly in rural settings as well) might play a pivotal role. There the meaning of dwelling at and continuously negotiating cultural boundaries as a spiritual task becomes specifically apparent. In today's globalized world of course we all are in intercultural contexts, not only those designated international congregations. It remains valid, however, what a statement of a seminar for leaders in international Methodist congregations in Berlin claims about these congregations: "These ministries provide a foundationally unique understanding of ecclesiology and accompanying ministry. Globalism and localism intertwine daily in these church

settings; resident aliens become global citizens in Christ."³⁵ This issue of "global citizenship in Christ" (see Ephesians 2:19) needs to be considered in any Methodist local church that takes its connectional identity seriously. This would also mean to refrain from applying the key ecclesiological metaphors from the Bible such as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) and the vine and its branches (John 15) exclusively to a limited group of people. It means continuously taking the presence of the other, the culturally different as a potential or real member of the body of Christ into account.

If cultural diversity is acknowledged the global Methodist connection indeed has a vital role to play in an increasingly globalized world. But in its affirmation of cultural diversity it also needs to be a counter force to the homogenizing powers of globalization. At the 10th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in 1997 Rowan Williams has put this challenge for the church to offer an alternative globalization succinctly when he said: "The responsibility of the churches ... as one of the few international organizations not primarily driven by money, is to keep alive the awareness of other forms of community in shared responsibility."³⁶ I want to understand the Methodist connection very much as a form of community that offers an alternative to the

³⁵ Statement from the *Church Growth Seminar for International United Methodist Congregations in Europe* organized by the United Methodist Church in Germany in Berlin January 9-12, 2006. (Unpublished Document)

³⁶ BECK, Brian. *Exploring Methodism's Heritage. The Story of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies*. Nashville, TN: The Board of Higher E-

uniforming tendency of economic globalization. And it has the potential to illustrate what a global “shared responsibility” can imply. When Philip Drake describes the Methodist connection as “pushing the boundaries at every point, as we seek the larger Christ who calls us to live in new patterns of relationship and new networks,”³⁷ I agree. But this pushing of boundaries should not be understood in an imperial sense.³⁸ A connectional way of pushing the boundary does not mean expansion at any price, but rather to situate oneself at the boundary and in a certain way to understand oneself as a disciple of Christ as a boundary dweller, because “Methodist membership is not a closed circle marking a boundary to keep others out. It is intended to be an open connexion, looking to reach out into the world.”³⁹ Maybe Methodist membership then could be understood as an exercise of boundary dwelling insofar as the Methodist connection never allows local churches to become exercises of encirclement. In the connection it is precisely the boundaries themselves as contact zones to other members of the connection and the surrounding culture that become privileged sites not only of ecclesial

identity, but of the encounter with God as well.⁴⁰

Itinerancy as Boundary Negotiation

For understanding the Methodist connection as a boundary exercise it can be illuminating to see it in the context of one of its most important historical correlates, itinerancy. Pondering itinerancy will also provide us with some caution to idealize the connectional system. At the rise of Methodism itinerancy was probably the most efficient practice to hold the connection together. From the very beginning it was a transatlantic enterprise. The historian Timothy D. Hall in his study *Contested Boundaries*⁴¹ has shown how itinerancy has connected a transatlantic community of believers and how this practice can be interpreted as a contestation of multiple boundaries in a new historical situation. This historical study shows how itinerancy notwithstanding its ecclesial implications was also intimately linked to the British colonial project and

education and Ministries of the United Methodist Church, 2004, p. 72.

³⁷ DRAKE, Philip. *Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness*. In: Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones, Helen Wareing (Ed.). *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. New York, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 138.

³⁸ For a careful study on the correlation between early Methodism and the rise of empire, c. HEMPTON, David. *Methodism. Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

³⁹ DRAKE, *Joining the Dots*, p. 139.

⁴⁰ This is what is suggested in cultural anthropologist Lucia Ann McSpadden’s book *Meeting God at the Boundaries*, in which she presents her results of interviews with cross-culturally and cross-racially appointed United Methodist ministers in several annual conferences in the United States. Cf. McSPADDEN, Lucia Ann. *Meeting God at the Boundaries. Cross-Cultural-Cross-Racial Clergy Appointments*. Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2003. – Focusing more generally on leadership for people of faith, Gary Gunderson has argued that leadership needs to take place in the boundary as a contact zone: “Boundary leaders think of their community as a kind of estuary in which salt water and fresh water mingle.” – GUNDERSON, Gary. *Boundary Leaders. Leadership Skills for People of Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. p. 23.

⁴¹ HALL, Timothy D. *Contested Boundaries. Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Reli-*

in tune with the spread of market economy.⁴² In other words, it did on the one hand connect believers in a wider connection than ever imagined before,⁴³ but it also participated in the exclusions effected by the social and political dynamics of its time.

Hall treats itinerancy not simply as a historical practice, but also as a "category of meaning,"⁴⁴ a category that was seen by many as a threat to the social order because of its continuous neglect of existing boundaries. "Itinerancy," Hall writes, "came to situate human action and identity in a world of broader spatial, social, and conceptual horizons."⁴⁵ And as such it is an important precursor for the development of a global Methodist connection to this day, even though itinerancy is in need of continuous reformation due to changing societal conditions.

Hall's concluding comments on the significance of itinerancy for the negotiating of boundaries is of relevance for today's global Methodist connection. On the frontier, Hall insists, "where few meaningful external boundaries existed, itinerants compensated by propagating revivalism's stringent morality."⁴⁶ In times of globalization, when the market is conquering ever new frontiers, we are

again in the situation of rapidly dissolving boundaries of different kinds, and the moral challenges arising from the vanishing of "meaningful external boundaries" are great indeed. Instead of "propagating revivalism's stringent morality" as boundary marker, or building fortresses of another kind, however, I suggest that today the moral imperative in the context of the global Methodist connection lies in the continuous and patient negotiation at and of the boundaries of our churches. A loving negotiation at these cultural and ecclesial boundaries (More often than not they overlap or are co-existent.⁴⁷) will keep the connection open for developing new forms of community in continuity with early itinerancy that "mitigated individualism by opening the way for commitment to new forms of community."⁴⁸

The Methodist connection then, if it wants to be true to its global and therefore diverse scope on the one hand and its resistance to excluding tendencies by the social status quo on the other hand, needs out of necessity to continuously search for new forms of community. This search is ultimately rooted in a creation centered soteriology that I consider an important aspect of our Methodist heritage. I suggest that the global and even cosmic aspect of salvation is guarded and put into practice by understanding the boundaries of the connection as contact zones that connect us in ever new ways with God's renewal of creation.

A full formulation of such an understanding of ecclesial boundaries is still

gious World. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.

⁴² Ibid., p. 2,9.

⁴³ "The boundaries of traditional society were weakening, opening avenues whereby the peoples of the English Atlantic could gain a new sense of connection with distant, anonymous, but similar people – an 'imagined community,' in the historian Benedict Anderson's phrase, which transcended the sphere of immediate experience to embrace a world far beyond local horizons." – Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁴ HALL, *Contested Boundaries*, p.7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴⁶ HALL, *Contested Boundaries*, p. 128.

⁴⁷ TANNER, *Theories of Culture*, p. 104-119.

⁴⁸ HALL, *Contested Boundaries*, p. 138.

missing. But there are theologians who have made useful suggestions in this direction. Miroslav Volf comes to mind who against the backdrop of the exclusionary boundaries that the conflicting ethnicities tried to erect during the Yugoslavian war of the 1990s has developed the notion of non-exclusive boundaries.⁴⁹ My vision of the global Methodist connection would be in tune with such a reading of boundaries as non-exclusionary and as spaces for the creative process of differentiation. Another example is Serene Jones who, inspired by her many conversations with the women's group in her local church, is more explicitly ecclesiological when she describes the shape of the church in the paradoxical terms of bounded openness⁵⁰ as a model for a feminist, eschatological ecclesiology. "The sanctified church," she concludes, "knows that its boundaries exist in order that it might be a community formed for openness ... its boundaries exist to facilitate openness."⁵¹ Due to the giftedness of the church by the God of the entire creation, therefore, I want to understand the boundaries of the Methodist connection as contact zones at which God's redemptive work in the world can become concrete.

⁴⁹ Cf. VOLF, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996. p. 66f.

⁵⁰ Cf. JONES, Serene. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*. Cartographies of Grace. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 169ff.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174-5.