Good News to the Poor?

The United Methodist Church

and Ministry With the Poor

by Steven W. Manskar

The Poor as Jesus’ Bosom-Friends

by Charles Wesley

The poor as Jesus’ bosom-friends,
the poor he makes his latest care,
to all his followers commends,
and wills us on our hands to bear;
the poor our dearest care we make,
and love them for our Savior’s sake.

What’er thou dost to us entrust,
with thy peculiar blessing blessed,
O make us diligent and just,
as stewards faithful to the least,
endowed with wisdom to possess
the mammon of unrighteousness.

Help us to make the poor our friends,
by that which paves the way to hell,
that when our loving labor ends,
and dying from this earth we fail,
our friends may greet us in the skies
born to a life that never dies.

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Introduction

Jesus began his public ministry in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus rolled up the scroll and sat down. With all eyes in the synagogue upon him he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-21).

Jesus announced his mission to the world in the reading of those words. These verses summarize the church’s mission as well. If the church truly is the body of Christ for the world (Ephesians 4:12; Colossians 1:15-20), then its primary task is to be an agent of good news to the poor. And the good news the poor are to receive is not just any “good news.” It is God’s good news of grace, justice, and righteousness incarnate in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This good news is the promise of liberation to those who have been cast aside and crushed by the world. The church is the body of Christ for the world only when it is a herald of Christ’s good news to the poor. The church ceases to be the body of Christ when its proclamation and ministry are no longer motivated and driven by Christ’s righteousness and grace.

One of the chief reasons for The United Methodist Church’s steady decline in vitality and influence in society is because it has become enculturated. Enculturation occurs when an institution accommodates itself to the dominate culture in which it exists. In the case of the church in North America, the gospel it was charged to proclaim was altered to accommodate a market economy and culture. As it grew into a church of and for the middle and upper-middle classes, The United Methodist Church (and its antecedents) ceased to be a church of and for the poor. The chief consequence of this historic reality is the decline of vitality and life of a great church.

This article examines the history and current state of The United Methodist Church in light of God’s preferential option for the poor and offers a vision for a radical return to the gospel of Jesus Christ, in particular his ministry among the poor, and his mission in the world as it is revealed in Luke 4:18-19.

A Biblical Foundation

God’s preferential option for the poor is clearly revealed in Scripture and articulated in the theologies of liberation. Liberation theologians remind us that the God revealed in the Bible is not an impartial God. While God loves all people and all people are created equally in God’s image, God’s mission in the world is revealed through and with the poor. When confronted with evil and oppression, God always takes the side of the poor. Liberation from oppression, spiritual, physical and economic, is the focus of God’s work in the world. And God’s preferential option is for those who are the victims of the world dominated by power, wealth and greed.

This divine option for the poor permeates the Bible. It is found in both the Old and the New Testaments. This is seen first of all in the people through whom God’s power is revealed. The Hebrews, when compared to the world as a whole, were a small, insignificant people in a remote region of the world. They were the victims of constant conquest, oppression, and slavery. And yet, it is through this hapless band of people that the God of the universe chooses to name as God’s chosen people. If God were a God of and for the rich and powerful God would have chosen the Egyptians, the Greeks, or the Romans as vehicles for divine revelation. But God makes very clear that human standards of power and wisdom have no relation to divine power and wisdom. For the God of the universe, the God of the Bible, chose to be revealed in weakness and foolishness (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

The Old Testament

We do not have to look far in the Old Testament before we come across the divine option for the poor. The book of Exodus is an account of liberation from slavery and oppression in Egypt. God chose Moses, the son of an enslaved people (Exodus 2:1-4), an exiled murderer (Exodus 2:11-15) and shepherd (Exodus 3:1) with a speech impediment (Exodus 4:10), to go to Pharaoh and tell him to set the Hebrew slaves free. In Moses, God confronted Pharaoh and brought about the liberation of the Hebrew people and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army.

From this band of ex-slaves God built the nation of Israel. God’s power and grace are revealed through this small nation. Israel was so poor that they were not an identifiable people. And yet God chose them to be God’s covenant people. Throughout the life of Israel, as the law and social structure was developed through Moses, God’s word displayed a very clear concern for the welfare of the poor (Exodus. 22:25-27; 23:3, 10-11; Leviticus. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy. 14:22-29; 15:7-11; 23:19-20, 24-25; 24:6, 19-22, 10-13; Ruth 2; Isaiah 1:12-17; 3:13-15; 58:6-9; Amos 2:6-7; 5:21-24).
God established the year of Jubilee, the sabbatical year, to redistribute the wealth of the nation and provide for the relief of the poor (Leviticus 25:8-55). The Law of Moses is a law of mercy toward the poor. It is law written for a poor people designed to insure protection for the poor.

As the nation grew and developed, as it encountered other peoples, was conquered and taken into exile, God’s word revealed in the Psalms and the Prophets is permeated with a witness to a preferential option for the poor. For example, God chose David to be the first great king of Israel. The youngest and smallest of seven sons, young David was chosen by God to be anointed king after Saul’s fall from grace (1 Samuel 16:1-13). In the young David we see God’s fondness for using the least expected, smallest and weakest person as a herald of God’s grace and power in the world. For it is in the weak and vulnerable ones of the world that God’s power is most profoundly revealed (1 Corinthians 1:20-31; 2 Corinthians 12:9). Not only does God act through a small tribe of people in a remote part of the world, but God chooses to act through the lowliest members of this lowly tribe.

God’s option for the poor is most powerfully expressed in the books of the prophets. These witnesses and martyrs of God who lived in and around Jerusalem before, during, and after the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles were heralds of divine justice and righteousness to the people of Israel. They proclaimed God’s judgment against the nation that had forsaken God’s righteousness in favor of foreign gods, wealth, and worldly power. The nation put its trust in wealth, kings and the power of armies. They had forgotten God’s law and oppressed the poor. God judged the nation and allowed its destruction and exile (Isaiah 5:1-7). In the midst of oppression God consistently takes the side of the poor over against the powerful who oppress them (1 Samuel 2:1-10; Psalm 12:5; 14:6; 37:14-15; 72:4; 113:7; 140:12; Isaiah 3:13-15; 14:30; 10:1-4; 25:1-5; 58:1-14; 61:1-4; Jeremiah 22:13-17; Amos 2:6-8; 4:1-3; 5:11; 8:4-10).

The eighth century prophets provide authoritative witness to God’s option for the poor. The oldest and best example of this prophetic witness is Amos. His ministry was concentrated in the urban areas of Israel during a lengthy period of prosperity. Amos spoke out against fraud by business executives (8:5), bribery (5:12), and abuse of the poor and vulnerable, (2:6-7; 5:11-12; 8:4-6). He warned the nation of impending judgment and national calamity if there is no repentance. Amos’ context closely resembles that of modern North America. He was rejected by the religious authorities and expelled from the temple because of the harshness and power of his prophetic word. Prophets are treated in much the same way within the church today.

God’s preferential option for the poor is an important theme that runs throughout the Old Testament. It is a theme that has, however, been either ignored or spiritualized by the North American church. The prophetic word contained in the Old Testament is difficult to hear because it is a word of judgment on a church that has given its blessing to an ethic of success, competition, and prosperity that predominates in a market economy and culture which views wealth as the measuring stick (or plumb line) of justice and moral virtue. The church needs to reclaim the prophetic witness contained in the Bible. If it does not, it is doomed to continue its decline and ultimately experience the wrath of God’s judgment.

The New Testament Witness

Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God on earth. In him the fullness of God is revealed. The apostle Paul describes the person of Jesus Christ in his letter to the Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

In Jesus Christ, God was incarnate and lived in the world as a poor Galilean carpenter. He was a Jew living in first century Palestine; a land occupied by forces of the Roman Empire. In him, the God of the universe chose to come to earth in the flesh of an oppressed people in a remote outpost of a powerful empire. This God entered human existence as any other human being, through the waters of a young woman’s womb. In other words, the God who is the creator of all that has been, all that is, and all that will be entered this world in the flesh and blood of a helpless baby boy (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-7). This boy’s life began in persecution as his family fled to Egypt to protect him from the murderous swords of King Herod (Matthew 2:13-18). Eventually returning to Nazareth in Galilee, the boy grew into a man who supported himself working as a carpenter; a laborer working with his hands. In the baby, the boy, and the man, God revealed God’s self as one with the poor and the oppressed peoples of this world.

Jesus came from Nazareth, a small town in Galilee that had a less than desirable reputation. After meeting Jesus, Philip ran to find Nathanael to tell him, “We have found
him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, ‘Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ Nathanael said to him ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’” (John 1:45-46). God comes not only in the form of a common Jewish carpenter, but God chose for that carpenter to come from one of the least renowned and least desirable villages in a small, remote region of an occupied nation. This is a God who identifies with the poor and the oppressed of the world. This God did not choose to come in the form of a king or a prince or even a temple priest. This God chose to experience human life from below rather than from above.

Jesus called his disciples from their work as fishermen (Matthew. 4:18-22; Mark. 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11). He even called one who was considered one of the lowest of the low, the tax collector Matthew (Matthew. 9:9-13; Mark. 2:13-17; Luke. 5:27-32). Jesus associated, lived, and ate with those whom the world considered to be the least, the last, and the lost (Luke. 15:1-2). Both the religious and civil authorities considered him to be a troublemaker and rebel.

Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matthew. 25:31-46). He preached about the potential power for evil to be found in the accumulation of wealth (Matthew. 6:24; Luke. 16:13). For Jesus, the love of wealth is one of the greatest obstacles to the kingdom of God (Matthew. 19:16-30; Mark. 10:17-31; Luke. 18:18-30). Wealth has the power to displace God from the hearts and minds of those who possess it. The danger of accumulating riches is the topic Jesus preached about the most. He clearly asserts in Matthew 6:25-34 that God has provided in abundance for the needs of all of God’s creatures. But it is those who take more than they need that cause deprivation, poverty, and anxiety for the needs of each day. Jesus’ call is to a simple life for all that all may simply live (Luke 16:19-31).

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the ultimate confirmation of God’s preferential option for the poor. God chose to participate in their suffering by submitting to the humiliation of a criminal’s death on a Roman cross. Certainly Jesus’ death was for all humanity, rich and poor. But in his death, God gave meaning to the suffering of the poor. For if the rich are to gain entry into the kingdom of God, they must be willing to deny themselves and share in Christ’s suffering and death. Only then will they be able to share in his resurrection. Christ states very clearly:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:34b-35)

The crucifixion is God’s “YES” to the poor. It is a word of hope because in the suffering and death of Jesus they know that God suffers with them. The resurrection is a word of victory. Through it God reveals to the world, especially the poor, that suffering and death do not have the final word. Injustice, oppression, and evil will, in the end, be vanquished by the power of grace. Therefore, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the ultimate signs of more than God’s preferential option for the poor, they are signs of God’s solidarity with them.

Therefore, if the church is to be faithful to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, if the church is to be the herald of God’s Good News, then it must operate with a preferential option for the poor as well. For the church can be the church of Christ only when it is about the business of proclaiming Christ, crucified and risen, in a way that this Good News is good news to the poor.

A Theological Foundation

God’s grace, incarnate in Jesus Christ, is singular and threefold in nature. Grace is universal. It is freely offered to all. Grace is relational. It is revealed, experienced, and received in community; through relationships of love and forgiveness with others. The relational nature of grace is revealed in the triune nature of God. In other words, God in Godself is a community of divine love: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Each distinct persons bound together by love. Human beings, created in the image of God, are therefore created for relationship with God and with other humans and with creation. We can only know and love God as we know and love other human beings. Through submitting to and living in relationships characterized by love and forgiveness grace is given and received. It is in such relationship that we find out true identity as individuals. Grace reveals who and whose we truly are. We are also given the freedom to accept or reject this gift.

The Apostles Creed is an historic creed of the church. Since the church’s very earliest days, this creed has been an integral part of the ritual of baptism. In it the baptismal candidate and the congregation affirm their faith in the triune God. The creed faithfully conveys God’s concern for the poor and oppressed peoples of the world.

The God described in the creed is a God of grace. However, the nature of the creed makes clear to those assenting to its contents that the grace of God is a “costly grace.” The understanding from the creed is that grace places demands upon those who accept it. And the demand is loyalty to God expressed in a changed life; a life given to whole-hearted love to God and neighbor.
The Apostles’ Creed consists of three articles. Each describes a person of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each article is a profession of faith in the God revealed in the Bible. Taken as a whole, the creed is a personal oath of loyalty to the one God who is a community of self-giving love. Each of the articles of the creed describes a God who has acted and is acting in, with, and for me for the redemption of planet Earth.

**God the Father**

Article one affirms belief in “God, the Father Almighty.” Right from the start, the creed affirms the personal nature of God. This God is one who is like loving parent in a life-giving relationship with the members of the household. This clause affirms that God is intimately involved in our lives in the way only a loving parent could. It affirms the words of Paul when he writes of the spirit of adoption given to us in Jesus Christ. Through the grace given to us in Christ, God has adopted us as a Father adopts a child (Romans 8:15-17; Galatians. 4:4-8; Ephesians. 1:3-8a). Giving us all the benefits of inheritance and giving us the privilege of calling God, “Our Father.” There are no restrictions placed on this fatherhood. It is a gift offered to all without regard to race or social standing. God is Father to the rich and the poor.

God the Father is the divine creator of all that is and all that will be. This is the God of creation and providence. Because God is Father to all, God also created the heaven and the earth for all. If God’s fatherhood is inclusive, God’s creation and providence for that creation are equally inclusive. Therefore, the heavens and the earth are created for all of God’s children. In other words, God created the world in such a way that all of the children of the Earth would have all they need to sustain life. In this world resources necessary to sustain and nurture human life are provided in abundance. God has appointed humanity to be steward of these resources.

Why then are so many of God’s children hungry, homeless, and sick? If God the Father created the heavens and the earth for all, providing for the basic needs of life for all, why is there so much deprivation in this world?

The cause of suffering in this world is sin; structural and personal sin. Like children, humanity chose to rebel against God and God’s grace. With that rebellion came a multitude of sins. We have not been good stewards of God’s creation. The consequence of sin and poor stewardship is suffering.

Humanity suffers hunger, homelessness, loneliness, hopelessness, and alienation because it has built systems and structures designed to enrich and protect a few while they impoverish and oppress the many. The injustice of sin is that those who suffer its consequences are seldom those responsible; they are the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed. The people responsible for the systems of oppression and greed go about their business enjoying the fruits of their iniquity.

The earth suffers from pollution and the destruction that accompanies war. Finally, God suffers because God is our Father who seeks the well-being of humankind.

**God the Son**

Only God holds the cure for the human disease called sin. The name of the cure is Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord. In Jesus, God held the key to the healing of humankind. This special creation in God’s own image had, through sin, become diseased and distorted. Only God could restore the image to wholeness.

Jesus Christ is God in human flesh and blood. In Jesus, God came to redeem and reconcile humanity to Godself. But God did not come to us as a wealthy ruler or powerful king. God came to us as a poor Jewish carpenter born to an unremarkable mother and father in an insignificant town (Nazareth) in a remote region (Galilee) of the mighty Roman Empire. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph, lived most of his life in anonymity. Working for a living and struggling to make ends meet just like everyone else. The God who came in this Jesus of Nazareth lived in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed peoples of the world.

Jesus’ public ministry confronted the religious and political powers of his day. They felt he posed such a threat that he “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” In Jesus, God was arrested and prosecuted by the religious and civil authorities. Like the poor of every age, Christ submitted to the humiliation of unjust imprisonment and persecution to the point of death on a cross. Jesus “was crucified, died, and was buried.” He died a criminal’s death, sharing in the unjust suffering of the oppressed and the poor. He himself was poor without a home and dependent upon others for his welfare as he traveled the land preaching, teaching, and healing. Out of his grace, out of his self-giving love, Christ suffered for our sin and shared our death. Through Christ’s sacrificial love, God reconciled humanity to Godself and removed the burden of sin and death from our shoulders. Through Jesus, humanity is offered its only hope for healing and wholeness. Through Jesus, God proclaims good news to the poor and oppressed and offers them the hope of justice and wholeness.

**God the Holy Spirit**

Through the Holy Spirit God calls the community of Christ, the church into existence. In the Spirit God creates a
community of faith that is universal. In other words, God’s community is open to all people. The Spirit knows no limitations. The human barriers of race and class cannot bind it. No one is excluded from its grace-filled power to forgive and transform and heal. The Spirit is the power of liberation that flows through the poor and the oppressed for the world. The Spirit gives the assurance that sins are forgiven and the hope of resurrection and eternal life. The Spirit sets us free to love as God loves and to live for the other. It is the Spirit that calls us to discipleship. It is through the Spirit that Christ calls us to come and die to self and live for him.

**Universal Grace**

The Apostles’ Creed is ultimately about God’s grace. It is grace freely offered by the one God in three persons: the God who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). As God is one, God’s grace is singular. And, as God is one in three persons, grace is singular and threefold in nature (prevenient, justifying, sanctifying). As God is God of all the world, God’s grace is freely offered to all. Grace, like God, is universal.

Grace is God’s divine initiative for humankind and creation. Its source and destination is God. Grace is the beginning of life, love, healing and wholeness. It is the fountain of salvation and healing of sinful humankind and a broken universe. While this grace is singular, as God is singular, it has three expressions: prevenient, justifying and sanctifying. Grace is God’s means for acting for the healing of the universe.

Prevenient grace prepares the heart for healing. God moves and acts in a person’s life before he or she is aware of God’s presence with them and in the world. Prevenient grace awakens the heart to its own sinfulness. It brings the person to the realization of his or her own brokenness and need for someone or something beyond themselves to make them whole. That someone is Jesus Christ. Prevenient grace is God’s way of introducing us to Jesus Christ. As the soul is convicted of sin and experiences its own brokenness, prevenient grace enables it to turn away from itself and turn toward God. Another word for this turning is repentance. Prevenient grace is God’s hand working to bring people to repentance.

Once the heart has been awakened to its own sinfulness and brought to repentance in the presence of Christ, justifying grace opens the way for the experience of forgiveness and the implanting of Christ’s righteousness. Justifying grace is God’s working to restore the person to right relationship through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. By the power of the cross God implants Christ’s righteousness into the heart of the believer. This grace allows the person to know their sin is forgiven and that Christ lives in them. The life of Christ within them is the beginning of sanctification or being made holy; being formed into the image of Christ. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

Sanctifying grace is God’s working through faith and love to form us into the image of Christ. It is the grace that works to make us holy. It empowers us to live the life of Christ in the world; to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. And love our neighbor as ourselves. (Luke 10:27) Sanctifying grace is the power of God in Christ to lead us into lives of holiness; to being ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), Christ’s representatives in the world; agents of his compassion, justice and love; channels of his grace; reflecting his light for those who live in darkness. Sanctifying grace leads us to lives of wholeness for ourselves, our community, and for our neighbor (Luke 10:25-38).

This “order of salvation” is the way for new life in Christ. It is the way of grace that leads to healing and wholeness for those who have known only brokenness. It is the way of life for those who have known only death. It is the way of salvation for those who have known only sin. This way of grace is the way of Jesus Christ, grace incarnate, who came to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, open the eyes of the blind, and to set free those who are oppressed.

One of the important reasons for the current decline in vitality and influence of The United Methodist Church is neglect of its Wesleyan roots of universal grace and ministry with the poor. The United Methodist Church has become so enculturated that it unconsciously (or consciously) excludes the poor from its congregations and ministry because, in this market-centered culture, the poor have no value. The church has become a part of the market culture to the point that it has integrated its values of competition, marketing, and profits into its proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the heart of the gospel, universal grace, has been nearly lost.

**Historical Roots**

The United Methodist Church needs to rediscover its Wesleyan roots. It needs to rediscover God’s preferential option for the poor. It needs to reevaluate its mission and ministry in light of these two, repent of its sin, and move forward as a church of and for the poor.
The Ministry of John Wesley

A recognition of God’s preferential option for the poor is apparent in the life and ministry of John Wesley. The United Methodist Church today needs to look to his witness among the poor as its model for renewal in the twenty-first century. During his years at Oxford, Wesley was known to give the bulk of the stipend he received from home to the poor. As the leader of the Holy Club, he devoted much of his time and resources visiting and providing for the needs of the imprisoned and poor people of Oxford. He gave away so much of his small income that Wesley’s mother, Susanna, was known to have expressed concern for his health and well-being. She was concerned that John was not eating enough because he was giving his money away.

Wesley lived all of his life on the annual sum of £29. Even when his earnings increased substantially in later years, he always gave the balance to the poor.

Like Jesus, Wesley’s was a life of solidarity with the ones who lived at the bottom of society. He devoted time each week visiting the poor in their homes, the prisons, and hospitals. Wesley realized the gospel could not be heard on an empty stomach or over the cries of a hungry and sick child. Through first hand experience, Wesley learned of the grinding misery in which the poor lived. He knew the gospel of grace could not be received in the midst of such hopelessness. Therefore, Wesley resolved, in the interest of grace, to remove the barriers erected by the world to the hearing and receiving of God’s saving Word.

Along with collecting food, clothing, fuel, and medicine for the poor, Wesley was among the first to provide them with the means for lifting themselves out of poverty. First, he established access to free health care. Wesley offered free medicines, modern treatments for various ailments, and information on home remedies to people who otherwise would have no access to medical care or were easy prey for quacks.

Secondly, Wesley developed a system for assisting people in finding jobs. If he could not find employment for someone, Wesley would create work for them.

Third, Wesley created a sort of credit union designed to help the poor out of debt. People could obtain money interest free for three months to pay off creditors who were known to charge exorbitant interest rates. The interest free loan could then be repaid as the borrower was able; thus keeping many breadwinners out of debtor’s prison. The loan fund helped people out from under the burden of debt and the threat of prison while the employment service helped the same person secure the means for repaying the loan while providing for their family’s needs.

In addition to these self-help services, Wesley also provided educational assistance by teaching people to read and write; thus increasing their likelihood of achieving self-sufficiency.

However, Wesley’s most important contribution to improving the life of the poor in England is the effect he had in helping to change attitudes toward poverty and the poor. Wesley’s greatest contribution was his demystification of wealth. He helped debunk the notion that the poor were poor because they were lazy and dishonest. The common belief among the middle and upper classes and the poor themselves was that the poor deserved to be poor. Wealth was a sign of divine favor and poverty was a sign of divine disfavor. Through preaching and advocacy, Wesley helped to soften the heard-hearted and dispel the prejudice of the day:

Is it not worse for one after an hard day’s labour to come back to a poor, cold, dirty, uncomfortable lodging, and to find there not even the food which is needful to repair his wasted strength? You that live at ease in the earth, that want nothing but eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand how well God has dealt with you—is it not worse to seek bread day by day, and find none? Perhaps to find the comfort also of five or six children, crying for what he has not to give. Were it not that he is restrained by an unseen hand, would he not soon “curse God and die”? O want of bread! Want of bread! Who can tell what this means unless he hath felt it himself? I am astonished it occasions no more than heaviness even in them that believe!

Through his various efforts among them, Wesley helped the poor to know that they too were valued children of God and heirs of God’s kingdom of grace and freedom.

In addition to these concrete efforts on behalf of England’s poor, Wesley was a vehement critic of the social structures that contributed to their suffering and oppression. While he remained a Tory and political conservative all of his life, Wesley was not afraid to criticize government policies and practices that contributed to the suffering of the poor in England and around the world. He took unpopular stands against merchants, distillers, physicians, lawyers, war, colonialism, and slavery.

Wesley preached against merchants who bought merchandise at lowest possible prices and sold them at inflated prices. He saw this as nothing less than thievery and exploitation of the poor. Wesley saw the production of gin and whiskey as taking bread out of the mouths of poor children. Not only did the consumption of liquor contribute to drunkenness, poor health, and unemployment, but its production consumed large amounts of grain that could have been used for bread. The diversion of these grains to distilleries...
reduced the amount of grain available to bakeries, thus increasing the price of bread. Physicians and lawyers took advantage of the poor through unethical practices and high professional fees. Wesley opposed war because he knew the poor were the ones who did most of the fighting and dying. In colonialism Wesley saw the suffering of the poor on a global scale. He knew the nascent British Empire was built on the white, brown, and black backs of the poor of Great Britain, India, Africa, and America. Wesley’s most vehement arguments with regard to human rights and justice were in his life-long opposition to the institution of slavery:

Where is the justice of inflicting the severest evils on those that have done us no wrong? of depriving those that never injured us in word or deed, of every comfort of life? of tearing them from their native country, and depriving them of liberty itself, to which an Angolan has the same natural right as an Englishman, and on which he sets as high a value? Yea, where is the justice of taking away the lives of innocent, inoffensive men; murdering thousands of them in their own land, by the hands of their own countrymen; many thousands, year after year, on shipboard, and then casting them like dung into the sea; and tens of thousands in the cruel slavery to which they are so unjustly reduced?

Therefore, John Wesley’s ministry was entirely with and for the poor. He saw solidarity with the poor as solidarity with God in Jesus Christ. Wesley modeled his life after his Savior. In his praxis he hoped to bring the good news of Christ to those who were most receptive to his message of universal grace. Wesley’s ministry with the poor was also aimed at the comfortable middle and upper classes who were, he hoped, made to feel uncomfortable by his preaching and witness.

At Wesley’s death in 1791, the Methodist movement in England had become predominantly a middle-class endeavor. The movement that started among the poor and oppressed helped to lift many out of poverty. However, once free from the slums, the former poor adapted many of the same middle class attitudes that contributed their former suffering. Many turned their backs on their poor sisters and brothers. Wesley lamented this fact in a later sermon written after he had traveled the circuit of Methodist societies across England. Entitled, “On God’s Vineyard,” the sermon provides Wesley’s account of the history and doctrine of the “people commonly called Methodists.” In it he offers a stinging critique of the Methodist’s growing neglect of their heritage:

O ye that have riches in possessions, once more hear the word of the Lord! Ye that are rich in this world, that have food to eat and raiment to put on, and something over, are you clear of the curse of loving the world? Are you clear from the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life? Do you “put a knife to your throat” when you sit down to meat, lest your “table should be a snare to you”? Is not your belly your god? Do not you seek happiness in dress, furniture, pictures, gardens, or anything else that pleases the eye? Do not you grow soft and delicate, unable to bear cold, heat, the wind or the rain as you did when you were poor? Are you not increasing in goods, laying up treasures on earth, instead of restoring to God in the poor, not so much or so much, but all that you can spare? Surely, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

While Wesley continued his efforts on behalf of the poor until his death, the Methodist movement which claimed him as leader and founder had begun to dilute its mission and ministry of proclaiming the universality of God’s grace. The close of the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of the Methodist’s option for the middle-class in place of God’s option for the poor.

Methodism in America

Methodism came to North America in the later half of the eighteenth century. As in England, its appeal was to the lower classes. Early leaders were lay men and women (Robert Strawbridge, Barbara Heck, Philip Embury, Philip Otterbein, and Martin Boehm) of Irish and German descent. In 1769 Wesley sent Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore, the first English Methodist missionaries, to the colonies. Francis Asbury arrived in 1771. The early Methodist preachers were faithful to Wesley’s teaching on prevenient grace, justification by grace through faith, and Christian perfection (sanctification).

The gospel of God’s grace and freedom revealed in Jesus Christ had great appeal to the humble folk of the American Colonies. Economic opportunity and absence of a rigid class structure facilitated the rapid growth of the middle class in America. As the middle class grew in the general population, its representation in the churches that would eventually make up The United Methodist Church grew as well. People of middle class status, both economic and cultural, predominated in the church at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The seeds of the United Methodist Church’s current decline in vitality were planted in the nineteenth century. While there are certainly other contributing factors, the two most important were the Methodist Episcopal Church’s struggle with slavery and the theological changes that occurred during the Second Great Awakening.

The treatment of African-Americans and slaves by the American Methodists marked their first major departure with
Wesley’s teaching. In 1784, at the time of the Christmas Conference, the Methodists were an integrated movement. Blacks and whites worshiped together. Black preachers such as Richard Allen and Harry Hosier traveled with white circuit riders. The Christmas Conference included an order for all Methodists to begin the process of emancipating their slaves. Methodist clergy were not permitted to hold slaves and remain in the connection. However, the general conference hesitated to enforce its own rules.

Along with this hesitation was the increasing white distaste for sharing their churches with their African sisters and brothers. Blacks were commonly forced to sit in the back pews or in the balconies. They were not allowed to receive the Lord’s Supper until all the white parishioners had received. As time passed, Blacks were made to feel increasingly unwanted in the predominantly white churches of the Methodist connection. It is a testament to their courage and faith that many remained in the church. Others, such as Richard Allen, could not tolerate being treated as second class citizens of God’s household. Allen and others left the Methodist Episcopal Church to form the Black Methodist churches: the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

The Methodist Episcopal Church could not come to terms with the issue of slavery. It reflected the struggle taking place in the nation. On paper, the American church remained faithful to Wesley’s vehement opposition to slavery. However, the church’s practice was one of consistent waffling, double-talk, and compromise. The bishops provided no consistent leadership on the antislavery cause worried about the effect it would have on church unity. The bishops and the general conferences between 1796 and 1844 placed the welfare of the institution ahead of the prophetic call of the gospel. While there were certainly prophetic voices within the church, most coming from the abolitionist movement, such voices were routinely pushed to the margins in favor of compromise and equivocation. The Methodist Episcopal Church failed to give voice to the voiceless poor. It chose, rather, to accommodate in the interest of the church’s economic and political survival.

While the Methodist Episcopal Church certainly advocated the humane treatment of slaves, it never seriously challenged the institution or the laws that mandated its perpetuation. It is on the issue of slavery that the Methodists in America walked away from the legacy of John Wesley. The issue of slavery also marks the beginning of the acculturation of the American Methodists. The church embraced white racism as normative behavior rather than challenging it as a sin against God. Accommodation of the sins of slavery and racism caused the Methodist Episcopal Church to turn its back on its founder and lose its voice as a legitimate witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Its leaders and its members brought the prevailing prejudices and attitudes of American culture into the church and called them “Christian.”

The second important factor leading the Methodist Episcopal Church away from its Wesleyan roots was the changes in theology that took place during the Second Great Awakening; especially during the revivalist and holiness movements that began around 1835. During the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, the Methodist circuit riders were firmly grounded in the Wesleyan doctrine of the threefoldness of grace. However, as the frontier expanded and the population moved westward two important changes took place in the proclamation and theology of the preachers and theologians. These changes were reflections of changes that occurred in American culture.

The first was a result of simple logistics. As the frontier expanded, circuits expanded. Because circuit riders were responsible for larger geographic areas and more congregations, the frequency of preaching in individual churches decreased. It could be weeks or months before a circuit rider could return to any given church (given the high mortality rate of circuit riders, they sometimes did not return). The people of the frontier were predominantly uneducated and illiterate and ill equipped to hear and understand the theological language used to describe the nature of prevenient grace. Therefore, sermons emphasized conviction and conversion. With the almost exclusive emphasis on “the sins of the individual” and calls for conversion, the doctrine of prevenient grace was all but lost. Justification became conversion and sanctification was rarely mentioned. The inseparability of justification and sanctification was pulled apart until they were finally completely separated. The doctrine of sin was reduced to a collection of misdeeds. Consequently, the doctrine of sanctification was reduced to a collection of virtues. On the frontier, circuit riders did not have time to develop fruits of the spirit or holiness among their charges. Emphasis on conviction and conversion lead to an attrition of the Wesleyan emphasis on grace.

The second important change in American culture and theology that further corrupted Methodist understanding of Wesley’s doctrine of the threefold nature of grace was the increasing emphasis on individualism and the “Scottish Common Sense” philosophy of Thomas Reed with its emphasis on free will.9 Preachers did not preach about sin, they preached about sins. Emphasis was placed on the ability of the individual to choose, by the freedom of their will, for or against conversion. The idea of faith as a gift of grace
from God was lost. Faith became an act of the individual’s free will. Both original sin and prevenient grace were lost. Conversion hinged totally upon the freedom of the will for or against God. Sin, therefore, became an individual problem. Asa Shin and Nathan Bangs were important Methodist theologians of this period who contributed to the evolution of this pervasive individually centered theology. They managed to change God’s prevenient grace to God’s “gracious ability” or God’s “gracious influence” to help a person decide for or against conversion.

The nineteenth century began with Wesley’s doctrine of grace centered on Christ with the emphasis always upon God’s action toward humanity in Christ. By the end of the century a complete shift was made to emphasize the importance of human action toward God. Wesley’s Christological paradigm had been forsaken in favor of an anthropological paradigm.

Institutional racism, accommodation of slavery, and the theological changes described above illustrate the increasingly middle-class nature of the Methodist church in the nineteenth century. They contributed to several separatist movements within the church (Wesleyan Methodists, the Free Methodists, and various Holiness groups). Each of these elements was an accommodation of the dominant culture into the Methodist Episcopal church (North and South). They, individually and collectively, diluted the gospel of Jesus Christ and prevenient grace to become nothing more than a personal code of ethics. Once Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace was eliminated, the glue that held justification and sanctification together was lost. Along with it went the call to address societal injustice.

When sin became an individual problem the energies of the church were shifted from serving and improving the lot of the poor to condemning moral evils such as alcohol, gambling, and dancing. The theological and cultural orientation of the Methodist Episcopal church by the end of the nineteenth century virtually eliminated it from addressing the increasing injustice, exploitation, and oppression of the growing number of urban poor; most of whom were newly arrived European immigrants brought to this country to serve the need for cheap industrial labor.

By the close of the nineteenth century the social gospel movement had become a significant voice in the American church. It arose predominantly in the cities through the efforts of men such as Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister and professor of church history who insisted that the social and economic life of the nation should conform to the requirements of the gospel, and showed that economic liberalism—the theory that the law of supply and demand suffices to regulate the marketplace—results in great iniquity and social injustice. The task of Christians in that context is to seek to limit the unbridled power of runaway capital, and to advocate the enactment of laws that will aid the poor and promote greater justice.

The Social Gospel movement was an attempt among the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Unitarians to minister to the manifold injustice and wretched living conditions of the growing immigrant population.

The Methodists were late in coming and reluctant to join the struggle. The social and cultural standing of the church posed a formidable barrier for any involvement in ministry to the urban poor. Methodists had a long history of disdain for the poor and especially the urban poor. As many believed sin was an individual problem there was little or no understanding of collective or institutional sin. Many Methodists believed the poor deserved their station in life as a consequence of bad moral choices. Combine this with the fact that the vast majority of Methodists were still predominantly to be found in small towns and the country; far away from the slums and tenements of the inner city. However, some Methodists did, eventually, get involved in the Social Gospel movement that dominated much of main-line Christianity in the first half of this century.

The Social Gospel movement itself is a movement with a middle-class mind-set. It is a product of the liberal theology of the nineteenth century. As it embraced the Darwinian theory of evolution, liberal theology’s understanding of human nature and future development was, along with the science of the day, very optimistic. It was believed that as life on earth evolved biologically, human society was evolving. As scientific discoveries and technology progressed, humankind would progress toward a utopian society that will be the kingdom of God.

As liberal theology and the Social Gospel are examined in light of Wesley’s understanding of the doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace, one finds that they are very individualistic and anthropocentric in orientation. They emphasized human action and industry rather than God’s action toward humanity in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of original sin was lost in favor of an optimistic notion of human nature.

The history of Methodism in North America reveals a church riding the waves of North American dominant culture. That culture built a great nation and, North American Methodism built a great church. However, many of the wrongs that plague North American society became part of the church. Racism and individualism have predominated much of church life and mission over the last one hundred fifty years. As the nineteenth century progressed, American Methodists moved farther and farther away from the theolog-
ical legacy of their Wesleyan roots. The church which began as a church of the poor and lower classes became progressively more affluent along with the nation. As more of the church achieved the ranks of the middle and upper classes, the seat of power and influence in America, the gulf between the church and the poor grew larger. The institutionalization of the church also contributed to the growth of this painful gulf. For, as the institution grew it became willing to compromise the demands of the gospel of Christ in the interest of evangelical success (among the middle class) and economic survival. The pattern of behavior established in the nineteenth century continued throughout the twentieth century. The causes are the reality of human sin and loss of the theological focus given by John Wesley.

**The Church Today**

The United Methodist Church mirrors the North American middle class. It is a sociological reflection of the environment in which it exists. A look at such categories as annual household income, education, and life-style are a good indication of the composition of the church. The following information is from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey published in 2003 by The Office of Research of the General Council on Ministries of The United Methodist Church. Some of its findings follow:

- United Methodists are older, on average, than the general population. 39% of the members are over the age of 65 as compared to 25% for the U.S. as a whole.
- 38% of lay members have completed four or more years of college as compared to 23% of the U.S. population.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial/Ethic Groups</th>
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<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
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<td>African American</td>
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<td>Hispanic American</td>
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<td>Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>European American</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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This data reveals a church that is overwhelmingly white and middle-class with regard to income, education, and lifestyle. Another important point for consideration is that 82.6% of United Methodist lay people and 84.3% of clergy live in and around cities of less than 250,000 population. In other words, The United Methodist Church has very little presence in cities of over 250,000 people. The majority of United Methodists are concentrated in rural areas and small towns of less than 50,000 people. The typical member of a United Methodist church is white, married, has an annual household income greater than $35,000, owns two cars and a home in either a suburban or rural community. This is a description of a typical American middle-class household.

**An Enculturated Church**

The church described above is one whose attitudes and behaviors are shaped by middle-class values of respectability and material gain. It is a church isolated from the poverty and oppression experienced by the urban and rural poor. It is populated and lead largely by people who have fled from the cities to the suburbs and rural communities. The dominant culture of The United Methodist Church is a mirror image of the dominant culture of the United States. The values of the dominant culture have been substituted for the Gospel. As a result of this enculturation, the church has almost ceased to be the church of Jesus Christ. It has become the equivalent of a neighborhood social club that is interested in religion and occasional service to the community.

The gulf between The United Methodist Church and the poor is increasing every year. As long as the church remains predominantly middle and upper classes (the seat of power and influence in America) the gulf between the church and the poor will continue to grow. The direct consequence of this muddle is a church that is very good at doing ministry to the poor.
By ministry to the poor I mean that countless United Methodist clergy engage in ministry with the poor. They readily give money and supplies to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. But do they welcome the homeless poor into the churches? Does the church offer good news to the poor? Does it support urban churches and other ministries that could, like John Wesley, empower and help the poor to work themselves out of poverty? In other words, does The United Methodist Church engage in ministry with the poor?

At a session of one of the larger annual conferences, held in the Fall of 1992, a lengthy debate occurred over the conference’s proposed Role and Mission Statement. Several African-American pastors and lay people spoke in favor of inserting a clause expressing a commitment to actively support inner-city churches. Most, if not all of the affected churches are located in some of the poorest neighborhoods of major cities located within the annual conference. Most of them are predominately African-American congregations. By virtue of their location, they offer the conference innumerable opportunities for ministries with the poorest of the poor. When the vote to add such a clause to the conference role and mission statement was taken, all of the hands raised in favor of the motion were black. A sea of white hands representing the vast majority of the annual conference soon resoundingly defeated them.

This brief moment illustrates the unwillingness of the more affluent, predominantly white, suburban and rural churches to support the struggling African-American churches of the inner city. This also illustrates an unwillingness on the part of the majority of the annual conference to confront the institutional racism that infects the structures of the church and perpetuate the forces of oppression in the world. This bourgeois church is reluctant to confront its own racism and the structures in the larger society that sustain the cycle of poverty and despair in the inner city.

The United Methodist Church has become so caught up in the ideological and moralistic arguments of the dominant culture that it has allowed itself to become desperately distracted from the business of proclaiming Christ’s good news to the poor. The controversies of the latest General Conference illustrate this point. The political polarization of the nation is replicated in the life of the church. Conservatives and liberals stake out their positions on the right and the left. They struggle and argue and stereotype each other in order to win and gain power. This is just as true in the world as it is in the life of the church. The trouble with our fights in the church is that in the midst of all the cau- sing, arguing, petitions, protests and votes there are always winners and losers. At the center of all this struggle is ultimately a desire for power cloaked in piety. Christ is used by both sides. All claim to be serving him and striving to keep the church faithful to his commands. But, ultimately, Christ is little more than a means to power for both sides. In the process, the Christ revealed in Scripture, the crucified and risen One, whose command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind…and love your neighbor as yourself” is given little more than lip service. His command to love, his mission to preach good news to the poor, release to the captive, liberty to the oppressed and recovery of sight to the blind, are set aside in favor of continuing struggles for power.

The Itinerancy System

Finally, the system of itinerancy and clergy compensation and benefits serve to disable ministry with the poor. As long as the local church is responsible for paying the pastor’s salary, poor churches will never receive the pastoral leadership they need and deserve. If a church cannot raise the funds needed to pay a full-time salary and benefits package it will be perpetually relegated to part-time status and limited service.

As a pastor gains experience, his or her salary is expected to increase with each year of service. A church in an economically depressed area has little possibility of raising the funds needed to support an experienced full-time pastor. As the system is currently structured, the best qualified pastors are appointed to the churches that can afford to pay their salaries and benefits. This system excludes poor churches from access to the most experienced and talented pastoral leadership a conference has to offer. The system is structured in favor of the affluent suburban churches. The poor are left to gather the crumbs from the tables of the rich.

The United Methodist Church has replaced God’s preferential option for the poor with its own preferential option for the middle-class. This is revealed by the denomination’s favored strategy for new church development. The bulk of its evangelistic and church development resources are devoted to suburban areas. A brief review of evangelism and church growth resources published for use in the church reveals an overwhelming bias toward the development of affluent congregations. Very little is offered as resources for ministry with the poor.

For example, in the 1990s one of the larger annual conferences and other church groups invested over one million dollars in the development of a new congregation in a rapidly growing affluent, predominantly white suburb of a major U.S. city. This money was invested for the development of another affluent, white church while the problems of vio-
lence, drug abuse, unemployment, and homelessness in the poorest neighborhoods of the city continue to worsen.

If an annual conference is serious about God’s option for the poor, if the church believes it is called to work alongside Christ in the world, why is it spending so much money on the affluent? How can investing one million dollars on an affluent community that could support and finance itself be good news to the poor? If the United Methodist Church is ever going to become a vital church it needs to repent of its preferential option for the rich and return to its biblical and Wesleyan roots of God’s option for and ministry with the poor. For it is in ministry with the poor that the affluent will truly encounter Christ.

A Vision for the Future

A church that is hiding behind walls has no future. A church that chooses to isolate itself in comfortable suburbs where the poor can be kept comfortably at a safe distance deserves to decline and die.

The times are telling the church to sit up and take notice of what is happening all around it. It is time for repentance and conversion. It is time for taking stock and finding ways to return to prophetic roots. It is time to live as if there is an alternative way.

Any lasting, significant change is going to come from below. The powers of enculturation are too firmly entrenched at the top of the church’s structures for any meaningful change to take place there. If it is going to happen, it is going to happen according to the way of Christ, from below.

Many models for empowerment and change have been developed. Briefly highlighted are two that offer potential for lasting reform. Both are intended to help the United Methodist Church reclaim and re-tradition the small group ministry that was an essential element of and characteristic of its historic identity. Reclaiming this part of its tradition will help the church discover what being a connectional church really means.

The first is an adaptation of the Wesleyan class meetings known as Covenant Discipleship. The second is the Christian base communities of Central and South America. Both emphasize the need for spiritual discipline and mutual accountability to Christian formation and congregational mission and ministry.

Covenant Discipleship is a movement within The United Methodist Church supported and resourced by the General Board of Discipleship. Covenant Discipleship encourages the formation of small groups focused on mutual accountability and support and guided by the General Rule of Discipleship:

Participation in a Covenant Discipleship group is open to all members of the church. The size of a group is limited to seven people. Pastors are strongly encouraged to be part of a Covenant Discipleship group.

The groups are composed of people who are ready to be accountable for their discipleship. The groups meet together for one hour a week to give an account of their discipleship. Each group draws up its own covenant based upon the General Rule of Discipleship. The covenant includes clauses dealing with the four areas of faithful discipleship: compassion, justice, worship, and devotion. Once the covenant is unani-

With the emphasis on acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion, Covenant Discipleship groups empower people to obey the commands of Christ to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind … and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). The active, balanced faith encouraged by these groups is thoroughly grounded in what Wesley called “holiness of heart and life.” It is expressed through participation in both the works of piety (prayer, worship, and study of the Scriptures) and works of mercy (caring for and serving with the neighbor). Covenant Discipleship is a well balanced approach to discipleship that could be the foundation for a Wesleyan-style revival within The United Methodist Church.

The second model is similar to Covenant Discipleship groups. The Christian Base Communities are a development within the Roman Catholic Churches of Latin America. They are community-based and run by the laity. Like Covenant Discipleship groups, base communities meet together regularly in private homes. However, the only covenant they have is the Bible. The time is spent studying and discussing the Scriptures, singing hymns, prayer and conclude with informal worship. Meetings go on as long as the Spirit leads the people.

I experienced several base community meetings during a visit to Nicaragua in the summer of 1990. The base communities are an effort by the peasants to claim the message of the Gospel for themselves. It is a movement that arose out of poverty and oppression. Base Communities are designed to empower common people to read and study the Bible for

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themselves. From their study of the Bible they clearly see God’s preferential option for the poor.

Encouraged by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, the people organize themselves to provide essential tools for the building of their community; such as literacy training, basic health care, sanitation, and, in some cases, political action. The base communities provide the spiritual support the people need to be empowered to stand up and claim their humanity in the face of institutional oppression. The power of the Holy Spirit enables them to see and understand themselves as daughters and sons of God, created in God’s image.

Both models, Covenant Discipleship groups and Christian Base Communities, can be employed by the people of The United Methodist Church as a means of spiritual awakening, Christian formation, and accountability that are needed for reform and revitalization. They contain within them the Biblical foundation and disciplined structure needed to take the church beyond its own walls and into the world. Covenant Discipleship and Christian Base Community have the potential for leading the people of The United Methodist Church into ministry with the poor. With and among the poor is where this middle class church will once again encounter the living Christ.

Proclaim Good News to the Poor

The key to the revitalization of The United Methodist Church will be found when it steps out of its comfortable walls and repents of its preferential option for the middle class. Revitalization will begin when the church begins to participate in God’s preferential option for the poor. Only then will the flame of the Spirit be rekindled. Only then will the gospel proclaimed by the church become good news to the poor. When the gospel proclaimed and lived by the church is good news to the poor, it will know it is proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some difficult steps need to be taken before this can occur. Structural, evangelistic, and missional priorities need to be reformed. Some suggestions are as follows:

1. Completely re-structure the current system of clergy compensation. No longer allow the local church to pay the pastor’s salary. Establish a uniform and flexible pay scale that will equalize clergy salaries and be disbursed by the annual conference. Under such a system, ability to pay pastoral salary and benefits would no longer be a consideration in appointment making. Poor churches could then be given the pastoral leadership they need rather than the leadership they can afford to pay for.

2. The church needs to focus the use of its mission and ministry resources in areas of the greatest need. Ministry among the inner city and rural poor is neglected because the church is currently more interested in developing churches and ministries in affluent, suburban communities that have greater potential for financial success. Better stewardship of such resources would be to direct them into ministries designed to empower the poor to gain the education, job training, health care, and spiritual well-being they need to overcome the hopelessness and despair that accompany poverty in America today.

3. Encouragement and support of Covenant Discipleship, Christian Base Communities, and other ways of developing discipleship among the laity, along with a commitment to ministry with the poor will reveal the ministry of the poor to the middle class.

These are some suggestions for change that have arisen from the issues raised in this article. If revitalization of The United Methodist Church is going to happen, it will have to arise out of a renewed commitment to God’s preferential option for the poor. The truth of this can be seen in the history of the Methodist movement. The church’s roots are in John Wesley’s ministry with the poor of eighteenth century England. His understanding of the threefoldness of grace compelled him to develop ministries that empowered the poor to experience God’s unconditional love. Prevenient grace shatters any notion that wealth is a sign of God’s favor and blessing. It demystifies wealth and empowers ministry with those upon whose backs wealth is created. Prevenient grace calls the church to be the church of Jesus Christ. Which is to say that Christ calls the church to be for the poor.

The church is to be for the poor because they have an important ministry to those who are not poor. Christ speaks most directly through them. Christ is alive today among the poor. It is in them and with them that he is calling the church to repentance and conversion from the idols and ideologies that have crept in and distracted the church from the business of proclaiming good news to the poor. Christ is calling us to return to our biblical heritage and to live his gospel of grace found in Luke 4:18-19 —

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
Bibliography


Notes


3 See V.H.H. Green, John Wesley (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987).


