

Models of Methodism and the Unity of the Church: A European Reflection on the Conflict in The United Methodist Church over LGBTQ+ inclusion and affirmation¹

David N. Field

The continuing conflict with The United Methodist Church and its possible outcome has given rise to a host of blogs, papers, articles, and books, one might rightly ask is there is any place for another paper. In this paper I will attempt to approach the issue from a different perspective. Rather than focusing on the ethical issue my focus will be on the diverse models of church that inform the way the conflict on LGBTQ+ inclusion and affirmation is responded to. My hope is that by reflecting on how underlying ecclesiological models shape the contradictory responses to this particular ethical debate we will come to a better understanding of the interaction between ecclesiology and ethics and thus be equipped to engage this and other debates. From a European perspective within the UMC I hope that this will help us as we seek to find a way into the future and for other Methodist and Wesleyan churches, I hope this will contribute to the way that they respond to this and other serious ethical conflicts.

There are two preliminary issues that need to be addressed. The first is one of terminology; as soon as one engages this debate one becomes aware not only that people use diverse terminology but that this diverse terminology is has significance. Recognising that the this is at its core a conflict over people and not an issue the UMCs Commission on a Way Forwarded decided to describe it as a conflict over LGBTQ+ inclusion rather than about sexuality or homosexuality. People representing different and conflicting viewpoints agreed that the issue was the extent to which LGBTQ+ people could be included and affirmed in the life of the church and the conditions for such inclusion and affirmation. Importantly this description of the conflict shifts the debate from an issue of ethics to one of ecclesiology and hence soteriology.

This alternative terminology also enables us to move beyond the inadequate and problematic use of terminology such as conservative, traditionalist, centrist, liberal, and progressive which entail a number of theological, philosophical, and political assumptions that are not necessarily applicable. Putting aside for the purpose of this paper issues relating to gender identity for trans people we can note the following positions within the UMC.

- LGBTQ+ people can only be accepted in the church if they reject their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- LGBTQ+ people can be accepted in the church and are welcome to all offices in the church as long as they are not engaging in sexual relationships with members of the same sex. Same sex marriages should be rejected.
- LGBTQ+ people can be accepted as members of the church but same sex sexual relationships are not affirmed and those engaging in them are not permitted to be office bearers and/or ordained within the church. The performance of same sex marriages should not be permitted. Same sex marriages should be rejected.

¹A revised version of a paper presented at the conference of the Methodist Related Theological Schools in Europe Conference in Varna, Bulgaria 2020

- LGBTQ+ people are welcome and affirmed within the church and those living in faithful monogamous covenanted same sex partnerships are welcome in all offices of the church. It is important to note some further differentiation here; some people accept and affirm marriage between people of the same sex, for others marriage is by definition the union of a man and a woman and therefore same sex partnerships should have a different designation. Diverse legal contexts also shape the designation of covenanted same sex relationships – in some cases laws provide for same sex marriage, in others there is provision for civil partnerships, and in others no legal recognition of same sex partnerships. The same sexual ethical standards should be applied to all relationships whether heterosexual or homosexual.
- LGBTQ+ people are to be welcomed and affirmed in the church and are to be welcomed in all offices of the church. A variety of consensual sexual relationships between adults can be affirmed. The same sexual ethical should be applied to all relationships.

The second important clarification is to recognise that the conflict is not only about the inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people in the church but also about the ethical and theological significance of the debate. We are in conflict not merely because we disagree as on inclusion and affirmation but because different groups within the church weigh the significance of the diversity of views differently. This is an ecclesiological issue in two ways. Firstly – how much diversity can be embraced and or tolerated within a church? Second – how do we determine what are church dividing ethical issues and what are not?

Models of Methodism

Albert Outler in his 1962 Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies paper: “Do Methodists have a Doctrine of the Church?”² Outler’s conclusion was that while Methodists had a functional ecclesiology, they had not developed a detailed theological understanding of the church. While Outler’s argument is open to significant questioning, the importance of functional ecclesiology in shaping the self-understanding of diverse groups in the UMC is important. In this paper I sketch a number of functional ecclesiological models that are present within the UMC. It must be noted that these functional models are not exclusive. Rather they overlap in diverse ways giving a variety of combinations people characteristically using more than one. Nor is the list exhaustive – there are other models at work as well. In particular, a comprehensive account must include African and Filipino models their lack of inclusion here reflects the limitations of my research and that this paper was addressed to a European context. I hope in the future to revise the paper to include at least African models. In my evaluation the six models discuss are very significant in the present controversy.

The UMC as a [(Mainline) US American (Centric)] Denomination

The denomination as an ecclesial structure is a complex product of a particular combination of the influences of the enlightenment, seventeenth century British dissent, and the eighteenth century evangelical revival in the context of Britain and British settler colonies with a particular focus in the newly created United States of America, which was then exported via mission work to other parts of the world.³ A denomination has a number of distinctive features.⁴

² Albert C. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in Dow Kirkpatrick (ed.) *The Doctrine of the Church* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1964).

³ See Richard E. Richey *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013).

⁴ Some of the following is drawn from the work of Richard Richey.

- Denominations are voluntary church structures that assume a context of religious pluralism and toleration.
- Denominations understand themselves to be part of the universal church.
- Denominations recognise that other denominations are also authentic parts of the universal church. They do not claim to be the (only) authentic expression of the universal church.
- Denominations are organised institutional structures with particular histories, ethos, rules, and practices.
- Denominations affirm freedom of religion and do not expect or demand that the state impose their version of Christianity on all people.
- Theologically denominations have five important foundations:
 - Diversity and difference of opinion and practice amongst Christians is normal.
 - People can be genuine faithful Christians even if they hold to different theological beliefs and church practices.
 - The unity of the church is spiritual not institutional, structural, or visible.
 - Cooperation with other denominations and people from other denominations gives expression to the spiritual unity.
 - Separation is not necessarily schismatic and can be a legitimate expression of theological and practical diversity and freedom of conscience.
- The rise of the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century led to a recovery of a greater commitment to visible unity amongst the denominations. This has however declined in the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century.

The understanding of the UMC as a denomination has obvious resonances with the aspects of Wesley's understanding of the Catholic Spirit developed and enculturated in the American context. Further its coming into being as a merger of diverse churches in 1939 and 1968 as part of growing ecumenical awareness was a move beyond denominationalism to give greater institutional expression to the ideal of visible unity of the church. This also gives expression to another aspect of John Wesley's ecclesiology – that is his deep commitment to the visible unity of the church that came to expression in his various reflections on the relationship between Methodism and the Church of England.

Understanding the UMC as a denomination must take into account of the America context of the rise denominationalism and the UMC's predecessor denominations. The history and development of denominations in the US context have been deeply entwined with the social, cultural, and political history of the USA.⁵ This is particularly true of Methodism. It's particular relationship to the USA is implicitly part of the doctrine of UMC and its Methodist Episcopal predecessors. Article 23 of the Articles of Religion thus states:

The President, the Congress, the general assemblies, the governors, and the councils of state, as the delegates of the people, are the rulers of the United States of America, according to the division of power made to them by the Constitution of the United States and by the constitutions of their respective states. And the said states are a sovereign and independent nation, and ought not to be subject to any foreign jurisdiction.

The denominational expressions of Methodism were born in the aftermath of the American revolution and their growth to become major denominations was a product of its adaptability to the dynamics

⁵ This was classically analysed in H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1957)

of the westward expansion of the US. The result is a pattern of mutual influencing with the developing US culture and society being influenced by Methodism and Methodism being influenced by US culture and society.⁶ The entwinement with US Culture took a new turn in the end of nineteenth century as the two Methodist Episcopal Churches become dominant denominations in their respective regions. Methodism became increasingly more respectable and part of the dominant middle-class culture. The more culturally critical aspects of Methodism were embodied in the new holiness denominations and in minority groups within the main Methodist denominations. A motivating factor in the union of Methodist churches in 1939 was the intention of becoming the most influential denomination in the USA.⁷

UMC is unique amongst the mainline denominations in the USA due to its increasing international component. This dimension has given a particular flavour to the UMC's identity as a mainline US denomination. Yet despite the international membership it remains structurally and in much of the ethos of its work a US centric denomination.

The UMC's character as US mainline denomination founded in the context of ecumenical enthusiasm and desire to be a significant influence on US society resulted in a complex instability. The churches that came together in 1939 and 1968 embodied considerable diversity in theology, ethos and practice. Theological pluralism was enshrined within the UMC's *Book of Discipline* but the question of what united and unites this diversity remains largely unanswered. A common appeal to the Wesleyan tradition, the common history of early Methodism or the Doctrinal Standards has not provided sufficient cohesion nor has the appeal to the "Wesleyan quadrilateral". However, the UMC affirms in the preamble to its constitution the importance of visible unity for the Church and expresses that its creation was done in "obedience to the will of our Lord that his people be one".⁸

The model of the UMC as a denomination raises fundamental theological issues. The first is the nature of the relationship between denominations and the universal church. The *Book of Discipline* and the constitution are not particularly clear – The preamble to the constitution describes the church in a way which confuses elements that traditionally relate to visible churches (the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments) with a description of the universal church. The constitution goes on to describe the UMC as "a part of the church universal, which is one body in Christ."⁹ Is a denomination, in this case the UMC, to be understood as part of the church universal or as an expression or manifestation of the church universal? If the UMC is merely part of the universal church then separation and division is not inherently schismatic for one is dividing oneself from a part of the universal church and creating another part. Both parts remain part of the universal church and are united spiritually. However, the statement about the importance of the unity of the church and that the UMC was founded in "obedience to the will of our Lord" suggest that the UMC as a denomination is to be understood to be a manifestation of the universal church and not merely a part. The creation of the UMC gives expression, in a broken and limited way, to the unity of the one body of Christ. In

⁶ See for example Nathan Hatch and John H. Wigger, *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Nashville: Kingsway, 2001)

⁷ See Morris L. Davis, "The Methodist Merger of 1939: 'Successful' Unification" in GBHEM *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018)

⁸ Preamble to the Constitution, *Book of Discipline 2016*, 25.

⁹ Constitution Article IV, *Book of Discipline 2016*, 26.

this case separation and division is disobedience to “the will of our Lord” and a distortion and obscuring of the manifestation of universal church.

A second important theological issue is that the model of the UMC as a denomination emphasises that one can recognise the authenticity of the Christian commitment, faith and life of others even when one has severe theological and ethical disagreements. When this is combined with an affirmation that a denomination is a manifestation of the one body of Christ it should lead to a commitment to be as closely united with each other without violating each other’s conscience

A third important relates to the international character of the UMC. This international character is perceived in diverse ways in the present conflict over LGBTQ+ inclusion and affirmation however it is important to recognise its theological significance. If the denomination is understood to be a manifestation or expression of the universal church then UMC has a particular opportunity to manifest the universal church in a way that other mainline US denominations do not. Its international character gives expression to the transnational character of the universal church. This however, has as its consequence that the way this international character is structured cannot be a matter of mere pragmatic consideration nor an expression of the historic dominance of the US branch of the church. Rather it must seek to embody the body of Christ in which there is no longer Greek or Jew, barbarian, Scythian, American, Congolese, Russian, Roma, Filipino. The continuing US centricity distorts the manifestation of the universal church.

In conclusion we note the significance of the American identity of the UMC despite some attempts to move from this. This can be seen in a number of ways, not the least in its decision-making structures and processes. However, one evaluates the content of the recently released “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation”, it is significant that while the process of negotiation was chaired by a bishop from Africa and there were representatives from the Philippines and Europe the key players were people linked to the various US based caucus groups – a recognition that these were the people with the power to make any agreement work or fail. Equally significantly is the way in which the divisions in the (US) UMC parallel the socio-political divide in the USA. While there is not a complete overlap, particularly at a leadership level, the identification of evangelical, with socio-political conservatism, and the dominant conservative wing of the Republican party, and theologically liberal/progressive with US socio-political liberalism and the Democratic party is clear in numerous social media posts, blogs and in some cases the websites of caucus groups. Different views on the inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people often line up with these cultural-political divisions. All sides claim to be counter cultural followers of Jesus and accuse their opponents of cultural conformity; from the outside it appears to me that there is a deep cultural conformity in all sides it is just that they are conformed to different dimensions of US culture and are blind to it.

The UMC as a European Free Church (with International Connections)

The model of a European “Free Church” is popularly used to encompass a wide variety of Christian churches and religious organisations in Europe. These churches have diverse histories, theological emphases and practices. Some are of local origin, others are imports from other countries. Some are autonomous national institutions and others have a variety of international connections. They share a number of common features that are significant for understanding the UMC in Europe.

Firstly, they came into being in Europe in the context of the post reformation ecclesiastical territorial division of Europe. This created churches which were:

- Territorial churches – the Church was established and linked to a particular political territory.
- State related churches – while there were some structural differences, in most cases, the territorial churches (Protestant or Catholic) historically had a strong relationship to the state.
- People’s churches – the territorial churches assumed that all people living in the particular territory were faithful Christians and members of their particular church.

In the contemporary context the formal relationship between the church and the state has often been dissolved. Increasing secularisation and decreasing membership has eroded their identity as “People’s Churches”. However, these territorial churches still have relatively high social status and respectability.

Secondly, the free churches were established in direct contrast to the territorial churches. This gave rise to a number of key features of their identity.

- They rejected the idea that each territory should have only one church.
- They rejected any state influence, control, or interferences in the life of the church.
- They assumed that significant numbers of people who were members of the territorial churches had no living faith and were hence to be evangelised.

Thirdly, the free churches strongly emphasised the importance of personal voluntary commitment to Christ and to the local congregation.

Fourthly, there was a tendency to regard the territorial churches as insufficient, and in certain contexts as lifeless, and theologically corrupt. In contrast these churches regarded themselves as more authentic manifestations of the universal church due to their doctrinal integrity, their spiritual life, their conversionist emphasis, and their evangelising practice.

Fifthly, both from within and without the free churches were understood to be counter cultural. In various countries and in different times they were subject to legal restrictions (as is the case in Russia today). They were regarded in the popular culture as extremist and sect like. The free churches defined themselves against the dominant culture in which they lived. This contrast was in some cases expressed in particular behavioural markers – such as abstinence from alcohol.

Sixth, free churches, such as the UMC, that are part of international connections stand in contrast to the national or regional identification of territorial churches thus reemphasising the critique of the identification of church with the people of a particular territory.

While the UMC and its predecessors were not unique in being free churches with international connections it is probably unique in being linked to churches in the USA which were characterised by many of the entwinements with the dominant culture and a theological breadth that in Europe are characteristic of the territorial churches. These international connections have been given different significance in different historical contexts. In particular contexts the relationship with an American Church has been politically problematic. In recent years the importance of the inter-European connections has played a greater part.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a significant bifurcation in the identity of the UMC as a European free church. In the aftermath of the second world war and the cultural changes of the 1960’s and 70’s the UMC in significant parts of Western Europe moved towards greater socio-cultural integration. An emphasis on ecumenicism led to closer relationships with the territorial churches

which were themselves experiencing significant changes. The connection with the UMC in the US with its greater theological breadth and involvement in the ecumenical movement encouraged such a rapprochement. In some countries the UMC came to be regarded as a “respectable” free church. The increasingly secular culture has progressively marginalised all forms of Christianity. The growing “respectability” and socio-cultural integration raises significant challenges to the self-understanding and mission of the UMC. In contexts where personal freedom is emphasised and proselytism is strongly rejected there are significant cultural restraints on evangelism. In some parts of Western Europe this move to the cultural and religious centre has not taken place and the UMC has tended to identify itself more with other evangelical free churches than with the territorial churches. In certain contexts, there has been a mixture with some congregations aligning themselves more with dominant culture and churches and others with evangelical free churches.

In Eastern Europe the advent of communism and the cold war intensified the counter-cultural ethos of the churches. While there were variations in the different countries, being an active member of the UMC was costly and brought with it various forms of social rejection, persecution, and pressure from the state authorities. Faithfulness to the gospel in the face of opposition became an embedded element in the identity of the UMC and other churches in Eastern Europe. The post-communist era brought new social, political, cultural, and religious challenges. In some countries there has been a revival of the influence of the territorial churches. This has contributed to greater levels of cooperation between free churches. The influence of western socio-cultural liberalism has had a complex reception with elements seen to be degenerate and dangerous to the national cultural identity. The promise of economic well-being through capitalism has not been fulfilled. In most cases the ending of the communist era religious restrictions has opened the way for evangelism and church planting.

The different ways the model of the UMC as a European free church is embodied in different parts of Europe. This model of the church emphasises the counter cultural identity of the church. The church is the proleptic manifestation of God’s eschatological reign within the present world. The conformity of the church to the dominant socio-cultural and political order that occurred in many European territorial churches is to be rejected, (as is its conformity to powerful US socio-culture movements). At the same time, it must be recognised that merely being counter cultural is of no theological significance when the differences and boundary markers between the dominant socio-cultural order and the church are arbitrary or without biblical and theological warrant. In the conservative evangelical culture that I grew up in South Africa in the 1970’s, Christians demonstrated their counter cultural identity by not drinking, smoking, or dancing. Supporting apartheid was considered to be of no relevance, further those who insisted that opposing apartheid should be an expression of Christian non-conformity were likely to be condemned as conforming to worldly politics. One of the reasons that the UMC moved closer to the dominant culture in parts of Western Europe was the perception that some of the boundary markers were not or no longer faithful expressions of God’s requirements. The coming eschatological reign of God stands in a complex relationship of continuity, discontinuity, and transformation with the present creation. The church is called to faithfully discern where loyalty to the gospel of its crucified and resurrected Lord calls for distinction, separation, and even confrontation with elements of the dominant socio-cultural order and where that order can be accepted and even affirmed.

The question ought not to be whether or not the church should be counter cultural but where and in respect to what issues should it be counter cultural. To return to the present church conflict, are those

who argue that: LGBTQ+ people are welcome and affirmed within the church and those living in faithful monogamous covenanted same sex partnerships are welcome in all offices of the church; conforming illegitimately to the dominant western European socio-cultural order or are they giving expression to the gospel in a pastoral and missional context. Or are those who argue that: LGBTQ+ people can be accepted in the church and are welcome to all offices in the church as long as they are not engaging in sexual relationships with members of the same sex; conforming to aspects of their dominant their socio-cultural or are they being faithful to biblical teaching on sexuality. To argue for the first position in Tunisia would be a dangerous counter countercultural act to do so in Denmark would be acting in a way that resonates with the culture.

Methodism as a Connection of Holiness Societies

It could be argued that at the centre of any Methodist ecclesiology is a tension between Methodism's historical origins as a connection of societies dedicated to seeking the renewal of the Church of England and spreading scriptural holiness "among people of every denomination"¹⁰, and its transformation into an independent church. The tension, however, is already present in Wesley's writings. On the one hand, regarded the early Methodist societies as an expression or manifestation of the church, on the other, he viewed them as religious societies bound together by their relationship with him. Becoming an early Methodist meant willingly submitting to Wesley's authority and obligating oneself to the *General Rules*.¹¹ When Methodism became a church and Wesley was no longer the leader the question became to what extent should the characteristic features of the Methodist societies continue into the church. It is important to note that in some places Wesley's description of the church appears to be a description of a holiness society. In his sermon "The Reformation of Manners" he describes the church:

On the other hand, men who did fear God, and desire the happiness of their fellow-creatures, have, in every age, found it needful to join together, in order to oppose the works of darkness, to spread the knowledge of God their Saviour, and to promote his kingdom upon earth. Indeed He himself has instructed them so to do. From the time that men were upon the earth, he hath taught them to join together in his service, and has united them in one body by one Spirit. And for this very end he has joined them together, "that he might destroy the works of the devil;" first in them that are already united, and by them in all that care round about them.

This is the original design of the Church of Christ. It is a body of men compacted together, in order, first, to save each his own soul; then to assist each other in working out their salvation; and, afterwards, as far as in them lies, to save all men from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and set up the kingdom of Christ. And this ought to be the continued care and endeavour of every member of his Church; otherwise he is not worthy to be called a member thereof, as he is not a living member of Christ.¹²

¹⁰ Sermon 107 "On God's Vineyard" §2.8 in *Works of Wesley* 3:511.

¹¹ See *The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies* in *Works of Wesley* 9:69-75. In his *Journal* entry of November 23, 1779, Wesley records that a Mr. McNab did not want to submit to Wesley's system of appointments and was informed by Wesley that he could only become a preacher if he agreed to submit, in *Works of Wesley* 23: 155.

¹² Sermon 52 "The Reformation of Manners" § 2 in *Works of Wesley* 2:302.

This tension intensified as Methodism in the US moved towards greater respectability and lost its strongly counter cultural dynamic in the nineteenth century.¹³ As Methodist churches adopted more of the features of other churches and sought to become socially influential so the distinct forms and disciplines of the societies tended to recede. In the nineteenth century in America the resulting tension led to the creation of new holiness denominations. In recent years there have been moves to re-emphasise holiness as central to Methodist identity and with that to recover some of the features of holiness societies that had been lost over time. A key aspect of this has been the recovery of small groups patterned on Wesley's classes and bands. It is important to note that this recovery does not directly reflect particular perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusion or on other theological dividers within the UMC.¹⁴ In the increasing secular contexts of both the USA and Europe where cultural Christianity and nominal church membership is declining the dream of being an influential denomination integrated into the social cultural context is quickly dissipating. Hence a recovery of the ideal of Methodism as a connection of holiness societies becomes more appealing. Can Methodism become a movement characterized by visible holiness again?

While this vision is alive a fundamental question remains: What does visible holiness look like? Equally importantly must visible holiness look the same in different cultures and contexts? This brings us back to the conflict over LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church. Kevin Watson, for example, has argued that visible holiness entails a detailed and specific account of what holiness requires. For Watson this must include one clear position on LGBTQ+ inclusion and marriage.¹⁵ For Watson that is the affirmation that that sexual relationships can only be affirmed within the context of marriage as the union of a man and a woman. In a connection of holiness societies structural unity is only possible with people who share the same understanding of what visible holiness requires. Hence, for Watson people who disagree with a different position on sexuality and marriage must form their own connection of holiness societies with a different set of standards of what visible holiness looks like. This does not necessarily mean that people with different views on the specifics of holiness are not Christians or not part of the universal church but it is to insist that Methodist churches must be clear and specific as to what holiness requires even when it recognizes that other faithful Christians will for various reasons have come to different ethical conclusions. Here as in the model of the UMC as a denomination there is an affirmation that faithful Christians will have different theological and ethical view but there is a strong insistence of the correctness of a particular understanding of holiness.¹⁶ It must also be noted that in some cases the insistence that a particular stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion is the only legitimate stance leads to regarding those who differ as living in conscious disobedience to clear commands of scripture and thus are not embodying holiness.

¹³ See Kevin M. Watson *Old or New School Methodism: The Fragmentation of a Theological Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

¹⁴ See for example, David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002); Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2014); Kevin M. Watson and Scott T. Kisker, *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist: Rediscovering our Evangelistic Vision*, (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008) and from a different context Peter Storey *Are we Yet Alive? Revisioning our Wesleyan Heritage in the New South Africa* (Cape Town, Methodist Publishing House, 2004).

¹⁵ Kevin M. Watson "Holiness of Heart and Life': Unity, Holiness, and the Mission of the Church" in GBHEM *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality*, 435-457.

¹⁶ In addition to Watson, "Holiness", see Scott T. Kisker, "The Unity of the Church of God, the body of Christ" in GBHEM *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality*, 247-284.

Historically Methodism described the specifics of visible holiness in terms of the *General Rules* which were explications of three principles – “Do no harm, do good, and keep the ordinances of God. These in turn are best understood as a way of expounding the command to love God and one’s neighbour. While the *General Rules* do set out the specifics of visible holiness within the context of eighteenth-century Britain, they are by no means a comprehensive list of specific behaviour. They deal with specific issues that Wesley thought were clear requirements for the early Methodist. Implicitly they allow that there are areas where Methodists were free to disagree as to what holiness required. Wesley, for example argued that eating blood was clearly forbidden in scripture but at the same time refused to let this become an issue for excluding people from Methodist societies.¹⁷ Further he was, on occasion, prepared to accept variations in compliance with the *General Rules*.¹⁸ Since Wesley Methodists have permitted a diversity of opinions on some ethical issue but not on others. This raises three further questions.

The first is on what basis are such decisions made. As I argued above the *General Rules* are best understood as explications of the meaning of the double love commandment in the context of eighteenth century Britain. Hence, I would suggest that the closer an ethical issue comes to the core of the commandment to love God and one’s neighbour the more significant it becomes. Eating blood was not as significant as drinking distilled alcohol although the bible refers to the first and not the second. Why? Because in Wesley’s perspective any involvement in the production and distribution of distilled alcohol was supporting an industry that destroyed people’s lives. It must also be noted that as times and contexts change so some of the rules become obsolete or degenerate into mere ritual boundary markers. Hence, in the nineteenth century the ban on drinking distilled alcohol was expanded to all alcohol largely because of the destructive impact it had on the lives of the poor. However, in many contexts, but not all, it has lost this significance and became merely a symbolic boundary marker.

The second issue is how specific and detailed should such rules be and how do they relate across cultures and contexts. The danger is that in making too many detailed and specific rules Christian freedom is lost and the pursuit of holiness degenerated into a legalistic obedience to rules. Further what is appropriate in one culture might not be appropriate in others. Thus, for example, when Methodists began to do mission work in Southern Africa they required that their converts adopt Western clothes as the outward sign of an inward change. This was of particular relevance to young women. In nineteenth century Britain for a young woman to bare her breasts was shameful and associated with prostitution, promiscuity, and sexual depravity. However, in Southern African cultures there was no shame involved and, in some cases, it was a sign of purity. It is worth noting that Wesley’s vision of specific holiness included the acceptance of diverse opinions and active love towards those one disagreed with. He records in his *Journal* cases where he excluded people from Methodist societies because of the way they fought over theological positions.

The third issue is who makes this decision? In early Methodism it was John Wesley, sometimes after consultations with his preachers, but the final decision was his. This role was passed onto the various Methodist conferences which were intended to be places of consultation and decision making; a conciliar process. However, in the UMC and its predecessors, as the conferences grew genuine discussion and consultation degenerated into parliamentary processes and decisions by majority vote

¹⁷ See *Journal* of October 29, 1745 *Works of Wesley* 20:97 & 98 and *NT Notes* Acts 15: 29.

¹⁸ See the letter to Wesley from Thomas Willis and Wesley’s comments on it in *Works of Wesley* 26:116-118.

modelled on the US political system. More genuine conciliar processes do still take place where conferences are smaller or where structures are deliberately set in place to promote consultative decision making. In the UMC, the European conferences are better models of this than some of the US conferences and General Conference. In context of socio-cultural diversity in an international denomination there is a greater need for a genuine conciliar process and allowance for regional and local diversity.

In conclusion, the recovery of the historical identity of Methodists as communities of people seeking to live lives of characterised by holiness of heart and life is a positive development and of particular relevance in our increasingly secular society. The challenge is how should holiness be expressed in the relation to the conflict over LGBTQ+ inclusion?

United Methodism as a Confessional Church

A key question that has emerged within the UMC since its formation is whether or not it is to be understood as a creedal church with a clearly defined set of doctrines that should be confessed and taught within and by the church. The Confessing Movement in the UMC argues, for example:

The Confessing Movement is a witness by United Methodist lay women and men, clergy, and congregations who with one voice pledge our confident allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ according to “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The faith of which Jude wrote is the Church’s apostolic faith as witnessed to in Holy Scripture. This heritage centers on Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, and on his life, death, resurrection, ascension, gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, and promised return in the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

This faith is a gift from God. It is not an ideology we invent or imagine out of our own desires and experiences. The Church has a written deposit of doctrine and teachings which binds the conscience of the faithful to the whole of God’s self-revelation in history as read in Holy Scripture, summarized in creeds and confessions, updated and extended in the official body of our doctrinal materials, and praised in liturgical language that remains true to the apostolic witness. We affirm that a faithful Church lives in continuity with that apostolic Christianity. To minimize or ignore this deposit is to deny and distort our identity as a Church.¹⁹

In this understanding authentic confession of faith in Jesus as Lord is integrally bound up with affirmation of a definite set of doctrines. It is further argued that UMC has clear doctrinal standards which must be subscribed to and enforced. These doctrines describe the identity of the UMC and the unity of the UMC is constituted by a common adherence to them. For some within the UMC the present conflict over LGBTQ+ inclusion is a symptom of a deeper divisions over substantial doctrine set out in the doctrinal standards. This division is between those who hold to a strict subscription and enforcement of the standards and those who see them as describing a broad historical ethos of the church that is open to a wide variety of interpretations.

¹⁹ “What is the Confessing Movement” <https://www.confessingumc.org/our-story>. See also William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) and Riley B. Case, *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 258-263.

This argument raises a number of issues.

The first is what are the doctrinal standards? Due to a lack of historical clarity there have emerged two schools of thought. The one is that the standards are the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. The other is that the standards also include Wesley's *Standard Sermons* and the *Notes Upon the New Testament*. If it includes the *Standard Sermons*, the question of which sermons are to be included in the *Standard Sermons* remains.

The second is how the authority of these standards be should understood and implemented. Historically different theological traditions have understood the function of their doctrinal standards differently and so the question of whether there is a Methodist and Wesleyan theology of doctrinal standards remains.

The third is that the doctrinal standards, even if limited to the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith are very different theological genres. If we add to this the *Standard Sermons* and the *Notes Upon the New Testament* this becomes more complex.

An illuminating way to address these issues is to look at the history of the UMC doctrinal standards.

In June 1744 the first Methodist Conference was held in London to consider: What to teach? How To teach? What to do? During this conference a significant issue was how the early Methodists understood themselves as members of the Church of England. In the minutes the following questions are recorded:

Q.4. How are we to defend the doctrines of the Church?

A. By our preaching and living.

Q.5 Do the 8th, 13th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 21st, 23rd, and 27th Articles agree with Scripture.

A. We will consider.

Q. How shall we bear most effectual testimony against that part of the clergy who either preach or live contrary to the doctrine of the Church of England.²⁰

This gathering of clergy and lay members of the Church of England clearly regard themselves as faithful members of the Church and defenders of its doctrines. They discuss how they are to defend the doctrines of the Church and act against those who preach and live contrary to doctrines. And, with no sense contradiction, they question the validity of some of the Articles of Religion that set out these doctrines. In "Ought we to Separate from the Church of England" (1755) Wesley describes the "doctrine of the Church, contained in the Articles and Homilies" as the product of "fallible men" and declares that he holds them in very high esteem but he would not "undertake to defend every particular expression in them."²¹ In 1784 Wesley, still a priest of the Church of England, edited and abridged the Articles of Religion for the Methodists in America he omitted all of the articles questioned at the 1744 conference except the 16th and the 27th, both of which he revised. The revisions to the 16th were such as to substantially change its meaning. In addition, he omitted another eight articles and revised others. In the article on the church he retained the statement, "in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered" but in his sermon "Of the Church" written in 1785 that he would "not undertake to defend the accuracy of this definition."²² Clearly Wesley did

²⁰ "The London Conference of June 25-29, 1744" Minutes June 27th in *Works of Wesley* 10:134

²¹ "Ought we to Separate from the Church of England" § 2.2, in *Works of Wesley* 9:569

²² Sermon 74 "Of the Church" §19 in *Works of Wesley* 3:52.

not think that he, as member of the clergy of the Church of England committed to preaching, defending, and living according to the doctrine of the Church of England, was required to agree with and teach everything contained in its Articles of Religion.

In America the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church affirmed Wesley's articles and added the 23rd Article on the government of the United States. In 1809 the Evangelical Association adopted a revised German translation as its own Articles of Religion. In 1815 the United Brethren in Christ adopted a Confession of faith. All three denominations added rules preventing changes and additions to their standards of doctrine. – the Methodists in 1808, the Evangelicals in 1839, and the United Brethren, after a process of revision and development, in 1841. The articles became the unchangeable foundations of the denomination. All three wanted to prevent the very thing that Wesley did with Church of England Articles. Between 1864 and 1916 agreement with the Articles was a requirement of membership in the Methodist Episcopal Church. However, despite the strict formulations the focus of Methodism was on practical Christianity rather than on doctrinal precision with the articles being considered to be the summary of common doctrinal heritage of Protestantism.²³ From the end of the nineteenth century there is a gradual movement away doctrinal precision which continued and intensified in the twentieth century.

As noted above, while the Methodist Episcopal Church and then Evangelical Association adopted the genre of Articles of Religion taken from the Church of England, then United Brethren adopted the genre of a Confession of Faith – possibly reflecting its Reformed and Anabaptist roots. When the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren united, they adopted a confession of faith which drew on the doctrinal statements of both denominations. When the UMC was formed the Confession and the Articles were ruled by the Judicial Council to be “congruent, if not identical in their doctrinal perspective and not in conflict”²⁴ thus circumventing the restrictive rule. However, what was not recognised was that the difference in genre is more than one of style but reflects different understandings of the nature of doctrinal standards. A confession of faith in the first person expresses personal commitment to and affirmation of the particular doctrines as expressions of one's loyalty to Christ. Articles of religion express the consensus of the church with regard to key doctrinal issues. If you add the *Standard Sermons* and the *Notes upon the New Testament* as doctrinal standards the issue of doctrinal precision becomes more complex.

The understanding that the United Methodist Church is confessional has significant roots in the 19th Century but by the time of the formation of the UMC in 1968 it is only one stream within Methodism. More significantly, how does a confessional understanding relate to the theology of John Wesley given the way that he approached the Articles of the Church of England. The following points with regard to Wesley's understanding of doctrine ought to be noted.²⁵

- One must not equate doctrinal orthodoxy and the affirmation of correct doctrine with saving faith. A person might have genuine saving faith but very incorrect doctrine. The extent to which Wesley was prepared to affirm this can be seen in his comments about Thomas Firmin

²³ See K. James Stein, “Doctrine, Theology, and Life in the Foundational Documents of The United Methodist Church” in *Quarterly Review* 8:3 (1988), 42-61.

²⁴ Quoted in Russel E. Richy, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 460.

²⁵ I have dealt with Wesley's understanding of doctrinal statements in *Bid our Jarring Conflicts Cease: A Wesleyan Theology and Praxis of Church Unity* (Nashville: Founderey Books, 2017), 87-115, the following is based on the detailed discussion there.

– a Unitarian. He published an extract from “The life of Mr Thomas Firmin” in the *Arminian Magazine* with the following preface: “I was extremely struck at reading the following Life; having long settled it in my mind, that the entertaining wrong notions of the Trinity was inconsistent with real piety. But I cannot argue against matter of fact. I dare not deny that Mr Firmin was a pious man, although his notions of the trinity were quite erroneous.”²⁶

- All doctrinal statements stand under the authority of and subject to the critique of scripture.
- All doctrinal statements are the product of fallible human beings and thus subject to limitation, confusion, error, and mistake.
- One must distinguish between the theological reality and the fallible human doctrinal description of it.
- The same doctrine can be expressed in diverse verbal formulations.
- One must distinguish between doctrinal statements which relate to the fundamental realities of the Christian faith and those which relate to matters which are indifferent. Wesley recognised that what some regard as a matter of indifference others regarded as a dangerous mistake. For him the difference is to be determined by whether a statement is compatible with “a love to Christ and a genuine work of grace”.²⁷
- People are responsible before God for their doctrinal beliefs – these must be held in good conscience and no one must be coerced to affirm doctrinal statements or particular practices against their conscience.

Wesley’s understanding of doctrine is compatible with the way he handles the Articles of Religion. They were fallible human propositions subject to evaluation by scripture. The core doctrinal understanding contained in them can be affirmed in good conscience even when one disagreed with the way it was expressed and with statements that did not relate directly to the core. No one should be pressurised to make statements against their consciences hence, I would argue, the genre of Articles of Religion is more consistent with Wesley’s theology than that of a confession of faith. Genuine “faith working in love” is more important than detailed precise conformity to the details of the Articles of Religion. In many ways this reflects the origins of Methodism as a renewal movement within the Church of England promoting scriptural holiness rather a product of doctrinal and theological controversy.

Finally, is United Methodism to be understood as a confessional movement? Such an approach, in my opinion correctly affirms the importance of doctrine, but over emphasises doctrinal precision and detail and fails to allow for Wesleyan insights into the fallibility of doctrine even when it might stand in conformity with nineteenth century Methodism. However, Wesley emphasis is, in my opinion, not sufficient. His distinction between doctrines that deal with the fundamental core of the faith and those that deal with matters of indifference is important but leaves open the question as to how and who determines what belongs to the core. The distinction between the theological reality and its doctrinal description and the recognition that there are diverse ways of expressing the doctrine are important but how and who determines what particular expressions are faithful descriptions of the reality and which are not.

²⁶ Works of Wesley (Jackson), 14:293.

²⁷ Letter to John Newton May 14, 1765 in *Works of Wesley* 27:427.

United Methodism as a Generously Orthodox Church

An attempt to affirm both the importance of doctrine and to affirm a doctrinal core without insisting of detailed doctrinal precision and allowing for some diversity of interpretation is the model of the United Methodism as church characterised by generous orthodoxy.²⁸ In the present conflict this approach has been argued as a way of strongly affirming that the doctrinal integrity of UMC is compatible with diverse views on the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion. This perspective calls for a clear description of the doctrinal core and a stricter enforcement of compliance with that core combined with a greater flexibility with regard to other issues.²⁹

Unity is located in the doctrinal core which is understood to include the central affirmations of the Christian faith set out in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, key aspects of historic Protestantism, and the Wesleyan understandings grace and holiness. It could also include a statement of key ethical principles that are rooted in the doctrinal core. The doctrinal core describes a theology of grace. God's gracious love extends to all, promises to all the possibility of transformation into the imager of the God of love, and envisages the church to be the embodiment of God's grace and love to the world. God's grace transforms human beings so that they are turned from their self-centredness to become God centred and directed towards the good of others. It unites the believer to Christ and thus simultaneously to fellow Christians who are very different from each other – so that one's identity as a Christian is constituted by being in relationship with others who are different from oneself. Christians, by virtue of being Christians are placed in unity with people with a diversity of theological views and ethical practices.³⁰ They are called to recognise God's transforming work within and through such people recognising that God's gracious transformation of a person does not bring about theological unanimity.³¹ Hence, this model has a vision of church which includes people of diverse and even contradictory theological and ethical positions but who embrace the common doctrinal and ethical core and who graciously live in community with each other. Living in such community becomes a means of grace as its members grow in love for each other. The visible unity of the church is of major significance as the it is the embodiment and witness to God's gracious transforming and uniting love. This model motivates Christians to seek as close unity as possible, however the emphasis on grace also requires that no one's conscience is violated. Denominations and relationships within denominations must be structured in such a way that no one is coerced or pressured to act against their conscience. The affirmation that God's grace draws people into a dynamic relationship with Christ and with others united to Christ inspires and requires a spirit of ecumenicism that seeks greater unity with other denominations and confessions.

In relation to the present conflict within the UMC this model seeks to include people with diverse and conflicting views on LGBTQ+ inclusion to structure itself so that people are not forced to act against their consciences. However, for some who regard all same sex sexual relationships as sinful this very inclusiveness is experienced as exclusive for, they cannot in good conscience be part of a church that,

²⁸ See Kenneth Carter *Embracing the Wideness: The Shared Convictions of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

²⁹ See for example Ted A. Campbell "Grounds for Unity in the United Methodist Church and a Proposed Way Forward" in in GBHEM *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality*, 113-131

³⁰ This is a central theme running through Tom Greggs *Dogmatic Ecclesiology* vol. 1 *The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019).

³¹ See Wesley's sermons "A Caution Against Bigotry" and "The Catholic Spirit" in *Works of Wesley* 2: 76-95

for example, ordains people living in such relationships. Others, would argue that the full inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people are a direct outworking of the central doctrinal and ethical core of a theology of grace, and must be mandated throughout the denomination.

Methodism as a Movement of Liberation

The argument that the full inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people should be central to the UMC has been strongly advocated by those who view Methodism as a movement of liberation. Various forms of liberation theology have influenced sectors of the UMC and other Methodist churches since the 1970's and some have argued that there is a deep resonance between key aspects of liberation theology and the Wesleyan and Methodist tradition.³² For the purpose of this paper it is important to note the following features of a liberationist perspective.

- The gospel proclaims God's integral and holistic liberation of oppressed, exploited and marginalised people.
- Jesus proclaimed a message of justice for the oppressed, the exploited and the excluded which entails the radical restructuring of society.
- In Jesus God identifies and stands in solidarity with poor, exploited, excluded, and oppressed people.
- Justice and injustice are intersectional – diverse forms of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion are interlinked with each other with some people living at the intersection of diverse forms of injustice. Hence the pursuit of justice needs to centre on these intersections.
- The gospel calls those who benefit from exploitation, marginalisation, and oppression to repent and enter into relationships of radical solidarity with the victims of society.
- The church is to be called to be the community in which God's inclusive love and transforming justice is embodied in its life and its structures.
- The church is called not only to serve the excluded and exploited but to be with and amongst them.
- The church is called to follow Christ to the margins so that the marginalised become the centre of its life.

In this perspective the unity of the church is not the institutional unity of a denomination with diverse views and practices but the engaged and missional unity of standing in solidarity with the excluded and the victims placing them in positions of leadership and decision making. Such unity is not compatible with allowing parts of the church to continue to practice oppression and exclusion. Thus, in the present conflict within the UMC the task is to create a church in which all forms of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion are overcome. There can be no compromise in this task and all forms of gradualism must be rejected. This requires that ending of all discrimination against LGBTQ+ people within the church, affirming the leadership of LGBTQ+ people, and for non-LGBTQ+ people to enter into solidarity with them and accept their leadership in the struggle.

³² Theodore W. Jennings, Jr, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), M. Douglas Meeks, (ed) *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), Joerg Rieger and John J. Vincent, (eds) *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004), and Joerg Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: Foundry Books, 2018)

In our contemporary world there a multifaceted diversity of forms and locations of injustice and complex networks and systems of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion.³³ While it is possible in some cases to map the intersections of some of this diversity and complexity in other cases there appears to be no intersectionality. What for example is the intersectionality of the discrimination of Roma in Europe and the suffering of rural women in Congo? In relation to the church who are the excluded, exploited, and oppressed who are to be placed at the centre of the life of Methodism. The UM Forward movement for example refers to Persons of Colour, Queer and Trans people it also refers to indigenous women and the victims of colonisations.³⁴ However the emphasis falls on Persons of Colour, Queer and Trans people reflecting the typical US identity politics. If the UMC is a truly international denomination then it needs to be recognised that diverse sections of the church will need to centre different exploited, marginalised, and oppressed groups. So, in many parts of Europe that would be centring Roma people or various migrant groups. Internationally, given our global dependence on computer technology (within and outside the church), we ought to be centring the rural people in the Congo where many of the resources needed for the manufacture of computers, smart phones, and other electronic devices are sources in a situation of conflict, poverty, and corruption. The UMC is present in, with, and for these people but in many cases these deeply exploited and oppressed people have conservative views on LGBTQ+ inclusion and affirmation. Once the diversity and complexity of injustice, exploitation, and exclusion is recognised then a perfectionist liberationist understanding of the church is not possible given the awareness of complicity in diverse forms of exploitation, exclusion, and oppression.

Further it is not clear how creating a separate liberationist Methodist denomination serves to bring justice for LGBTQ + people in other forms of Methodism.

Conclusion

Despite the conspicuous absence of an analysis of African and Filipino models of Methodism, the above analysis has demonstrated that what is at stake in the present debates and controversies in the United Methodist Church is not only an issue of divergent ethical perspectives but also divergent models of what it means to be a Methodist Church. This the challenge before us is what kind of Methodist Church do we want to be?

³³ See my "On (Re)centering the Margins: A Euro-African perspective on the 'Option for the Poor'" in Joerg Rieger (ed), *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Theology* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 45-69.

³⁴ See the "Loved and Liberated" document

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7fa689c3c16a93686201f4/t/5cf47770e7967500010c6e10/1559525233196/LOVE+AND+LIBERATED+-+Final.pdf>