

Presentation on “The United Methodist Way”
To the Convocation of Extended Cabinets
Scott J. Jones
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The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The adoption of that statement by the 1996 General Conference was a significant step in the renewal and revitalization of our church. Part of its significance was shown at the 2004 General Conference when the unity resolution made explicit reference to the mission statement as our church’s key unifying theme. It did so with good reason: United Methodism’s beginnings as a separate church are not rooted in doctrinal dispute or ethnic separation. It was a missionary movement among people who were not being reached by the established church of its time. We are genetic missionaries. When we are clear about our mission we thrive. When we are fuzzy about our mission, we die. During my lifetime in the United States, we have been fuzzy, and thus we are dying. Now by the grace of God we are gaining clarity.

For the last three years, the Council of Bishops has decided to focus its energies on the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The concept of transformation was already implicit in “making disciples”, but adding the last phrase helps communicate the ultimate purpose of disciple making: to participate in God’s saving activity for the whole of creation. We Wesleyans hold out a vision of the world

- Where at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord
- Where all God’s children have shoes, an education, and good health,
- Where the poor have good news preached to them
- Where racism and sexism are eradicated
- Where people enjoy equal rights under democratic governments
- Where the earth is cared for as part of God’s good creation
- Where peace reigns and swords are beaten into plowshares
- Where women have equal opportunities with men
- Where every human being hears the gospel and has a genuine opportunity for salvation
- Where the sick are healed and the hungry are fed.

God is in the business of doing these things. O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer’s praise, the glories of my God and King the triumphs of his grace.

And here is the unbelievable part—you and I have been invited by almighty God to participate in the great work of salvation. We participate in God’s saving activities by making disciples: proclaiming the gospel, leading persons to commit their lives to Christ, nurturing disciples, and sending them forth disciples to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ. That’s paragraphs 120 and 122 of our discipline. But how many of our United Methodist people know that mission statement and understand its meaning for their lives? How many of our clergy understand the driving force of mission as the purpose of their leadership of congregations and agencies?

The Council of Bishops has listed living the United Methodist Way as one of its four calls to action. But we know there needs to be much more discussion and discernment about it. Hence, the document you read in preparation for this meeting. I want to address why it’s important to live the United Methodist Way, what it means, and what it looks like?

There are four reasons it is needed. First, we Wesleyans believe this way of salvation is the heart of what God has revealed in the Bible. It is the purpose of our existence as a people of God, called out by God to

participate in God's saving activity. Now I believe that any organization, and especially a worldwide church, needs clarity about its identity and purpose. In an important recent study, titled *Church, Identity and Change: Theological and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, Professors David Roozen and James Nieman, identify the problem of how denominations are facing the challenges of the present time. They come to this conclusion: "the 'problem' is foremost a matter of identity, and only derivatively a matter of the role and process of a denomination's national structures." More than structure, more than decision-making processes, more than culture wars over worship and more than conflict over social issues, it is clarity about identity that will allow a church to thrive. I see this vision pathway as central to our United Methodist answer to this challenge. Who are we? We are people who live the United Methodist Way.

A second reason this is important is our changed context. There are lots of religious groups in the world. Globalization has led to some of the greatest migrations of persons ever seen in the history of the world. Technology and the ease of travel mean the exchange of ideas at unprecedented rates. The result is the multiplication of religious options for everyone. There are more Muslims than Episcopalians in the United States. Resurgent and militant Islam is competing with Christianity in Africa and the Philippines. Atheism is dominant in American university faculties and in the culture of Europe. A man whom I shall call George was raised in the First United Methodist Church in a county seat town in Kansas. When I knew him he had already been a Hare Krishna follower—a kind of populist Hindu sect. George was then practicing Sufism—mystical Islam. Later he converted to a form of Pentacostalism. I can only imagine where George's spiritual journey has led him during the last 30 years. People over 50, whether in Africa, Europe, Asia or North America, probably grew up at a time of limited religious choice. For our children and grandchildren, that is no longer the case.

The third reason for identity clarification is the polarization of American religion. The fundamentalists and atheists have dominated the American religious scene for the last thirty years and I am sick of it. To make matters worse, American religious tensions are now being exported to other countries. In my home state, United Methodism has been in decline for 30 years, while fundamentalist churches have increased dramatically and our cities have become more and more secularized. In a recent book called *What's the Matter with Kansas* a journalist Thomas Frank rips apart the fundamentalist religious right from a liberal point of view. I have my own take on the deep problems facing my state. United Methodists are people of the extreme center. United Methodist conservatives are compassionate. United Methodist liberals are responsible. What's the matter with Kansas? When United Methodism drifts, Kansas suffers. I am ready for United Methodism to grow and play a more significant part in transforming the world.

Fourth, post modernity has brought to many of our young people a deep uncertainty about truth, about the purpose of life, and how best to find happiness. They often don't know where they are going. In a movie called "Garden State" Andrew a young man from a dysfunctional family, meets Samantha, when they are both seeing the same psychiatrist. They spend time together, and it is clear that everyone in the movie is well, they're weird—drug-dealing grave robbers, peeping toms, neurotic families. In fact, the most normal people in the movie are living in a boat at the bottom of a rock quarry. At the end, Andrew gets on an airplane to go back to California. Then he finally realizes he loves Samantha, so he gets off the plane and goes back to find her as she is crying about his departure. Let's watch.

[Garden state clip: 1:32:34 to 1:35:44]

This drives me crazy. In an earlier time, people knew the next steps—you get married, you find work, you raise children, join a church, invest in your community. Now they ask a question and it haunts me: "What do we do?"

The key question that every United Methodist pastor should be able to answer: An unchurched person comes to you and says, "I want to be a United Methodist Christian. I have prayed for forgiveness of my sins, accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, what do I do?"

The answer lies in our very DNA as a people called United Methodist. Our text says we are “centered in God’s Empowering Spirit”. It is all about God. God’s grace. God wants a relationship with you, and asks that you be one of Christ’s disciples. It is all about God’s love and God’s saving grace.

The document entitled “The United Methodist Way” next says that we are “shaped by vital Christian doctrine.” I trust that ever clergy in this room was asked by some bishop,

Have you studied the doctrines of The United Methodist Church?

After full examination, do you believe that our doctrines are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures?

Will you preach and maintain them?

The Bible is our authority. Our standards of doctrine and doctrinal statements explain the way that we read Scripture. Our doctrines are the charter for evangelism, for worship, and for social justice ministries. Our way of reading Scripture as a community of faith is why we offer them Christ; it is why we ordain women as well as men, it is why oppose racism and it is why we pray and offer Holy Communion. It is the deep logic which shapes all we do. This is the basis for our clarity about what it means to be a disciple.

On the website www.extremecenter.org, I have summarized our basic doctrines in ten things every Christian ought to know from a United Methodist point of view.

1. The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.
2. God is triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. “We are saved by grace through faith.”
4. Humanity (both male and female) is created in the image of God.
5. All human beings are sinners (original sin and actual sins) who need of God’s forgiveness and transforming grace.
6. Everyone needs to repent, turning one’s life around toward God, with works appropriate to repentance.
7. Justification is a new, right relationship with God as daughter or son.
8. Being born again is seeing the world in a brand new way.
9. Assurance is confidence in one’s relationship with God.
10. The goal of life is to be a mature Christian, filled with love of God and love of neighbor, especially the poor and marginalized.

Doctrine is the blueprint, the design of the building. We as lay and clergy leaders of the church better know how the building was designed and how it all fits together. But most people don’t need to see the construction documents in order to use the building. At most, they might need a map of it to figure out how to get from one room to another.

What is important is Christ’s claim on people’s lives. It is God’s plan for each human being to be a holy and happy person. How does this happen? Ephesians 2:8-10 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” The way of salvation, enshrined in our doctrine and enabled by our practices of spiritual formation, show the steps, the process by which God’s grace saves us.

Taken as a whole, this way of salvation exhibits the paradox of the gospel, and we Wesleyans have it right. It is the extreme center that includes both justification and sanctification, both grace and good works, both individual salvation and the transformation of the world. It is all about God’s grace saving us and not our works. However, we are saved for the purpose of doing good works, of transforming the world.

What do you tell the unchurched person who asks what do I do? My answer:

- Worship weekly to stay in love with God. There you experience the means of grace, communion, preaching, corporate prayer, and worship itself.
- Meet weekly in a small group for spiritual growth and service. There one finds other means of grace including prayer, Bible study, accountability and Matthew 25 service, so that God can use you to transform the world.
- Grow toward and then beyond tithing. Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.

There will be a diversity of expressions of this United Methodist way. There ought to be. God values diversity as shown in the birth of the church at Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit descended, God did not lead everyone to speak in the same language. Rather, the miracle of Pentecost was the unity of a new body of Christ with an incredible diversity of expression. If Christ is truly going to reach everyone it is going to be done in many different ways.

There is one congregation in Wichita where there are five different worship services in one weekend, with five different music and worship styles. That is just one United Methodist congregation. Consider the Kansas area. We have differences between rural congregations in far western Kansas and the suburbs of Kansas City. Some of our congregations are on the liberal side of the United Methodist spectrum, others are conservative. Some are black, Asian, Anglo, Hispanic/Latino. Some are old and some are young. Add to that now the differences within the United States between Kansas and California, between Texas and Massachusetts. Then go worldwide and consider the differences between Mozambique and the Philippines, between Germany and the Congo. We are a worldwide church, and there should be differences in language, differences about which social justice issues are most pressing, and differences in the musical style which will best allow the people to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in worship.

But there must also be a recognizable, unifying pattern of spirit, doctrine and disciplines. Not only that, when we are all aiming at the same mission, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, when we are united by the same doctrine and discipline, then our diversity is a strength. Let me illustrate with one example from the Doctor of Ministry program at Perkins School of Theology. In a seminar on stewardship, the professor asked an African student how they handled tithing back home. He said, “Well, when a brother is not tithing, the leaders of the congregation go to him. We counsel with him and help him see the error of his ways. We convince him to begin tithing again and thus we restore him to righteousness.” The professor responded, “Yes, that’s how we do it here in the United States as well.” We Americans have much to learn from our African friends about stewardship and evangelism. Europeans can teach us much about the challenges of dealing with a post-modern and post-Christian culture. We Americans have a lot to offer in the way of inclusiveness and the role of women in the church. In all of these areas God’s people have much to learn, but by working together we can enrich each other’s ideas and practices so that we are all better at living the United Methodist Way in our own context.

Perhaps my favorite movie of all time is the Lion King. Simba has been exiled from the pride of lions and is living the good life with two friends. Their motto is “akuna matata:” no worries for the rest of their days. But back home, things are falling apart. He should be taking his place back with his group. But he thinks he cannot go back. Then he has a vision of his dead father Mufasa. Finally Mufasa utters the words that tell Simba he needs to gather his courage, return home and set things right: Simba, remember who you are.

United Methodists: remember who you are. Live the United Methodist Way.