Unified in Christ

David Morris
Southern Methodist University, revdavidmorris@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.smu.edu/theology_ministry_etds

Part of the Leadership Studies Commons, Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons, Nonprofit Studies Commons, Organization Development Commons, Social Justice Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.smu.edu/theology_ministry_etds/33

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Perkins Thesis and Dissertations at SMU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Ministry Projects and Theses by an authorized administrator of SMU Scholar. For more information, please visit http://digitalrepository.smu.edu.
Unified in Christ

Developing Unified Congregations in The United Methodist Church

David Morris

Advisor: Dr. Ted Campbell
Reader: Dr. Hugo Magallanes
Director, Doctor of Ministry Program: Dr. James Lee
Introduction

To begin this work, I first must confess my viewpoint and the perspective from which I am writing. I am an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church and seek to write this work as a practical guide for those who are working in the local congregations of The United Methodist Church on how to build congregations oriented on unity. I served a local church named Enterprise First United Methodist Church. This church went through the process of disaffiliation. One of the hardest things about walking through this process as someone who was going to remain United Methodist was a severe lack of unity in the congregation. This argument and debate had begun prior to my appointment to the church, and for two years the debate raged. The church was divided in its mission, ministry, theology, doctrinal beliefs, and structure. I believe this church would have done a much better job of doing no harm to its congregants if it had been structured with unity as its primary ethic. The church ultimately did disaffiliate, and it harmed many people. I willingly admit I was harmed during this process and ask for grace from my readers. This experience has positively shaped the way I lead churches as a pastor in a positive way even though the crucible of being the pastor of a divided and broken congregation was more than I was prepared to handle. I write this dissertation from a place of deep concern and woundedness in my soul and in the souls of congregations who are still facing uncertainty. My hope is to create a resource for congregations and pastors to build congregations whose foundation is unity with Christ, with their denomination, and with one another. Through unity we will hopefully be able to build Christian community capable of facing and dealing faithfully with the challenges and struggles we will surely face as God’s people in the future.
The United Methodist Church is facing a period of division and struggle unlike any that Methodists in the USA have faced since the late 1800’s, more than a century ago. The modern American United Methodist Church is dealing with a crisis of division during this season of disaffiliation and restructuring. Division within the church is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is not new in the Wesleyan tradition. The United Methodist Church is going through a difficult season where individualism within the church is continuing to create struggle and strife. As congregations and leaders within the denomination take up causes which are aimed more contextually towards their personal experiences rather than unity within the general church, the discomfort and division within the United Methodist denomination structure is palpable. Dr. Ted Campbell states, “But doctrine and worship are not about individual opinions. They are about what a church believes and practices together as a community. Unity in doctrine, ethics, polity, and worship seems to be slipping away from us.”¹ This unity which is seemingly slipping away is something worth striving for if the denomination is going to have a future. The question is what will unity look like as we move forward?

For unity to become a guiding principle of The United Methodist Church, local churches must make the conscious decision to be the guiding force for connectional unity within the denomination. Through the intentional implementation of processes and ministries for laity, lay-leadership, and clergy I seek to show the value in being united in missions and ministry beyond the walls of local churches. If Christian unity become the driving force in local congregations of The United Methodist Church, there will be a very bright future for the denomination and its

local congregations as we are all so much greater and more capable as a unified body than we are as a segmented and divided front.

Currently The United Methodist Church is dividing supposedly over the issue of human sexuality. I would argue these divisions do not solely rely on this issue, but instead lie within many cultural diversities which are at odds within the church as the differing factions within The United Methodist Church compete for power and control. In an interview Rob Renfroe, a known proponent of the Global Methodist Church, said this about the division within The United Methodist Church,

Back in 1968 The United Methodist Church was formed and even at that time it was a very diverse group of people. Not so much diverse in terms of ethnicity right or sociological levels or groupings but theologically there were some who would describe themselves as very liberal there would be others would describe themselves as very conservative. Then there'd be people somewhere in the middle. The differences today are about sexuality. Those are the ones that come to the fore but there have always been these deeper issues even from the very beginning. Many of us realize that. I mean as soon as I became a pastor if not before I realized we were two different tribes.

And so, there's some of us (conservatives) who value the Cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith we use to describe Orthodoxy. I'm not going to mention all of them but things like the Trinity, things like the divinity of Jesus, the fact that he died on the cross for our sins, and that he was physically resurrected. These doctrines we would say are essential for the Christian faith.

Then you have people that are progressive. Some of whom say those things are not essential for the faith. We would even have some progressives in The United Methodist Church pastors, perhaps Bishops, who would say they don't fully affirm those things. What's much more important is that the church be a place where all people are accepted where we fight for social justice and make the world a better place and we do this in the name of Jesus.

And then there are those in the middle today we call them centrists who may in some places come down a little closer to us (conservatives) and other places come down to others (progressives). It became apparent that we are two different tribes we just have two different views about what God is calling us into the world to do. We have two different views about what it means to follow Jesus. Two different views about some of the most important theological doctrines, and so some of us have just come to the decision that we would be better by saying God bless you and you take off and do what you think God is calling you to
do let us take off and do what we think God is calling us to do. We want kind of a Paul and Barnabas moment and then just be free to pursue our differences. It's been a difficult Road. This is very late in coming. I can tell you 20 years ago I knew this day would come and we needed to find a way to get there. So that's what it is you've got two different tribes theologically and it's just time to go our separate ways.²

Renfroe raises some interesting and valid points when speaking about the diverse nature of The United Methodist Church. This acknowledgement of schism within the church which has been a long time in coming is important for us to understand as we seek to build churches of unity. While I disagree with my brother in Christ, Rev. Renfroe, in many ways I do have to agree with the assertion the church has had division for some time now. While the disagreement is presenting currently around the issue of human sexuality it is primarily a fundamental disagreement about whether our church should be united in its differences or uniform in its understanding of our scriptural, doctrinal, and theological stances.

To understand unity, we first must define it. Common definitions of ‘unity’ involve; the quality or state of not being multiple, a condition of harmony continuity without deviation or change (as in purpose or action), the quality or state of being made one, a totality of related parts an entity that is a complex or systematic whole. This definition helps us as we seek to create Christian unity within our churches. For our purposes I define unity in the church as a congregation and pastor working together as a diverse whole to achieve the common goal of missionally making disciples of Christ out of all people whose life and work transform the world.

Uniform, on the other hand, is commonly defined this way; having always the same form, manner, or degree, not varying or variable consistent in conduct or opinion of the same form with others, conforming to one rule or mode, presenting an unvaried appearance of surface,

pattern, or color. Uniformity is, by its very nature, the process by which all things are the same. Uniformity in the church is essential in some things. The *Book of Discipline* is a uniform set of rules for our church to live by. Even within this structure of the *Discipline* though, there is a desire for diversity and unity. By its very nature the church is a place full of diverse people with diverse viewpoints within its walls.

Uniformity, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as the desire to create churches who look, think, and act the same way by enforcing rules and regulations which mandate how churches meet the needs of the communities in which they reside with their theological, doctrinal, and scriptural interpretations. When speaking of people who desire uniformity, I am not describing just one side of the issue. Any group which promotes uniformity over unity in Christ when speaking particularly about scriptural interpretation and our debatable points within our denomination about doctrine and polity is leaving people who desire a place to be discipled in Christ outside the church.

While there is always going to be some uniformity in the church, and in many ways, this is a good thing, I would argue that unity is more important than uniformity for local congregations of The United Methodist Church. Unless we are willing to unpack the issues created by the desire for uniformity within our denomination we will likely continue to fracture as time goes on.

The United Methodist Church is an incredibly diverse place. There are conservatives, moderates, and progressives within the local church and in leadership within the denomination. There are scriptural fundamentalists and theologically progressive people who all reside together under the big tent of The United Methodist Church. On the extreme end of the conservative spectrum many people feel strongly about taking scripturally literally and at face value. On the
extremely progressive side of the spectrum, you see the devaluation of scripture in favor of experience as the theological lens practical doctrine is formed by.

Dr. Ted Campbell, when writing about the history of the division within the church, asserts,

The Articles and the Confession of Faith affirm that the scriptures are to be received as authoritative in matters “necessary for salvation.” They do not specify that every verse of scripture is equally authoritative, and they do not specify that the scriptures should be considered authoritative for history or science.3

This stance on scripture creates a theological gray area where practical theology is allowed to work when we are discussing issues which are not “necessary for salvation.” While these divisions predominantly occur in the minority of laity as well as clergy, the platform for each of these more polarizing viewpoints has gained views and followers as time has gone on.

Thus, to face these divisions, this paper will work to provide a practical framework to build unity rather than uniformity within the local church. Our churches are experiencing division around the issue of the diversification of theological, doctrinal, and scriptural interpretation. In the midst of this division many of the groups wish others would uniformly agree with their viewpoints. Our strength as local churches and as a denomination is not found in this uniformity of beliefs. Instead, it is found in the unity of the body of Christ. There is so much fear, anger, anxiety, and hatred being promulgated by ideologues and demagogues who reside at the far extremes of our cultural diaspora particularly in areas of social and political cultural shifts. This tension is not only being felt in the political spheres of government but has matriculated into the culture of our churches. There are some who are so radically progressive they would like to destroy the very institutions which have created the possibility of free society. There are others

who are so radially fundamental in their thinking they would strip freedoms from people under the banner of preservation. One of the symptoms of this sickness of division our modern culture is experiencing is the desire to make everything *uniform* rather than *united*. It is my assertion this lack of intentional acceptance of others and desire to create unified community hurts the heart of God and has caused deep conflict within The United Methodist Church. The good news is there is hope for us. William Willimon, when writing on the hope for our denomination and congregational hope, writes this,

> You have the *Discipline*. The *Book of Discipline*, for all its faults, gives your congregation the structure and form it needs to do this work. You don’t have to reinvent the organizational wheel. Say what you will about the BOD’s dated rigidity, to tell the truth, the Discipline gives more flexibility, adaptability, and opportunity for creativity than most congregations have had the courage to use… The BOD can be either an alibi for avoiding risky work or a prod to do difficult, necessary organizational renovation.\(^4\)

Uniformity has never been the plan of God. In fact, Christianity has never been a uniform movement. Early Christians were a collection of diverse peoples with a wide variety of opinions and values brought together by the communal gift of being called saved by the grace of Jesus. Jesus, in the gospel of John 17: 20-23 when praying for those who have been following him faithful says this,

> I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that *all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that *they may be one as we are one*— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete *unity*. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:20-23, emphasis added).\(^5\)

---


Notice here that Jesus doesn’t seek uniformity where all people would have the same exact experience or values in life. Just that people would be unified in the glory of God, and this unifying gift from God (grace) would be the key ethic on which their lives were build. Jesus’ desire for his disciples is unity rather than division. The apostle Paul further explains this unified community of the faithful when he states,

> For he [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (Ephesians 2: 14-18, emphasis added).

So, what is required of the church by this scripture? The church is called through this admonishment of Paul to be willing to set aside the worldly barriers we build up between ourselves and other disciples who are on their path to righteousness. We are called to seek unity with God and with one another. We are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). If we are not rooting our faith in the love of God and each other, and instead are building up dividing walls we are allowing nothing short of victory to the evils of the world.

Bishop Willimmon, when speaking about the troubles the church is going through, writes,

> Never once did Jesus command us to love the lovely, loveable, and loving. Never did he allow his disciples to waste time attempting to determine which sin was the worst or who to ban from discipleship.⁶

Our divisions are the delight of evil in this world as the body of Christ is fractured and made weaker. Instead of seeking uniformity, the church should seek the unity found within healthy

---

⁶ Willimon, Don’t Look Back: Methodist Hope for What Comes Next, 40.
diversity. We are called to love everyone. Full stop. This kind of love creates unity within the church and leads to diverse congregations who seek to missionally transform the world.

Diversity within the church should not be feared. Instead, it should be celebrated as this diversity is what makes it possible for the church to live out the great commission to go and make disciples of all people. One of the most important aspects of the early church was their willingness to reach and accept people who were outside of their social and cultural norms of the church. If The United Methodist Church is going to have a vibrant future, it must reclaim this DNA and be about business of reaching those who are outside the faith regardless of their diverse cultural beliefs around secular issues.

This goal of creating a vibrant future for The United Methodist Church will not be accomplished by pouring vitriol and hatred on people. Instead, it must be done by intentionally reaching out to the world and inviting those who are on the outside of faith into an accepting and loving community of believers who are all working out their salvation with fear and trembling together.
Methodology

To approach the issue of division within the church I am going to utilize theological, doctrinal, societal, and historical sources to explore the root causes of division within The United Methodist Church and offer insights into how we might confront the issues surrounding the divisions being lived out in the denomination. These methodologies will help to lay out a timeline of where the church has been and help us to see where the church is going. While the future is not something we can predict, I believe it is completely possible to make some educated prognostications about where The United Methodist Church is likely to be in the next decade. I would argue that, while troubling in the moment, the future for The United Methodist Church in America is very bright.

As The United Methodist Church’s theological, doctrinal, and scriptural interpretation continues to shift towards a more accepting and affirming place for all people, I do believe we will begin to see the church finally take steps to be a place of reconciliation and hope for people who have been left on the margins of the church and society. To achieve this future, churches will need to adopt a strategy to lead them into building intentional leadership and community which will be capable of navigating the challenges of diverse community building with grace, hope, and love.

I will use the community building strategies and leadership development tools offered by several practical theologians to offer insights into how The United Methodist Church can begin the process of developing communities of faith which seek to be unified in Christ rather than uniform in their cultural comfort zones. In this section I will be using the work of thinkers and pastors such as Rev. Dr. Jimmy Dorrell to describe modern approaches to building communities through relationship building models to find the communities on love and respect. Dr. Dorrell’s
work addresses, at least in part, the issue of community building within our local churches. Much of what is experienced within the modern church revolves around consumeristic expectations rather than communal life. Putting community and relationships considering the example of Christ helps reframe the doctrinal and social conflict in the church from deep divisions into reasonable disagreements. These disagreements can then be more fruitfully navigated through the lens of community rather than the consumeristic or political lenses which are being employed more frequently by local congregations.

Matthew 22: 36-40 has a disciple come to Jesus and ask a question which leads to the type of community building I am describing. Jesus states, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ This passage of scripture describes the basic normative position Christian society should be in. Division, intolerance, and hate have no place within a community built on the love of God and love of each other.

As a United Methodist pastor, I also have personal experience in a church which has become incredibly divided amid disaffiliation discussions. Though disaffiliation in The United Methodist Church was supposed to only be discussed if a church was struggling with the stance of the UMC on human sexuality, the reality is many churches used this narrow opening to disaffiliate for many and varied reasons. Throughout the chapters I will use different aspects of how the disaffiliation process amongst different church members has caused division and pain within our local congregation. This process will be the backdrop in which this work is created.

7 Green and Willimon, The Wesley Study Bible, 1194.
Chapter One

As we ponder what a church focused on Unity would look like, we first must ask what is it that divides the church? There are many historic and contemporary factors which have driven the church to a place where division seems tempting. The only way for our churches to find a path to unity is for them to engage these difficult issues, name the pain they have either caused or experienced, and find a way to move forward faithfully unified as disciples of Christ seeking to be agents of mercy, compassion, kindness, and unity in the world.

**Uniformity vs Unity. Where are We Drawing Lines and Dividing Communities of Faith?**

Once upon a time in The United Methodist Church a local congregation was facing a decision that would affect the future of the church forever. The congregation faced the question of whether it should disaffiliate from the denomination which had offered it life and sustenance for generations or whether it should remain connected to its denominational home. This decision was one that was deeply divisive for the congregation. Even those who wished to depart their denomination did so with a deep sense of sadness and loss. They loved their denomination’s theological doctrines of grace, reconciliation, and love. The problem they saw coming in the church was these doctrines were, in their minds, being corrupted by those who would wish to allow anything and everything to be permitted under the umbrella of God’s grace. The church they grew up in had always taken firm stands on social holiness. This holiness included deeply conservative views on sexuality, politics, cultural issues, and socio-economic concerns. While this congregation believed the essence of these doctrines were good, they were deeply concerned about where the line between being gracious and falling into sin occurred. It wasn’t a lack of compassion driving their concern, but instead a desire to conserve the doctrines of the church which had formed them, edified them, and assured them of their salvation.
They loved those outside the life of faith but believed firmly those who wished to come and sit at the feet of Jesus had to embrace a lifestyle of repentance and conformity to the holiness found within scripture. Within this group there were many who believed their denomination which they had grown up in and loved had left them behind as socially progressive ideas were becoming more and more a part of their religious experience. Their beloved church clashed with their historical, cultural, political, and ideological viewpoints of the way things should be.

Others within the congregation viewed these changes as hope for a future which would speak to the generations coming forward who had largely left the church behind because the rigid rules and perceived harm the church had done to those who lives were on the margins of what was acceptable in the Christian tradition. They believed the grace of God was great enough to cover the sins of people who were striving towards perfection. Their understanding of the grace of God was one which valued the individual journey and believed Christian perfection looked different for each person. They welcomed those who had previously been seen as social pariahs and anathema to the church. They believed in the sacred value of all human beings without reservation or consideration. This stance, admittedly, required the church to embrace people who didn’t live into the theological dogma they had been formed in, but they believed in the revelatory grace of God which, in their opinion, needed to be revisited considering the differences of the present age from first century Palestine. They were ready for cultural change in the church and in the world. They believed in an inclusive society and an inclusive church.

The tension within the church was palpable. Ultimately the church came to a place where a decision had to be made. Seemingly, there could be no pathway forward where all these viewpoints could coexist faithfully together. The church had a season of discernment. Both sides passionately argued their points. Both sides believed they were correct and the other was clearly
falling away from faithfully interpreting holy scripture and living into the call of faithful discipleship. A vote was scheduled. A vote was taken. One side won. The other side left the church. Some left and joined other congregations within their denomination. Some left and joined churches outside the denomination. Some just left and became a part of the post-Christian diaspora becoming so common in American society.

I wish this were a fairy tale, but it is my lived experience. The church in question was once Enterprise First United Methodist Church. I served this congregation as the senior pastor and helped it grow in its witness and ministry in my two and a half years I served there. The church is full of good people who wish to serve and honor God. Their desire for a more uniform denomination with doctrines, theology, and scriptural interpretation which were completely orthodox in their viewpoints led them to a place where they felt, largely, they could no longer be a part of The United Methodist Church. Now it is known as Enterprise First Methodist Church. It is a non-denominational Wesleyan congregation.

This story echoes story of many United Methodist congregations across the denomination as we all been living through a season of discernment as disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church is weighed in the hearts and minds of clergy and laity alike. Bishop Willimon stated it best, “We claimed that the bonds that held the UMC together were theological; we learned that they were cultural, economic, and sociological. When those bonds break, so does the church.”8 At Enterprise First United Methodist Church I witnessed the cultural, economic, and sociological concerns of the church lead them to believe their doctrinal, theological, and scriptural beliefs were not compatible with those who lived across the denomination who thought, believed, and experienced life differently.

8 Willimon, Don’t Look Back: Methodist Hope for What Comes Next, 43.
In this chapter we are going to name the elephants in the room in for most local congregations in a broad way. It is important, if we are going to build congregations founded on Christian unity, to name the primary issues we seem to be divided over.

**Politics**

One of the key areas of divide within the modern The United Methodist Church, and arguably culture at large is found in our national politics. Politically the United States is seemingly divided over the fault lines of social liberalism and fundamental conservatism within our national politics. With the overturning of Roe v Wade our national politics saw a stark divide in reactions. Some states were quick to ensure the rights of those who would be most affected by the issue of abortion, while others were quick to ensure abortions would become illegal. This has created an incredible divide amongst the faithful in the church around the issue of justice for those who are most affected. Much of this divide has been around national politics which have been dealing with the rights and civil liberties which are contrary to conservative interpretations of scripture. This has led to much of the anxiety and fear people are feeling trickling into the pews and pulpits of our churches. Our *Book of Discipline* offers some guidance around this issue, and yet the stance is not definitive. The discipline states, “Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion. But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child.”

This stance essentially is meant to disapprove of abortion unless medically necessary for the well-being of the mother. In our current cultural climate this stance creates room for many gray area arguments.

---

This is not the only place where the politics of the day and the doctrines and polity of the church collide. While this controversial hot button topic of abortion is one of the most recent, there are many moments in our denominational history where politics have gotten in the way of faithful people. In the past five years pastors all over our nation and the world have had to navigate a season unlike any other. With the onset of Covid-19 many churches faced a season unlike any other in living memory. For the first time in many congregations the doors of the church were shuttered as we waited out the pandemic. Some congregations remained closed for almost a year. Some only closed for a few weeks. Regardless of the decisions the pastors made during this time a strange phenomenon occurred. What once would have been seen as a simple decision of trying to make the best decision for one’s congregation became interpreted as a political statement.

First the decision whether to have church was questioned. If you moved to only online worship, you were being too scared or too progressive. If you held in person worship, you were clearly too right-wing to be allowed to lead. If you required masks, you were just a pawn of the liberal media. If you let people choose whether to mask, you clearly didn’t take public health seriously. As all of this occurred, we faced protests over racial injustice, held a presidential election, and faced a storming of the capital in the January 6th riot. Political tensions were higher than they have ever been, and the local church seemed to be a place for the frustrations, anxieties, and fears of many to find a home. In The United Methodist Church these political tensions have created deeper issues.

Political divisions can cause rifts in society during the best of times, but this political season in The United Methodist Church has been a particularly difficult one. When you add the tinderbox of the looming general conference which was supposed to occur in 2020 but was
ultimately delayed until 2024 the recipe for disaster was perfect. United Methodist congregants had been through so much within the United States from 2019-2022 that many people have just run out of the ability to be patient. Political factions formed, caucuses were organized, and the more orthodox branch of The United Methodist Church created the Wesleyan Covenant Association, or WCA, at first to advocate for a more conservative future of United Methodism. Their chief concern was a desire for the end of the seemingly endless debate around theological and doctrinal issues. Bishop Scott Jones, a bishop in the Global Methodist Church, who has in his ministry been primarily seen as a centrist voice left The United Methodist Church. He stated,

“The Global Methodist Church represents traditional Methodism with a strong focus on reaching new people for the gospel…It is a new start that will help clergy and congregations move past the disputes of the last several years and focus on our mission. I am excited about forming disciples who worship passionately, love extravagantly, and witness boldly.”10

For Bishop Jones, this new denomination will be able to walk away from the arguments primarily around human sexuality and instead be focused on mission and evangelism. I believe his messaging is true both for the Global Methodist congregations as well as United Methodist Congregations. The United Methodist Church will have quite a bit more work to do. What both denominations will have to address is the reality of declining congregations across the board. My hope for both is they find a way to build unity in their local congregations who are then missionally deployed for the evangelistic and missional needs of our world.

The WCA, after splitting from The United Methodist Church, formed a new denomination called the Global Methodist Church. This denomination would be a traditionalist

offering of a hybridized traditional Methodist/congregationalist polity which would remain conservative on the issue of human sexuality. At the time of this writing the Global Methodist Church has a transitional Book of Discipline rather than a ratified discipline from a convening conference, but it seems their discipline, when ratified, will be returning to an earlier expression of Methodism in theology while offering a more congregational approach to the calling and equipping of ministers.

All this work occurred as a part of a political movement within The United Methodist Church. Both the conservative and progressive branches of the church disagree on how human sexuality should be viewed and treated within the theological and doctrinal standards of the UMC. While this theological problem within our church is significant, the political machinations and desires of people from both sides of the issue have ultimately been the driving force behind the fracturing of the United Methodist denomination. We have forgotten to value our community more than our disagreements. Caucuses fractured The United Methodist Church as they disagreed about our theology, doctrine, polity, and scriptural interpretation.

Sadly, we are experiencing is a lack of public civility as we disagree. Our denomination has a political structure as we cast votes for all important decisions made all the way from the color of the carpet in a local church to the decisions about how our theology and doctrine should be formed and deployed in the world. With this political nature to the church, we have fallen into the cultural temptation to sling mud at one another. I have witnessed speeches from both sides of the issue of human sexuality which paint differing viewpoints as evil or satanic. Realistically, we must find a way to disagree with grace. Human sexuality will not be the last disagreement within The United Methodist Church. We must find a way to embrace a better way to disagree in love and grace with one another. We need to gain the ability to have discourse publicly and privately
which honor God and intentionally find a way, in The United Methodist Church, to embrace and champion our desire to have a future together. In his book *Culture Wars* James Hunter puts forward, “If any consensus is achievable, it could and should first be about how to contend over the moral differences that divide—a public agreement about how to publicly disagree.”

In a later section we will discuss the issue of human sexuality in more depth, but it is important to understand the political underpinnings, and how politics within the church have evolved over time. Much like our national politics, the politics within the church have embraced more inflammatory rhetoric, have become much more divisive, and have become incredibly unwilling to find compromise for the good of the whole of the church. Political divides have caused and will cause harm within The United Methodist Church and in its offshoots unless we find a way to meet somewhere in the middle or find a workable compromise on the issues which cause us the deepest discomforts with one another.

**Racism**

St. Mark United Methodist Church was once an affluent church in the heart of Pensacola FL. In its golden era the pews were filled, there were so many children and youth they couldn’t easily be counted, lives were changed, and it seemed this church would be a juggernaut of disciple making until the Lord returned to bring the faithful home. Fifty years after this era the buildings were crumbling, the pews still had many in them, but no one would call them full. Children and youth found other interests which took them out of the ministry of the past, and the church seemed to be older and less connected to its community in which it resided. In those fifty years great changes had occurred in this capital city. African American and Hispanic families

---

had moved into the neighborhood. Affluent white families had fearfully fled the city. The only
time they returned was for Sunday worship, but even this became too much for them. The church
needed to change. It needed to reach its community. The cultural landscape around the church
had changed. What was once a white affluent neighborhood had become a lower middle class
diverse community. The church needed to be a part of resisting the fear and anxiety which had
taken hold of the city’s affluent yet fearful people. Instead, it was silent. The church was silent
for so long that when the time for change was forced upon it, it retreated further until it folded.
Rather than embracing the challenges of engaging in ministry within its newly emerging context
it chose to silently and slowly fade away.

I served this church for four years as its pastor. The church would proudly brag about
how it had a regional reach and viewed the many zip codes people drove into its sanctuary on
Sunday morning as a badge of honor. The least represented zip code was the one in which the
church resided. The congregation lost its missional and evangelistic voice in the neighborhood in
which it resided.

This is the story, sadly, of many churches which were once vibrant in The United
Methodist Church. Many of these churches which were once viewed with incredible hope failed
to be a part of the world which has been changing. They failed to build diverse and integrated
communities and staffs. They opted out of partnering with the diverse expressions of Christianity
found all around them. They failed to welcome the stranger or the alien into the family of God
within the walls of their local church. They didn’t learn the lessons of the past, but instead clung
to its fear and hatred. Their fear and hatred of anything new or challenging helped them remain
uniform in their makeup…until the church shuttered its doors.
The issue of racism in The United Methodist Church is as old as the founding of our denomination. The first large split of the Methodist Episcopal church, as it was known back then, was over the issue of slavery. The most significant and most disruptive split which has ever occurred within Methodism came in 1844 and was primarily over the issue of slavery. Unlike our current split occurring loosely around the issue of human sexuality, this split was not across the whole United states. It was a regional split between the northern and southern church.

This split caused much division and harm to the future of Methodism. During this season of split, three black denominations were formed from the crucible of the abolition of slavery and the racist ancestry of our country and our denomination. These denominations are the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. These three denominations have remained outside of the unification efforts of The United Methodist Church. Though they were created prior to The United Methodist Church they have never desired to be a part of its connection. They are in full communion with The United Methodist Church, but not a part of the denomination as a whole. While the reasoning for these denominations remaining outside The United Methodist Church are many and varied, I can say from personal experience these groups’ ministry has been fruitful and life-giving in places where the UMC has been unable to make significant progress. Within the African American community within the Alabama-West Florida conference in which I serve I can say our efforts to support and build up a Christian witness as United Methodists is under-

---

funded, under-supported, and not given enough resourcing and thoughtfulness to create a significant impact. The local AME Zion, AME, and CME churches, however, are doing exceptionally well as they teach and preach the gospel powerfully in the Wesleyan way. As I ponder this divide within The United Methodist Church over race, an uncomfortable pattern emerges. What appears is a church which has, historically, been unwilling to make real changes which make space for those who have a different voice or opinion than the primarily white conservative voice which has historically held the majority vote within the denomination.

Racial divides are still a problem within the UMC. While our churches today are not overtly racist, I experienced the discomfort and, in some moments, blatant racism many church members and leaders expressed during the George Floyd protests. Merely standing for those who had experienced the misery of being black in America and professing a desire for a better future where our churches and our nation would live into the call to inclusiveness found in the United Methodist Book of Discipline.

This call to inclusiveness states, “The mark of an inclusive society is one in which all persons are open, welcoming, fully accepting, and supporting of all other persons, enabling them to participate fully in the life of the church, the community, and the world.”¹⁵ Until The United Methodist Church fully embraces this stance around issues of race, and around many other issues facing our church’s future the denomination is going to continue to be a church filled with congregations seeking uniformity rather than unity in Christ.

The problem with doggedly pursuing this uniformity is the limitation it places on the ability for the church to live out its mission. In the United Methodist constitution it states, “The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its

¹⁵ The United Methodist Church, The Book of Discipline, 101.
mission in that world.”16 This statement on its own acknowledges the fact that this division within our system is apposition which cannot be allowed to continue. Racism is just the beginning of the issues facing the church. Racism against African Americans is just one aspect of racism which has been experienced within the denomination. While there is no room in this work to fully expound on every nuanced issue of racism within the modern church, suffice it to say The United Methodist Church has come a long way since its initial fracture over the issues of race and slavery, but the journey to reconciliation and true unity still has many miles to go. This issue is just one painful issue being faced in the church today.

Socio-Economic Divides

One large issue of divide in The United Methodist Church is a socio-economic issue. Many of our places of worship are homogenous in their makeup not only in race, but also in socio-economic status. In Jimmy Dorrell’s book Trolls & Truth: 14 Realities About Today’s Church that We Don’t Want to See, there are many lessons The United Methodist Churches can learn from his local ministry setting at the Church Under the Bridge in Waco, TX. The lessons offered to the church center around the recapturing of the mission of the church in our modern world by incorporating true diversity within the church. Dr. Dorrell asserts the church has lost its missional understanding and calling and instead focuses on personal piety, comfort, and feel-good ministry within local middle class and affluent Christian congregations within the United States. This type of ministry makes parishioners comfortable rather than being the living body of Christ in the world. Dorrell states, “Ironically, these modern trolls have become the teachers of truth to us “Billy goats,” trampling through life to get fat on the hillside.”17 He says this because

16 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 25.
these “trolls,” which is the preferred moniker of the parishioners of this church, jar us from our otherwise oblivious lives with truths about the nature and missional calling of the church which can leave many feeling unsettled about where their spiritual journey has taken them. I can attest to this as I have had the privilege of helping lead worship at the Church Under the Bridge. This church is a conglomerate of millionaires, homeless people, and everything in between.

What the church needs to do is not only serve those who have lesser means than perhaps the average church-going family. Instead, the church should be in community with them. It is much better to be someone’s Christian neighbor than to offer them a food bag every Thursday. Good neighbors do incredible things for one another. Jesus, in his parable of the good Samaritan, said,

“But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

This moment in scripture is one which shows us what value we can bring to people who, perhaps, are completely alien to us if we are willing to live into community and be their neighbors. One assertion Dr. Dorrell makes argues, “Diversity is not a burden, but a joy. Diverse spiritual gifts do more than make a community minimally operative; they are God’s way of allowing us to experience beauty and richness in our life together.” This idea of joyful diversity is one which creates space for so many more opportunities to live out the call to share the grace and love of Jesus Christ with the world. What we need is an authentic place where people who

---

18 Green and Willimon, *The Wesley Study Bible* 1257.
19 Dorrell, *Trolls & Truth*, 75.
come from all socio-economic backgrounds can come together to worship God together. Only when poor and wealthy can come and worship together as equals will be able to experience an authentic faith filled with the grace of God given freely to all.

Acts 2:45-47 states,

They would sell possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.20

One of the most important aspects of the Christian movement has always been the willingness to receive anyone who professes belief in Christ into its membership. The problem with this historical view of Christianity being open to anyone is the practice we see in modern churches. Allegorically, churches I have served have all had barriers newcomers had to achieve which were not scriptural or theological barriers. In some cases, the barrier was race, but the most common barrier experienced was one of socioeconomics. If you didn’t fit the mold of the church, you need not apply. In most instances the threshold was comfortable middle class.

Dr. Dorrell articulates the need for the church to be a place where generosity is practiced by all who come to be a part of the spiritual community. This is a very important point in the landscape of American Christianity. Dorrell writes, “The reality is, we have the lowest per capita spending on the poor of all 17 industrialized nations.”21 This point is played out not only in our governmental spending, but also in our religious spending. In my own experience I can attest to the reality churches spending a majority of the keeping the buildings nice, safe, secure, and free of those who would do not fit the narrowly defined vision of who belongs within the church.

20 Green and Willimon, The Wesley Study Bible, 1325.
21 Dorrell, Trolls & Truth, 109.
Dorrell’s vision of a renegotiated vision of ministry that places an emphasis on self-sacrifice for the sake of the poor and the marginalized must come to fruition if the church is going to have a significant impact on the future.22

This self-sacrificial love is not only about providing for those who are in need. It is making those who are in need a part of what the church is doing. Making space for them to not only receive, but also to offer what they have to the Lord. Dr. Dorrell writes, “the reality is few workers have a “theology of work.” They just routinely get up, do their job, and go home. This bios (mere existence) fails significantly short of God’s intended zoe (abundant life) filled with meaning and purpose.”23 This point articulates an issue found particularly in many United Methodist Churches. In each church I served we have faced difficulty when working to help the poor because the majority of wake up each day to go and do a job they don’t love purely to provide for the things their families need and want. They don’t realize the privilege they have just by having the opportunity to earn a sustainable and most times abundant wage. The poor are viewed as lazy or as less than.

When churches embrace the poor as a part of their faith community and truly view them as equals in the eyes of God what becomes clear is those who are socioeconomically challenged are no less vibrant or less important than those who tithe half the yearly budget. These people bring wisdom about the world and perspective many people have never dreamed of to the church community. Yes, the church can help alleviate and, in some cases, even help people overcome the material poverty of the world, but those who experience material poverty in the world are in many cases the very people who are filled with an abundance of spiritual wealth. One man who

was in and out of homelessness in one of my parishes loved to tell me, “God has gotten me this far and one day God is going to lead me to a home that will never be taken away.” His faith was in a God who had space for him.

So how do we accomplish this task of making those who experience material poverty without harming them? In the book *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...or Yourself* the authors offer insights into how churches can work with the poor by intentionally seeking out the underlying reasons of poverty with the intention of helping us to alleviate poverty without harming those we are helping or ourselves.24

When we go about doing ministry with those who face socioeconomic hardship in an attempt to alleviate the evils of poverty the wrong way, we hurt ourselves and the poor. This does not mean we are meant to stop our actions to try and create a more just world. Instead, we are called to make informed decisions on how we alleviate poverty. The authors argue the methodology church should use is “study, learn, pray, repent, try to do something, evaluate, and then repent again. And then trust that a sovereign God is more than able to take our feeble acts and turn them into something that He can use for His glory.”25 To achieve a more just and Christ-like witness to the poor our pastors and congregations must be willing to live into the call of creating change by overcoming and breaking the chains of injustice in our world. As a church we are called to spend ourselves on behalf of those less fortunate than us and to act justly with love and mercy.26

---

24 Steve Corbett et al., *When Helping Hurts How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself* (Moody Publishers, 2014), 10.
25 Steve Corbett et al., 16.
26 Steve Corbett et al., 39.
Material poverty causes people to feel shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness. These issues faced by those in poverty are symptoms of broken relationships. The church has always been the place where this brokenness is meant to be healed. When we fail to act, we break the covenantal relationship we agreed to when we accepted the call to be disciples.

In The United Methodist Church, there has been a lot of work to help alleviate the sufferings of those who face impoverishment, but in many local congregations this has been boiled down to supporting institutional agencies like UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) and other agencies who shoulder the burden of creating the relationships and funneling aid to those in need. According to their annual report UMCOR deployed 58.9 million dollars seeking to help people who are facing tremendous hardship and need around the world. While these entities are essential to the work of the church, in many cases many churches have lost the vision of what it means to be relationally responsible for the suffering of poverty which exists within their own communities. Writing a check and reading a report in a worship service of the work of a ministry agency passes for all the work a church does.

Disassociating from the healing work of the church breaks the intention God has for our ministry. We were not made to live in isolation, or to face all the hardships of life on our own. We are not meant, as a community of believers, to force others to face these issues alone either. Steven Corbett writes, “We are made to know one another, to love one another, and to encourage one another to use the gifts God has given to each of us to fulfill our callings.” If this is true,

---

27 Steve Corbett et al., 51.
29 Steve Corbett et al., When Helping Hurts How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself (Moody Publishers, 2014), 55.
then this means we are called to intentionally be in community with one another. This means we are called to be in intentional and meaningful community with people not only when their lives are going well, but also when they are facing seasons of suffering.

**Human Sexuality**

One of the most divisive issues facing The United Methodist Church today is the issue of human sexuality. In many ways this has been the wedge issue which has caused many other concerns or complaints to come forward as people have sought to make sense of what it means to be connectional within The United Methodist Church. On its own this issue comes down to the way scripture is interpreted, and how those who are working out their salvation with fear and trembling read and interpret the bible. Rev. Joe Miller writes, “The real issue is biblical interpretation. How does one read and interpret the Bible? Just to say that we should follow what it says does not work.”

This issue of interpretation is one which has caused much tension within The United Methodist Church. The problem we face truly boils down to the way we use scripture as United Methodists and Christians. Article V of the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church states, “The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required of any man that is should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” This leaves quite a bit of room for interpretation when examining scripture for things unnecessary for salvation. We don’t believe we are limited to scripture as we make advancements in fields outside of salvation. Dr. Campbell when writing about the articles of religion and the rest of the stance on scripture found

---

in the *Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church writes, “They do not specify that every verse of scripture is equally authoritative, and they do not specify that the scriptures should be considered authoritative for history or science.”

This tension around scriptural interpretation and authority as it pertains to human sexuality has led to the splintering of the denomination into several subgroups. Much of this splintering can be in some way connected to the issue of homosexuality within the leadership of the United Methodist episcopal and ordained offices. Though the official stance of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* is traditional, there are two openly homosexual bishops and several openly LGBTQIA+ pastors serving within the different annual conferences around The United Methodist Church. In my annual conference this is not the case, but the issue still exists.

The disobedience to the *Book of Discipline* happening is not a result of people choosing to live out a lawless or unfaithful lifestyle despite the rules of the church. Instead, for many it is an act of civil disobedience with the hope of leading the church to a place of inclusivity and change. Bishop Karen Oliveto, when speaking about the hardships she has faced in being the first openly homosexual bishop in The United Methodist Church, writes,

“How could people who didn't know me, hadn’t examined my qualifications, gifts, and skills, and had no firsthand experience of my ministry seek to disqualify me from this ministry? How could they reduce me to an issue for the Judicial Council to Rule on? What does this say about our understanding of being a part of the body of Christ?”

Her experience is one which is echoed by many in the LGBTQIA+ community. Very often the church has been guilty of boiling down human beings formed in the image of God to issues and

---


statistics. Bishop Willimon, when writing about the tension within the church found around the issue of human sexuality writes,

Self-designated “traditionalists” have taken on a huge task. Christian tradition is rich, multifaceted, so much so that it’s rarely self-evident just what part of our tradition commands the present moment. For instance, as today’s church struggles with how to be more inclusive of fellow Christians and their diverse gender orientations, some “progressives” point to early Jewish Christians wrestling with the inclusion of Gentiles. At the so-called “Jerusalem Council” (Acts 15), the church formally, publicly stated that, no matter what much of scripture said, Christ’s salvation extended beyond the bounds of Judaism. Yet “traditionalists” can cite the same passage, noting that while the early church made adaptations for wider inclusion, it did so conditionally, setting up some core, minimum standards for baptism (abstinence from food that had been offered to idols, sexual immorality, and eating animals that had been strangled, which includes everybody in my town). I dare contemporary Methodists to find guidance in that passage without interpretive debate. And as for you proud “progressives,” just what, in orthodox Christianity, have you enlightened modern folk progressed beyond? Surely you don’t think that we, who have never been able to keep up with Christ, progress beyond him?34

It is important for us to understand sacred value for the human lives being discussed when weighing heavy issues which are being debated within the church. It is also important for us not to lose hope in the church. Much of what we have experienced around the fracturing of the church has been due to both the traditional and progressive sides of this issue giving up on and, in some cases devaluing, one another.

Within The United Methodist Church’s official stance found in the Book of Discipline, the tension of this issue is evident. The Book of Discipline states, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”35 If the discipline stopped at this concise statement the debate would be over. However, it continues this way, “We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn

34 Willimon, Don’t Look Back, 62.
35 The United Methodist Church, The Book of Discipline, 113.
lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.”  

This continuation speaks to the heart of the issue at hand.

The core struggle within the church around the issue of human sexuality is how far and to what extent we believe the grace of God is extended to all people. The question which arises is whether we are truly showing love to our LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters in Christ if we are not able to include them in the life and ministry of the church in meaningful and transformational ways. Each person within a local church might have a different and nuanced perceptive given their interpretation of scripture, their life experience, the traditions they were raised with, and how they reason all these inputs together into their person ethics pertaining to human sexuality.

There is a real dispute in scriptural interpretation in how we understand what is known as the “Clobber” texts around human sexuality. As These verses are titled this way because they seem to be aimed at clobbering the notion of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the church. Typically, these are boiled down to six key verses. In each of these cases they are not dealing directly with the same time of modern human sexuality which we are theologically considering today. Traditionally, the church has not been inclusive to same sex unions but has been compassionate to those who have lived outside of the biblical understanding of what human sexuality is meant to look like.

Consider our views on divorce and remarriage in the modern context. Wars were fought over the right to divorce and remarry in the past. Now it is a normal part of modern church life to navigate the complexities of blended and complex families. In church experience we have always seek to help people who have had a secular history in their sexual past. If I refused to do marriages for people who lived together or already had children, I would likely be run out of any

---

36 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 113.
church I sought to serve as a pastor. It is reasonable to have the conversation as to where the church should go in our future considering all these factors in our modern lives.

This issue is a complex one, and not all people are going to end up in the same place on it. The real question we must ask is whether we can sit in the pew with people who disagree with us. Can the grace of God be big enough for our different viewpoints to live and breathe together within the loving community of Christ? Can we agree on the parts of scripture that are necessary for salvation while providing grace to those who interpret and experience scripture around non-salvific issues differently? If we can do this, I would argue we would be well on our way to creating a church environment where Unity is possible.

**Accountability**

Finally, the issue we must find a way to resolve is accountability. Within the life of a church the hardest moments congregations go through revolve around the issue of accountability. Nothing harms a congregation more than leadership lacking accountability. Church accountability has many facets. Ultimately, the accountability the church must be most concerned with is whether its decisions and actions help the church to make disciples of Christ and strengthen those disciples as they seek to be made perfect in the love of God. If the decisions and actions of the church, its laity, its staff, or its clergy run counter to this goal, then they must be addressed. Elders in The United Methodist Church vow to accept accountability within their ministry. One of the questions you must answer in the affirmative in order to be ordained is,

> Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accepting its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline, defending it against all doctrines contrary to God’s Holy Word, and
committing yourself to be accountable with those serving with you, and to the bishop and those who are appointed to supervise your ministry?\textsuperscript{37}

This vow is one which means the ordering of the life of the church from its pastor must be done in an accountable way. Each local pastor’s mission and ministry has to be conducted in a way which lives into the denomination’s expectations of the church.

Some of this lack of accountability we face occurs because we treat running a church like running any other business. We make decisions based on pragmatism and numbers much more often than we make them on what is right. Often pride gets in our way as we seek as pastors and laity to lead our churches to better places, but to be a leader in the Christian setting is to be a humble servant. This doesn’t mean leadership is meant to be a position of weakness. Instead, Christian leaders are called by God to make the choice to put aside our pride and adopt the attitude of Christ.

As Christian leaders who seek to have the attitude of Christ, we must behave humbly towards one another rather than putting our own selfish desires first in our lives.\textsuperscript{38} The best way to do this is to carefully use the examples we find of Jesus in scripture to inform our actions. In order to effectively emulate Christ in the world we have to be willing to first practice the self-emptying Jesus models for us as we seek to love one another.\textsuperscript{39} This self-emptying is not a call for Christian leaders to just go and suffer. Instead, it is a call to endure what may come on behalf of your brother or sister in Christ as a mark of faithfulness.\textsuperscript{40} Part of accountability within the

\textsuperscript{39} Craig C. Hill, Servant of All, 32.
\textsuperscript{40} Craig C. Hill, Servant of All, 69.
Christian setting is to not pass the blame to those who cannot defend themselves. Instead, we are meant to have communal accountability. When a ministry or mission fails within a church, we cannot only look at the one who was given oversight of the ministry as the culprit. We have to examen the community of faith to find out how we as a community failed to achieve our goals.

One aspect of leadership Dr. Craig Hill deals with directly in his book *Servant of All* is how to manage conflict. His remedy for the conflicts which inevitably arrive in even the healthiest of communities is to follow the teachings of the New Testament. He argues the best medicine for conflict is still this self-emptying love made perfect through Christ. If we find ways to love one another deeply, then the root of conflict; our ambition, pride, or status, would be overcome with that love.\(^{41}\) Conflict in the church is often where the most temptation to abandon accountability occurs.

To use a common example within congregational life, a church was undergoing a renovation project which was going to be extensive and would displace people from their typical meeting spaces. This renovation was primarily done to enhance and strengthen ministry with children. When the time came to begin reassigning meeting spaces a group of elderly people within the church felt they had been underrepresented in the decision-making processes and were never consulted on their feelings on the matter. Instead of reaching out to those who were making these decisions and expressing their concerns, the group became surly and bitter. Their anger became directed at the children’s director because, in their minds, it was the fault of the children’s ministry their lives were disrupted. This led to all kinds of small undercutting and arguing. Ultimately, several members of this group decided to stop funding the church’s

---
\(^{41}\) Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All*, 130.
ministries with their tithes and offerings to the church until their demands were met. They made a public proclamation to this effect at the next church council meeting.

Following this meeting the hostility towards the children’s director got more intense. The children’s director lost her temper with some of these people after a long period of small insults, and committees began meeting about potential repercussions for the children’s minister for her actions. This issue I’ve described can go on for a long time. Perhaps the children’s minister is removed from her office. Perhaps the committees decide to chastise this group who already feels displaced and hurt. Perhaps there is a third way. The scriptural way. Mathew 18:15-16 says this,

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that ever word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”42

In this scripture, Jesus is offering a model of accountability which gives the greatest chance of success. First, we are told to go and sit down with the person whom we are having trouble with directly. How much better in church life would it be for people who are feeling hurt by another to go directly to the person and have a discussion. In my experience this type of meeting resolves most issues between people in a congregation. If this one-on-one meeting doesn’t work invite a few others to the table. Perhaps negotiating within a small group will find better results. Only when these options are exhausted do you take the issue publicly to the church. At this point if no agreement can be made Jesus tells us to only then decide who wins and who loses as a church. This model of conflict resolution requires people to not only be

42 Green and Willimon, The Wesley Study Bible, 1187.
accountable for their actions, but to hold one another accountable in a meaningful way. This way also minimizes the conflicts which can occur in the life of the church.

Pastoral accountability is another issue churches face. While it may seem to many there are more cases of pastor indiscretion, I would argue these indiscretions are just more public now. Whatever the indiscretion might be, very often they are a result of a lack of accountability from the chief officer of the local church. Pastors, by their nature, are typically ambitious people. Ambition is neither good nor bad. It is something that exists within each of us that is hard to live with, and hard to live without.\(^43\) The trick is to live a balanced life as a pastor. Rather than being too focused on our ambitions we pastors have to find a way to balance our ambition with humility. In Christian ministry, ambition is necessary for success. Fruitfulness in pastoral leadership only occurs when ambition is put to work though the execution of visions, dreams, and ministry.\(^44\) Pastors without ambition tend to lead churches into a place of mediocrity, which is the death nell for most local congregations.\(^45\) In a world where dynamic and incredible ministry is a few clicks away local congregations must be ambitious as they reach souls for the kingdom of God. Our ambition should not solely be on being the biggest church or the best who has ever lived. Instead, we should live out our ambitions as an act of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. When we do this, we are most-likely living into the ambition God calls us to. Ambition is not something to be avoided, but rather it is something to be harnessed and used properly to make sure the kingdom work of the church is being done. The key is

\(^{43}\) Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All*, 7.  
\(^{44}\) Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All*, 134.  
\(^{45}\) Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All*, 135.
properly balancing vocational calling and career success. Our vocational call to ministry must remain constant while our career is secondary and variable in its importance.\textsuperscript{46}

It is difficult to maintain a healthy balance between vocation and career. Very often people have a difference in discerning the difference between vocation and career. Vocation is a calling which you give your life to. A career is how you earn a living. Putting your career as secondary to your vocational calling is difficult as a pastor. Bills still have to be paid. Children still need shoes, braces, and clothing. I have been guilty at times of being more concerned with my career being successful than I was making sure I was leaning into my vocational call to serve. In my weakest moments I have fallen into the trap of taking care of myself professionally before I even considered the well-being or impact my decisions and actions might have on others. This is a trap many pastors fall into. Our worldly concerns overwhelm our ability to live into the vocational call which is the reason we have a career in ministry to begin with. As pastors we must remind ourselves constantly of the vocational decisions we make even if they are detrimental to our potential career success.

Accountability for pastors and laity within the church not only impact those who are within the church, but they impact the future success of the church doing its important soul saving work. In a world full of people who are “church hurt,” it is imperative local congregations take seriously the role accountability plays in achieving the true purpose of the church: making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. If we are going to live into our work as the church every person, whether they be lay or clergy, has to submit to a life of accountability as we seek to transform the world.

\textit{Conclusion}

\textsuperscript{46} Craig C. Hill, \textit{Servant of All}, 141
It seems that the church has many reasons to divide. These divisions within the church call to mind the story of the split of the kingdom of Israel as laid out in 1 Kings 12. Instead of learning from our historical mistakes, listening to the wisdom of the voices of our past, and seeking to do the right thing we have allowed ourselves to fall into the trap of foolishness and pride. We are too busy listening to those who echo our own desires rather than listening to the wisdom we can glean from those who have faithfully gone before us. The overarching issue amongst all of the divisions within the church to some degree is we are unwilling to serve one another faithfully for the sake of a bright future.

In scripture we have been given an example of what happens when leaders refuse to care for and serve those who have given leadership to them. In 1 Kings the example we are given is the transition of Rehoboam into the position of the king of Judah. Solomon has died and a new king is being brought forward. There are many who needed a change and help as this regime change was occurring. Rehoboam didn’t know what to do so he asked for advice. When asking the elders of Israel for advice Rehoboam received this message, “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever.”

This passage of scripture is about political power of state rather than the issues of a local church, but the wisdom is still applicable. Often what we have experienced in each of the issues we have lifted up are a rigidity which has disallowed even faithful and earnest conversations to occur. We are unwilling to listen. Rehoboam was equally unwilling to listen to those whose wisdom would have helped him assume the mantle of leadership. Instead, he listened to his friends. His friends said what he wanted to hear. Listening to their council caused the northern tribes to secede from Israel.

---

If we continue our folly, we will become more vulnerable than we already are to the temptations of uniformity of thought, of mind, and of action. The church isn’t meant to be uniform. Instead, it is meant to be a place filled with holy diversity seeking to come together for the sake of the Kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 states, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body-Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of on Spirit.” Paul the apostle continues this discourse and discusses how the body is made of many parts, each important, and without the diversity of the body it would be impossible for the body to accomplish its job. The same is true in our churches. If we are unwilling to have unity within our church despite its lack of uniformity, we will be unable to complete the work of the church. One of the great miracles and mysteries of the church founded by the death and resurrection of Jesus is its ability to be a united group of people despite the many different world views, backgrounds, hurts, hang-ups, sins, and struggles which exist. In that panoply of seeming chaos there is a unifying Spirit. This Spirit helps us put each of our unique gifts and graces to work to accomplish a unified goal. This unified goal is to make disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world. To accomplish this transformational work churches, must be about the hard work of building unity rather than uniformity amongst the faithful.

In the next sections we will be delving into how churches can recruit both staff and laity in such a way that they build unity within the structure of the church. Through this unity churches will be more able to more capable achieve the mission of disciple making in a rapidly evolving and diverse world.

---

Chapter 2

Unity For Laity: How Can Congregations Live into Unity?

In the previous chapter we discussed many of the things which divide congregations from fully embracing one another in Unity. In this chapter we are going to particularly focus on how to achieve unity within the body of Christ from a lay perspective. Some of what causes us trouble in the church is falling victim to temptation. Temptation comes in many forms, but the most famous account of temptation is found in the gospel text when Jesus is tempted in the desert.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’

Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.\footnote{Green and Willimon, The Wesley Study Bible, 1244.}

In this pericope of scripture Jesus is tempted by worldly things. First, he is tempted by bread. After spending forty days and nights fasting it is only assumed that Jesus was famished and in need of sustenance. The temptation is for us to divide ourselves within The United Methodist
Church into small, isolated sects who look, think, believe, and see the world the exact same way.

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church said this in response to this temptation,

Christ’s prayer for our unity and command to gather all to the table, to make space for one another, appreciate one another, and look for Christ in each other, prohibit us from creating individual tables only for those who think, act, look, and perceive the world like we do. We cannot be a church that fractures its identity and commitment to Christ by aligning itself with political parties. We cannot be a traditional church or a progressive church or a centrist church. We cannot be a gay or straight church. Our churches must be more than echo chambers made in our own image arguing with each other while neglecting our central purpose. This is the way of the world.50

Our denomination’s bishops wrote this letter as a message of encouragement and hope within The United Methodist Church as we seek to continue in our work in local congregations in the midst of the season of disaffiliations. They argued we were better united through Christ and making space for one another even in the midst of our divisions.

This temptation into division is one which goes against the very fabric of the redemptive work of Christ. Jesus’s salvific work done on the cross was for the salvation of all the world. The great commission he gave us before his Ascension sent us into every nation to make disciples. The notion that once we got to these nations that we would once again divide the body into small enclaves of those who felt they were theologically superior because of their doctrinal beliefs wasn’t a clause Jesus added to this mission of evangelism and discipleship. To have a future the church must rely on scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to fight the temptation of division we face today.

Local churches struggle with finding unity when they are tempted to put their desires before the mission of the church. Sometimes these desires are very worldly in nature, sometimes they are spiritual, and sometimes they are theological. The Pharisees do not corner the market on thinking they have everything figured out. The questions we must ask ourselves is how can congregations put unity before the temptations that might arise as their spiritual community navigates the murky waters of living out a life of faith in an ever changing and evolving world?

**Unity for Laity: How to Help Laity Have Hearts and Minds for Unity.**

In the local church this temptation, when thinking about Christian Unity, comes when we desire to make our lives easier rather than doing the right thing. Christine Cleveland in her book *Disunity in Christ: Discovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* when speaking about choosing friends and community groups she was a part of at her church writes,

> The way I saw it, there were two types of Christians: the wrong kind of Christian and the right kind of Christian…The funny thing is, the more I talk with people about these labels the more I realize that many of us carry our own descriptions of Right Christian and Wrong Christian.\(^\text{51}\)

This discourse about right and wrong Christians is one which leads us to a place where we have to name the temptation we face as the body of Christ. This temptation is one of choosing to intentionally make our life easier by taking the easy way out of Christian community.

One of the primary temptations Christians today face is the desire to be relevant or popular in our ministerial contexts while maintaining a culturally comfortable environment.

within our local churches. Most church people judge the success of the work of their church on numerical metrics which support this temptation. A closer look at local church metrics would likely show us churches aren’t a place where true diversity is the norm. For places who see success as numerical growth it seems counterintuitive for churches to not make space for believers of diverse cultural, social, political, and societal backgrounds within local church campuses. Perhaps our temptation is not really relevancy. Our problem instead is the type of relevancy we seek. We strive to be relevant, typically, to a homogenous group of people. A church community is not considered to be successful if the pews are not full and the tithes and offerings don’t show an abundance of wealth flowing into church coffers. With this definition of success, it makes sense why most churches are launching in rapidly growing middle to upper class areas. If you are going to achieve success as defined by cultural expectations, you must serve only the communities which can help you get there. The “bread” we are tempted by is found in the desire for easy and comfortable ministry. Cleveland argues that instead of embracing the richness of diverse theological and cultural thought within our local congregations, “we tend to focus on the things that differentiate us from other groups…If we interact with other groups at all, we usually do so at a distance and with at least a hint of suspicion.”

We also want to be liked and to like the people we are worshipping alongside in our church community. Typically, this plays out in a local church with a particular common theme running through why people attend a certain church. Cleveland states,

If people who seem familiar are perceived as more likable and people who are completely unfamiliar are perceived as less likable, we’re going to naturally befriend the people who

---

seem familiar. And the people who seem familiar are the ones that we see around us-our neighbors, fellow students at our schools, and people in or church.

This further strengthens the argument for churches striving to be comfortable within their congregational makeup. We like what is familiar. We don’t like change. We don’t, by and large, enjoy the unknown. William Abraham, when writing about doctrinal shifts within The United Methodist Church, writes, “Across the generations, Christians have expressed the gospel in the categories of their culture, and each successive shift of meaning has always threatened those committed to the old ways of thinking and acting.” So, If we prefer to be around those whom we are always around, and we are threatened by cultural shifts in understanding and expression of our faith, we are obviously going to need to be intentional as we seek to be congregations who desire a unity based congregational life.

So, what is the antidote to this aversion to Christian Unity by giving ourselves over to the temptation of relevancy? I would argue the first step is building unity in the church around mission. Cleveland writes,

From the very beginning, divisions have threatened the mission of the church. But it is also evident that from the very beginning, followers of Christ have demonstrated that they can overcome divisions in order to preserve and strengthen the mission. Clearly, we have the potential to be so engaged in our common identity as members of the body of Christ that we begin to treat each other as fellow ingroup members. The key to achieving a common ingroup identity is cross-cultural interaction.

This argument from Cleveland is provocative as it encourages us to lean into the discomfort we feel when we experience challenges to our comfort and relevance to our stakeholders. We are called to build the mission of our churches so they cannot be overcome by fear or misgivings.

---

54 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 150.
Our mission within our local churches should supersede our comfort. Jimmy Dorell agrees with Cleveland but takes this argument even further by naming the division which is holding the church back. He believes the tension the division the church is truly experiencing is the division between faith and action. Dorrell writes,

Division of belief and action has caused many churches to swing to one of two extremes. Either churches have become so seeker friendly that they avoid topics on sin and repentance, or they have become rigid and judgmental against those who claim faith in Christ but live “worldly” lifestyles. Neither view is quite biblical, because belief and action are still separated.55

The state of the church as it currently exists in the world requires us to shift away from these destructive and divisive practices, we have let creep into our institutional makeup. We must be willing to relinquish the status quo of fearful reclusion or division in faith in action. Instead, local churches must seek to bring the community together in faith and action.

The mission of The United Methodist Church is, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs.”56 This mission is larger than any comfort we might be able to take by excluding others from feeling welcomed and a part of our worship and congregational life in local churches. It also is not a mission statement that argues for weak platitudes. Instead, we as a church are tasked to form people into disciples who are equipped to go out into the world with their faith and make a difference. This mission requires action. The church gets it right when we build unity around reaching the world and forming people into disciples who take their faith out into the world and put it to use

56 The United Methodist Church, The Book of Discipline, 93.
transforming the way life is lived around them. If the church is going to be successful in a culture which is seemingly finding new ways to be at odds every day, we are going to have to focus on building unity around the mission of the church.

If we are going to live into our mission, we must be willing to make space for people who are not parts of our ingroup within our worship, our discipleship, our leadership, and our missional presence within the local church. Abraham writes,

> Whatever other Christians may say by way of criticism, it is imperative that United Methodists remember that they have a unique calling to express a catholic spirit in their approach to ecumenical occasions. Such a spirit does not ask for uniformity in doctrine as a condition for fellowship and joint action. Even if there were some things said and done which were questionable to the orthodox, such a divergence from orthodoxy does not warrant withdrawal or opposition. United Methodists, following Wesley, are people who think and let think. If we can join together in heart, then we are to extend the hand of fellowship, provoking one another to love and good works. What matters in these circumstances is not unity in doctrine or belief, but unity in action and mission.57

While Dr. Abraham is speaking specifically about ecumenical occasions, I would argue that every Christian congregation has elements of ecumenical spirit within it. In my fifteen years of ministry, I have never had a church which was filled with cradle United Methodists exclusively. In fact, most of the members of any church I have served have experienced other denominational expressions of Christianity or other faith traditions entirely. We live in an ecumenical world. People care less about the name on the door of their local church and more about the mission, ministry, discipleship, hope, care, and love they might experience inside the church than anything else. Our goal should be to create space for people even if they are on the margins of what our doctrinal and theological understanding in The United Methodist Church believes. Making space for people to live and grow alongside us surely increases our ability to reach

people for the sake of the kingdom of God. I say this not to diminish the doctrines and polity of The United Methodist Church. Later in this chapter I will discuss how our doctrine and polity makes room for Christian unity. These things just aren’t typically the determining factor off why someone would join and remain within a local congregation. We live in an ecumenical world, and the church must have space for people to come, grow, learn, be cared for, and serve. Making space for these things to occur is paramount for churches to be successful in the diverse landscape of religion today.

If we focus on the missional nature of our church, we will stop pursuing the relevancy we are seeking and achieve an irrelevancy that is transformative for lives. Henry Nouwen teaches us our goal is not to seek relevance or popularity. Instead, we are to be people who are “called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self.”58 This call to irrelevance is significant for church leadership and for church lay membership because it flies in the face of most popular leadership models for church growth espoused and endorsed by many church leaders today. The way we become relevant to people’s lives is not a new flashy worship service, a trendy name, a hipster vibe, or being on the cutting edge of stage production. All these things are good if used well, but the most important ingredient is to authentically and vulnerably be who you are, and to make space for others to do the same. If we can be received into a local church carrying all the burden and weight of sin which exists within our individual life it should be only reasonable to make space for others whose sins and experiences in the world might be different than ours. We are unified by the grace, love, acceptance, and faithfulness we have in Christ. The most relevant thing we can do in

---

culture today is to not worry about relevancy and instead worry about authenticity. We particularly need to be authentic in pursuing the mission of the church. The incredible gift of grace and salvation and the missional purpose we hold in common are enough to help us move forward together in Christian unity.

**Building Programs that Build Unity**

So how do we achieve this unity we desire in the church practically? One of the hardest things to do is admit change is needed. The old model of an hour of worship and an hour of Sunday School is no longer enough to bring people to a place where they feel plugged into a faith community the way it used to. If a local church is going to faithfully take up the challenge of making space for diversity and faith in action, it is going to have to do some deep soul searching to find out how to reach people and make the impact it desires to make in its local community. One of the most important traits a unity focused church can have is a robust and radical hospitality. The way people are welcomed into churches is paramount to the success of churches. The days of people coming into town and seeking out a church and staying because there aren’t many other options in most towns in America is over. There are churches on every street corner. One of the surest ways to lose out on being able to make an impact is to fail at hospitality when people make the decision to come and be a part of Christian community. Christine Pohl writes,

> The earliest Christians understood the importance of hospitality. They knew that their welcome had come at a great cost, and that to be members of God’s household, brothers and sisters of Jesus, they would need to practice the same kind of costly welcome. And so, they welcomed one another into their homes when fleeing persecution or when traveling to share the gospel. They are together regularly so that the poor would be fed and so that they could keep their new Christian identity alive in a hostile world. They worshipped in homes in the first centuries and depended on the hospitality of the
homeowners. And, significantly, hospitality was the context within which they worked through complex and troubling ethnic and status differences.59

This concept of hospitality is one which many churches seek to achieve, but we always seem to fall short when hospitality becomes too costly. We are good at welcoming people to worship; we make sure bulletins make it into the hands of those who have wandered into our sacred spaces. Sometimes we even offer coffee and snacks to those who come into worship. Perhaps we have a nursery for smaller children and programming for school aged children and teens. All these things are great and are necessary for churches to disciple people as they grow into who God wants them to be, but hospitality is more than just having opportunities. Hospitality is making space. Hospitality in the early church, according to the book of acts, was full of providence for those who needed it. Acts 2: 43-46 states:

Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.60

This pericope from the book of acts challenges the church to live into the faith we have been gifted. It begins with the people being in awe of what God is doing in the world through those who had been called as apostles. Their awe and amazement don’t just impact them internally. They respond to what God is doing for them in an external way. They begin taking care of one another. The share everything. They sell off possessions to make sure the needs of the community are met. Everyone is fed. Everyone is invited not only to the temple to worship, but

---


60 Green and Willimon, *The Wesley Study Bible*, 1325.
also into the personal lives of the congregation of believers. As people are saved, they are brought into houses to share in food. They are cared for. What they were prior to becoming believers doesn’t matter. What matters is that they are people who have chosen a life of faith. They set aside all other worldly identifiers for the sake of the community.

In our local churches we may not have the luxury of this utopian understanding of the community of faith, but surely, we can make some compromises and concessions in light of the incredible gift of salvific grace which God has given us through Jesus. Internally this may look like building a team of people to serve at worship services and other large gatherings as intentionally placed extroverts. It is important for us to not only welcome people to worship. We also need to be able to invite them into our lives. One great way to do this is to have information in the hands of hospitality volunteers that serves as an invite to any event that is coming next. Some churches may have a Wednesday night meal. Make sure new guests are invited and tell them the meal is on the church.

Following up with people is crucial when seeking to build unity in the church. Inviting people in makes them feel as if they are part of the community. It gives them space to be a part of what God is doing. These invitations are not just to get people to come and be in the community of believers just to pad numbers. Instead, the follow up the church has, if it wants unity, has to be one that is personal. We should be seeking to get to know anyone who comes into a church. Our goal should not just be to get them comfortable and move on. Instead, we should be seeking how we can come alongside those in our midst. We should walk through life with them. Robert Linthicum writes,
When the church becomes a body of believers committed to each other’s liberation and empowerment in Jesus Christ, this will have a profound impact not only upon each other but also on all society around them. It will radically alter the Christian’s lifestyle into a pure, disciplined life. It will create a body of Christ that is truly liberating to all its members.\(^{61}\)

When we decide to put the needs of one another ahead of our own, when we are committed to doing good for one another, and when we are more concerned with the liberation, happiness, and wholeness of our congregational brothers and sisters we will experience unity within the church. In the first chapter we talked about all the things which divide us. Radical empathy and hospitality can overcome our discomforts and intolerances. We can be unified in Christ even if we don’t have a uniform idea of how we all thing the world should look.

Our churches should not only look inward if we want to have a church which prioritizes unity. We also must look beyond our doorsteps into the ecumenical world our churches reside in. A church which promotes unity not only in its walls but also in its community might be a church intentionally partners with churches who are culturally and/or theologically diverse. It might look like hosting courageous conversations about cultural and racial diversity issues within your local context. It might look like a local church working hard to not only missionally serve those who are struggling with the issues of poverty but also working to be in real and meaningful relationships with people who are going through poverty. Only when we truly focus on building these relationships with people whose lives have different experiences and lenses will we see this type of radical unity within the church which is needed if the church is truly going to be a place for all people to find hope in Christ. Irwyn Ince writes:

---

The heart of humanity’s problem is the one described in Genesis 3–A loss of intimate relationship with God and one another. In the garden of Eden nothing hindered our vertical or horizontal relationships. Indeed, the last verse of Genesis 2 is a portrait of intimacy: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (2:25). Everything was exposed to everyone. Every aspect of the relationship between God and humanity shone in the light. And it was beautiful.62

For Ince, the origination of our willingness to divide and remove ourselves from relationship with one another is hopelessly tethered to the fall of humanity. The moment sin entered the lives of human beings we began trying to hide and distance ourselves from God and from one another. Since that moment we have only gotten more creative at trying to hide the sinfulness we each individually carry as if by hiding it we can minimize its impact on our lives.

The byproduct of all this hiding from God and from each other in our sinfulness is loss of community. We have lost community with God and lost community with each other. Jesus is the only vehicle by which humanity has been able to find our way back into unity with God and each other. Faithfulness is the beginning of returning into community with God and one another. The Christian unity we desire can only be found through faithfully and intentionally making communing with God and each other essential parts of our spiritual and secular lives. Our faith must meet our secular life if there is hope for a true unified church.

Within The United Methodist Church there is a movement amongst church growth experts leading us to believe the hope of the church meeting these very needs of building community with God and with each other can be found in fresh expressions of Christian covenantal groups. These fresh expressions are a large part of what is needed to revitalize churches. The intention behind these fresh expressions is to help create new and creative groups

outside the normal church space and purview in the hopes of connecting the world to God. Fresh expressions argue congregations should take the church out into the world where people are, and through this ministry cultivate Christian community outside the walls of the church by meeting people where they are.

This means the gospel of Jesus Christ should be shared at trivia nights, on kayaks with small groups, in bowling allies, after movies, and anywhere else community is happening outside the walls of the church. In one church I have even heard of a Christian group who go and support their cities local minor league sports teams together. They buy a block of seats once a month, meet for dinner and prayer, then go to the game and do life together. This model of ministry shifts the definition of success for local churches. Instead of the old indicators based purely on numbers, success for churches is defined as new expressions of faith started and new groups cultivated. The goal is to bring the Spirit of God out into the world rather than hoping the world will stop in our local churches.

This movement towards fresh expressions is an attempt to capture the core essence of Christian community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when speaking about how Christian community is formed, states, “they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God permits them to meet together and gives them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and this “alien righteousness.”63 These fresh expressions of faith are meant to be Christian community groups that find Christ as their center as they go out and live in the

---

world. Done well, these fresh expressions of Christian community could bring back the old
Methodist class model that served the church in the past.

There is much about this movement to be applauded but there are some flaws. If done
incorrectly it becomes just another secular social club. The focus of each community founded by
fresh expressions must be Christ first. If not, it become just another hollow ministry without real
substance. David Watson writes when writing of the original Methodist class meetings says,

Whenever Christians meet together in the name of Christ to search out God’s will for
their lives, they remain, of course, human beings. As such, meeting in a social context,
they will occasion group dynamics; but something else will happen. The Spirit of God
will be present, working in and through the dynamics, to empower those Christians in
service for the coming New Age of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{64}

This concept of meeting together as Christians outside of worship is not a new one, but it is
important that we find new and meaningful ways to do so. When we live our lives together as a
community rather than segmented, we are there to support one another more fully through the
peaks and valleys of life. Building relationships and finding common bonds with our fellow
believers also creates relationships that last. We are much less likely to divide ourselves from
people whom we consider as close as family. The only way to build that familial intimacy is to
invest in our relationship outside the walls of the church.

One of the hardest things to admit as a church is the way we have always done communal
life doesn’t always work the same way it used to. I grew up going to church for four hours each
Sunday. One hour of worship, one hour of Sunday School, one hour of bible study, and one hour
of fellowship. Because I was a pastor’s kid, I also was at the church on Wednesday evenings for

\textsuperscript{64} David Lowes Watson, \textit{The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance}
one hour of fellowship and one hour of bible study. This trend has continued into my adulthood, but what I recognize is that this is not enough for most people as they seek to live into a life of faith seven days a week. The church buildings are no longer the hub of communal life they used to be. If the church is going to truly live into its missional call to make disciples of Jesus that transform the world we are going to have to get out into the world and start making disciples!

Local churches must look at their community and decide how to move forward into a new wave of evangelistic opportunities found through the intentional creation and maintenance of new expressions of Christian communal life. These communal expressions of Christianity are the best place for Christian unity to grow. This plan for reaching people should be undertaken with care. Fresh expressions of discipleship and covenantal formation should not only be a new and exciting easy to follow plan to solve all our church’s evangelistic problems. What they should be is encouragement to our church communities to be vulnerable and to offer ourselves in community and friendship to those who are inside and outside our local churches.

If we do the intentional work of creating real and meaningful community with those who live within proximity of our houses of worship, and intentionally build community we will find ways to serve the needs of our world which only a community of faith can accomplish. The church offers those who would come and be a part of it a life lived alongside a faithful community founded in the love and grace of Jesus Christ. This community is one built on loving God and loving one another. We love one another most intimately by loving the incarnate God; Jesus.\footnote{Nouwen, \textit{In the Name of Jesus}, 24.} Knowing Jesus is to have confidence we are loved without limit or condition. Perhaps
the fresh expression of United Methodism that is needed most is one which truly has space for diversity inside its walls.
Chapter 3

Doctrine, Polity, Theology, and Unity

In this section we are going to discuss one of the strengths of The United Methodist Church. As a denomination The United Methodist Church is uniquely situated to be more adaptive than most other mainline protestant denominations when it comes to facing the challenges of the world today. Part of our adaptive nature is our doctrine. We openly acknowledge the sacredness of other Christian traditions and seek to create Christian Unity beyond even a denominational level. Our doctrine and polity call us to unity. The Discipline states, “Christian unity is founded on the theological understanding that through faith in Jesus Christ we are made members-in-common of the one body of Christ. Christian unity is not an option; it is a gift to be received and expressed.”

Within this chapter I will be detailing how our doctrine, polity, and theology help support unity within the church.

Within our denomination structure we have annual conferences which deal with more localized ministerial administration and organization. Jurisdictional conferences which help regions administrate the work of the church and help equip the church with leadership in the form of Episcopal leadership. And finally, we have General Conference. General conference is the body which edits and maintains the *Book of Discipline* and debates the modern issues which we as a global denomination are facing. Each of our conferences are a representative democratic body which seek to help guide and strengthen the church as we seek to serve the present age. We will address this more fully later in this section, but for now it is important to see the ties that

66 The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 90.
bind The United Methodist Church together. Every local congregation of The United Methodist Church is bound together through these denominational holy conferences which govern our theology, doctrine, and polity.

One of the greatest gifts God has bestowed on The United Methodist Church is its doctrinal desire to make space at the table of Christ everyone through the process of proclaiming and sharing the grace of Jesus Christ with the world. The way United Methodists view the grace of God create space for unity. The United Methodist Church’s doctrines of grace, sacramental theology, and its ever-evolving polity which has been formulated and adapted over time aid its local congregations in the effort to be transformational communities united in evangelistic love with all the world. This openness of within the doctrinal structures of The United Methodist Church tear down the arguments for a uniform expression of the doctrines of our church. The priority of unity over uniformity is made apparent in the way we think about our doctrine, polity, and theology.

This grace is made most apparent within local congregations of The United Methodist Church. The doctrinal belief in prevenient grace throws the doors open wide to all people. One of the hallmarks of The United Methodist Church has been the phrase ‘Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.’ This slogan is one which has been shared across The United Methodist Church and captures the heart in which the church was formed. The church’s doctrine of prevenient grace creates a worldview which names the sacred worth of all human beings. We believe that everyone is loved by God. Our hearts, minds, and doors are open to anyone who would be willing to come and be a part of our local congregations.

The local church, if it is going to be a place where Christian unity is promoted, is the most important place for intentional and significant instruction in discipleship and community
development. The United Methodist Church has space for people to worship in diverse ways that reach the communities and cultures which surround it. The *Book of Discipline* states,

> We believe the order of public worship need not be the same in all places but may be modified by the church according to circumstances and the needs of men. It should be in a language and form understood by the people, consistent with Holy Scriptures to the edification of all, and in accordance with the order and *Discipline* of the church.\(^67\)

Diversity in worship is an integral part of creating Christian unity in a local church. The United Methodist Church is an incredibly adaptive denomination. Though our worship services are similar in many of our local congregations, there is quite a bit of room for local congregations to adapt worship elements and liturgies to meet the needs of the congregation in which it resides. This adaptiveness while kept in harmony with the essential doctrines of the church allows local congregations to reach people in ways which speak into the needs of their lives.

For a local congregation to begin sharing grace with the world, as noted before, churches must have space for all people by ensuring the church is inclusive enough to meet the spiritual needs of the people who may walk through the door. Doctrinally the denomination has worked hard make this doctrinal aspiration a reality. The polity and doctrines of The United Methodist Church have been formed over time to bring as many people as possible into discipleship of Jesus Christ. The mission statement of the church is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”\(^68\) This mission statement derived from the great commission, and by its very nature demands a sense of unity amongst believers.

The unity we need for the present age can only be gained if we lean into the polity and doctrine we have in our *Book of Discipline* around the issue of inclusivity within the church. Inclusive ministry requires a congregation and its leaders to put aside existing prejudices and

---

\(^67\) The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 76.

\(^68\) The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 93.
exclusivities which restrain the growth of the kingdom of God. Paragraph 4 of the *Book of Discipline* states,

The United Methodist Church is part of the church universal which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection.\(^{69}\)

This paragraph of the Discipline places the burden of inclusivity on all local congregations of The United Methodist Church. It is important to note inclusivity is not to be mistaken with acceptance and permissiveness. One of the pitfalls many churches struggle with is the idea that to be unified we cannot have any articles of belief that would be controversial. This is not the case. It would be a mistake to believe Jesus was never controversial in his earthly ministry.

Controversy will occur when people of faith are seeking to make a difference for the kingdom of God on earth. The question is whether or not this controversy serves the true desire of the mission of the church or not. Controversially standing in the gap for the rights of people whom society has harmed is exactly the place the church should stand. The United Methodist Church is meant to be a place where all people’s sacred worth is not only affirmed. But also fought for. Our goal as a denomination has never been to create uniform Christians who look, think, act, and worship in the same way. Instead, we are an inclusive denomination which allows people to think, explore, and seek God’s guidance as we live out our faith in this present age.

While we affirm the sacred worth of all people, the church does not accept all cultural norms which exist in the secular world as a part of the kingdom of God. Though we don’t accept and endorse everything people may do, inclusiveness requires an understanding and grace

offered to people who do not think, look, and act just like the social creed of our church. The social creed states, “We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world.” This statement places an obligation on local congregations to love, invite, and include people who exist outside of the current membership of the church, outside the accepted social principles of our denomination, and outside of the cultural norms of Christian society as a whole. We should do so in as kind and gracious manner as possible to promote the grace and love of God proclaimed in Holy Scripture to live into the missional responsibility to make disciples of Jesus Christ. So often we forget the fact disciples of Jesus aren’t just born perfect. They are, in fact, made. They are made from people who are broken, fallen, and indelibly stained with sin. If we are to be assured in our salvation, we have to believe that God can save everyone. Everyone is of incredible sacred worth. For this reason, we must love our neighbors who are outside the church before we are able to get them into the church. When we invite them in and receive them, we have to be willing to receive them into our community without reservation. Only after acceptance and trust are built will change occur.

If the church takes the call to have an inclusive society within the confines of its local church membership seriously these local congregations will provide a vital source of hope for those who are marginalized or disenfranchised with Christianity. The United Methodist Church has been seen as a middle ground between the evangelical right and the progressive left within the mainline protestant traditions. This middle ground stance revolves around making practical faithfulness available to ordinary people. Scott J. Jones writes, “some parts of United Methodist

---

doctrine aim at being “plain truth for plain people,” seeking to put the truth of the gospel into words that ordinary Christians can understand.” 71 Jones’ is arguing the UMC offers very practical and straightforward practices and theology. These simple and practical approaches to spiritual life are meant to engage people who come from many different walks of life to a common place of discipleship.

The most common ground people within a local congregation of The United Methodist Church share are the membership vows. When a person joins a local church in the UMC they agree to, faithfully participate in its ministries with their prayers, presence, gifts, witness, and service. In response the congregation agrees to welcome these persons into their community with Christian love. They also reaffirm their promise to be faithful in their prayers, presence, gifts, and service. 72 These commonalities amongst the membership of a local church create a solid foundational agreement from which all other work can begin. If we promise to faithfully pray, show up, tithe, and support the church and then actually follow through on these things there is already an enormous amount of shared buy in achieved. From these vows local congregations can build a resilient societal structure which can withstand the struggles of the day. The issue we have faced is we haven’t spent enough time developing a rich understanding and intentional implementation of these vows practically lived out in congregational life. When we take steps to intentionally educate and reinforce these core values, we find ourselves in a much more forgiving and understanding place as we face struggles within the church.

71 Scott J. Jones, United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 78.
Currently our denomination is fracturing over struggles around the issue of human sexuality. One of the blessings The United Methodist Church has is the middle ground approach it takes to making discernment on issues like this one. Though our discipline is clearly traditional on issues of marriage and sexuality we have compassion for people who live outside of our theological norm. The Discipline states, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” At first glance this might seem like a compassionless statement, but the Discipline goes on to say,

We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. This statement shows the middle ground approach used as we seek to divine God’s calling within the context of local congregations.

This balanced approach to our doctrinal work is due to what Bishop Mack Stokes calls the “balanced vitality” of The United Methodist Church. He states, “United Methodism is vital Christianity because in it the strivings of the moral life and the wonderworking power of the Holy Spirit come together into a dynamic unity.” The United Methodist Church creates space where morality and spirituality come together to create space for the Spiritual practices of the church to combine with the needs the local congregations within United Methodism. This collision of spirituality and practical need creates tension between secular values and historical Christian doctrine. In the midst of this tension grace transforms the hearts and minds of people as they come to believe in Christ and make the decision to be disciples.

73 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 113
74 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 113
Grace-filled inclusivity is the beginning The United Methodist Church’s triune understanding of grace. This theological explanation of the grace of God offers insights not into different forms of grace, as God’s grace is not fragmented, but in how the grace of God reaches people along the journey of their discipleship. The Book of Discipline states, “God’s grace is manifest in all creation even though suffering, violence, and evil are everywhere present. The goodness of creation is fulfilled in human beings, who are called to covenant partnership with God.”76 The Discipline is making the argument that God’s grace is prevalent in all of creation. There is no place in all of creation where God, the creator, does not exist and share grace with God’s creation. Even in the midst of evil God’s grace is present and working. Each human being is formed in the image of God and because of this is of incredible sacred worth. Suffering, violence, and evil don’t’ change this fact. The manifestation of the grace of God through Jesus in all of creation attests to the Lordship of Christ over all the earth. Jesus the Christ is rules over all of creation. Sinners and saints are under his divine dominion and rule. Ted A. Campbell states a, “historic Methodist emphasis has been on the love and compassion that God has for all humankind.”77 If our understanding of grace is one that includes all of humankind then we as followers of Christ by our own admission have to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. If Jesus has grace for all of us then, how can we not find grace for each other. Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem in the gospel of Matthew 23: 37-39 depicts this notion of God loving even those who are on the wrong path. Jesus says,

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I

---

76 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 52
tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

This pericope of scripture illuminates the heart of Jesus as he looked upon a group of people who knew were less than who God desired them to be. He knew the hardship they would face. He knew the destruction coming. He knew they deserved it, and yet he wished he could protect them. He wanted to gather them all in. As we think about what a local church should look like we have to consider what it means to have the heart of Christ for all people. We have to make our churches a place where people can come and gather under the safety and love of the wings of Christ like chicks gathered under their mother hen’s wings. We do this by leaning into our theology of grace.

To fully understand grace in The United Methodist Church local congregations must take seriously the need to understand the ways the grace of God is experienced in our lives. The discipline states,

Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. While the grace of God is undivided, it precedes salvation as “prevenient grace,” continues in “justifying grace,” and is brought to fruition in “sanctifying grace.”

As local congregations and the individual believers within it begin to understand these different ways, we experience the grace of God they become more capable of not only receiving, but also of sharing this grace.

This prevenient grace which is given to us before we believe is grace, which is undeserved and, in some cases, perhaps even unwanted, and yet God’s love and grace for us

---

79 The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline*, 52
exists before we are even capable of understanding it. When speaking about this prevenient grace the Discipline states,

This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God’s will, and our “first slight transient conviction” of having sinned against God. God’s grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith.\(^80\)

As described in the discipline this prevenient grace is the beginning of a life of faith. For an infant baptized into the faith is the promise of a safe space to learn and grow with a family of believers alongside to help shepherd and guide. It is the assurance of faith being taught and kept as a child grows to understand and prepares to take on ownership of faith for themselves.

For an adult believer this grace gives us the courage to make the decision to join a small group. Prevenient grace is the first foray into becoming a disciple. It is the beginning of repentance. What is needed in this moment in a person’s life is a safe local congregation to join, to grow, to question, and ultimately to make the decision to follow Christ.

This understanding of prevenient grace places a burden of action on mature believers. If God loves us before we love him then we are called to love on another before any reason for this love to be given is shared. One of the struggles we face as local congregations is the transactional nature of our relationships within the church. So often we treat one another as just another number or just another seat filled in the sanctuary. We value those who seem valuable, but our doctrine of prevenient grace challenges this. We are called to see value and worth in people before they show any signs of value or worth to our community. This ties into the hospitality we spoke about earlier in this chapter.

\(^{80}\) The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 52
The initial experience of God’s grace is powerful and is central to the teachings of how salvation is gained for a believer. This prevenient experience of God’s grace leads those who are willing to respond to its gentle call to a place of salvation. During this salvific moment we experience grace in a new way as we are justified. The Discipline states, “In justification we, through faith, forgiven our sin and resorted to God’s favor. This righting of relationships by God through Christ calls forth our faith and trust as we experience regeneration by which we are made new creatures in Christ.”

The experience of Justifying grace is different for many who are coming to Christ, but this is a time when churches need to be prepared to support people within their congregation. When someone makes a decision for Christ and comes to a place where they are either seeking baptism or renewing their baptismal covenant they are typically in a place where great spiritual growth can occur. The experience of grace during a time of justification is deeply transformative. It is a time when unity is made most apparent to people who are being initiated into Christ’s holy church. Regardless of the packaging and baggage they arrived with at the moment of baptism with, they are welcomed into the church. The only uniform thing about this process is the grace and love of God extended to every human being as they make a decision of faith and receive the transformative grace and love of God.

Local churches need to have processes and resources ready and available for people who are experiencing these moments. In smaller churches this may be as simple as the pastor and a few more mature in the faith laity prepared to walk alongside people who are experiencing a new or renewal of faith. In larger congregations this should look like an intentional process of establishing people within the congregation.

---

The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*,52
In many congregations which take this moment of justification seriously there are new member or next step classes offered on a regular basis. These are imperative for local congregations striving to assimilate new Christians into the life of the church. These classes also create space for deep conversations about what kind of church a local congregation is. Within a local congregation these formational programs are a great way to educate new laity on the inclusivity and sacred worth of all human life. It is also a great place to intentionally bring church leaders beyond the pastor into the lives of new people. Often churches will have small group leaders, staff members, and clergy take turns over a few weeks leading these classes so when the class is completed the new members not only know what the church believes and does, but also know all the lay, staff, and clergy leaders in the church. This is a different form of inclusion than just being welcoming. This is a moment when people are given a full view of the work of the church. These intentional Christian discipleship trainings early in a person’s faith life help them to find ways they can put their newfound decision for Christ or membership in a local church to work.

This act of getting connected brings us to the next way we experience the grace of God. The salvific moment of justification isn’t the end of our spiritual journey and development. Instead, it is the beginning of a life of faith which is lived out daily. As a Christian continues to grow, learn, and walk with Christ they begin the process of sanctification. The discipline states, “New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart “habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor” and as “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.”

---

82 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 52
Sanctifying grace is what comes next once we have proclaimed our faith in Christ and made the decision to be his disciple.

One of the great things about The United Methodist Church is that our salvation is not the end of our work in the local church. We are called to go out into the world as agents of the same grace which has met us in our brokenness, justified us, and made us whole. In the local church our best shot at creating unity is doing so by the way we live into this sanctifying grace. We are unified by our mission though we are not uniform in our lived experience.

We are not saved by the grace of God to rest on our laurels. We are instead saved for a purpose. This purpose is to live our lives in response to the grace we have been given. Our works do not save us, but we do believe, “personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world.”

It is through this missional lens churches can begin seeing the pathway to unity. When we put our sanctification to work serving the world, we begin to see the world as Jesus sees it.

As we experience grace and strive to live it out, we believe we can achieve what we United Methodists call ‘Christian Perfection.’ The Discipline describes the process of achieving Christian perfection this way,

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one’s neighbor as one’s self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.

This idea of Christian perfection is the inspiration for us as we seek to continue down the path of sanctification. Our goal is to love God and one another as perfectly as we can. If we pursue this

---

83 The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 52
84 The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 52
as a response to the grace given us, we have no choice but to seek unity with one another as Jesus draws all people to himself.

**Sacraments**

One of the things local churches need to do to fully experience the grace of God and center themselves in this life of grace is observe the sacraments. Sacramental life is the way in which we corporately interact with the grace of God as followers of Christ. This Sacramental life offers opportunities for a local church to commit to their faith, recommit to God and each other, repent, and remember what God has done for each of us.

The United Methodist Church observes two sacraments but view many other acts as sacred. These two sacraments are Holy Communion and Baptism. Other faith traditions have more sacramental acts which take place in the church, but The United Methodist Church does not view them as integral to the life of faith as Holy Communion and Baptism. The Discipline states, “We believe the Sacraments, ordained by Christ, are symbols and pledges of the Christian’s profession and of God’s love toward us. They are means of grace by which God works invisibly in us, quickening, strengthening, and confirming our faith in him.”

Observing the Sacraments helps lead people to faith and grow in closer to God in their discipleship as they are sanctified by grace. Baptism and Holy Communion are essential means of grace in the life of a believer. These sacraments, by their nature, help us to experience the grace of God in a tangible way. God, through these sacraments, offers us grace in ways we cannot fully fathom. We are gifted grace which gives us eternal life. Our sins are forgiven. We are made new. These sacramental acts help us to experience the mystery and goodness of God’s grace while at the same time allowing us in some small way to participate in the work God is doing and has done in the world.

---

85 The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 74.
During the administration of the sacraments, a pastor serves the community of faith through Holy Communion, Holy Baptism, and other sacred acts. Observing the sacraments is important to the life of the church because these sacramental practices draw people together around a common bond that both old, young, rich, poor, white, black, etc... are found unified by the leveling nature of the grace imparted to us by God. All participants are sinners accepting the love and grace of Jesus Christ as a common community.

The practice of offering communion to any who profess belief in Jesus Christ places all people at the same place at the table of grace. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and therefore need the salvific grace of Jesus Christ offered to us just as it was offered to his disciples through the sacrifice of Christ’s body on the cross for all of us. Communion brings us into relationship with Christ and with all who have accepted the grace of Christ and all who will accept the grace of Christ in the future. The practice of regular holy communion creates unity within the church as it recenters congregations around the need for grace and the gift of salvation each of us has been given. In this moment we acknowledge our brokenness and imperfection. The table of grace found in holy communion is set for everyone. Diversity is welcomed at holy communion as we celebrate the holy work of Jesus who birthed our church through his sacrifice for a sinful world.

Utilizing creative liturgies to facilitate this understanding of the sacred unity found at the table of grace is imperative for local congregations. Within the United Methodist Hymnal there are three different liturgies for Holy Communion, and each of them brings a different view of Communion to the minds of local churches. In the Service of Word and Table I there is a section which states,

Holy are you, and blessed is you Son Jesus Christ. Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the
blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when you would save your people. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners. By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit. This litany of Jesus’ actions tells the story radical unity which brought diverse and desperate people to a place of transformational grace and reconciliation. This litany of Jesus’ actions tells the story of a unity built on a God who can overcome all obstacles between sinners and salvation. This liturgy is one which unity within the local church should be built from. The is liturgy brings forth the truths found in scripture of Jesus being with those who were the least and the lost and through his selfless and redemptive work bringing us closer to God and to each other.

The birth of the church, as celebrated in Holy Communion, was the beginning of a sacred community built on being unified of heart, soul, and mind. Through the act of Holy Communion, the local congregation is being centered around the risen Christ remembering his life, death, and resurrection. The sacrament of Holy Communion is a reminder of the sacrifice and atonement given to us by Jesus. This Sacrament,

Is a representation of our redemption, a memorial of their sufferings and death of Christ, and a token of love and union which Christians have with Christ and with one another. Those who rightly, worthily, and in faith eat the broken bread and drink the blessed cup partake of the body and blood of Christ in a spiritual manner until he comes. This act of Communion is a Sacrament in which we join as the living body of Christ remembering the love and grace that we have been given through the sacrifice of Christ for our sins and for the sins of all the world. This moment in worship which we consistently partake in is one which has always been a symbol of our unity with Christ and each other. It is a leveling and humbling practice which brings all of humanity into unity as we sit at the feet of Jesus and

---

86 The United Methodist Church, United Methodist Hymnal, 9.
87 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 74.
embrace the grace and love of Christ which has been given to us. In holy communion we acknowledge Jesus’ death and resurrection are the vehicle which we have been given to experience grace which offer eternal life. This grace is a gift given equally to all of us. There is nothing that we can do of our own volition to ever attain such a treasure.88

What we are doing as a local congregation through the sacrament of Holy Communion is celebrating the mystery of the death, resurrection, and grace provided through the passion of Jesus and how it forms and shapes those of us who were once lost into a more perfect image of the grace of God through sanctification over time. This holy mystery found during Holy Communion plays a central part in the grace filled inclusivity of the church. Gayle Carlton Felton writes,

Jesus Christ, who is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being (Hebrews 1:3), is truly present in Holy Communion. Through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, God meets us at the Table…The divine presence is a living reality and can be experienced by participants; it is not a remembrance of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion only.89 Communion is a time where participants are invited feel and embrace the grace and love of the risen Savior. It is a time when we, as the body of Christ, affirm that God loves us unconditionally, and that we are called to reciprocate this love to God and share it with our neighbors. It is also a time where we, as followers of Christ, embrace the role the grace which has been imparted and imputed on us to form us into a new creation: the living body of Christ born of the Spirit and active in the world. We are called as imperfect beings into the love of Christ.

---

88 Jones, United Methodist Doctrine, 266.
This time of Holy Communion is a reminder that God’s perfect love and grace has called to all who live in this broken and fallen world not only to receive salvation, but to be a part of the work of God in the world. This work is all about living into a grace filled community which is inclusive enough to reach the least and the lost of our society. Holy Communion requires us to acknowledge how God is mending our brokenness through grace and love and through this mending is calling us to a place where our community resembles and reflects this grace and love to any and all who, like us, have been formed in the image of God. In Holy Communion we participate in this act which is a remembrance of the last supper. At this last supper Jesus ate with his disciples who came from all walks of life. One of these disciples would betray him. One would deny him three times. One would doubt him. All were still welcomed to the table. All were still offered the same opportunity at grace. As we gather at the table of grace during Holy Communion, we recognize the converting power it has as we partake of the mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. This table unites us all as sinners who have fallen short. Everyone is invited. God’s grace is sufficient for us all.

The other Sacrament The United Methodist Church observes is baptism. The sacrament of baptism is the initiation into the kingdom of heaven and the community of Christ, the church. John Wesley wrote,

If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two—the doctrine of justification, and that of the new birth: the former relating to that great work which God does for us, in forging our sins; and the latter to the great work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature.90

---

The act of baptism is the outward sign of the new birth, and the mark of belonging to God’s family. Through baptism, we become something more than what we were—a member of God’s eternal family. This gift of baptism is the acceptance of the grace of God that transforms us from whatever we were when lost to sin into a vibrant and important member of the kingdom of God. This gift is open to anyone who would profess Jesus Christ as Lord.

In the local church baptisms ought to be a moment of tremendous celebration. This is the moment someone makes the decision about who they are going to be. This is a moment of new birth for a believer. Scott Jones writes, “baptism is not only a “sign of profession” but also a “sign of regeneration or the new birth.”91 This moment of new birth is incredibly important for us as followers of Christ. It is an acknowledgement of the divine grace which has been given to each of us. Baptism is the initiation into Christ’s holy church. In this moment we are made one with each other and with Christ. Baptism is not restricted to only people who have everything figured out. It is for people who are making the decision to follow Christ even though they are not yet perfect people. This is significant for local congregations seeking to build unity because this baptism which we all hold in common is a unifying bond which goes beyond our mortal imperfections and speaks to the unified nature of the kingdom of God. We are all made on through our one God, one Grace, on faith, and one baptism. Celebrating Baptism is truly celebrating unity within the church.

The sacrament of Baptism is important because it signifies the moment in which humanity is allowed the privilege to be a part of God’s Kingdom as fully participating citizens in the work of God in the world Part of the inclusivity of the grace of God found in The United Methodist Church is the way we see this baptismal covenant as a covenant to be in partnership

91 Scott J. Jones, United Methodist Doctrine, 258.
with the Spirit of God in the world. As we accept the grace of God through the waters of baptism we are justified for a purpose. Our citizenship in the Kingdom of God is not delayed until death and resurrection, but instead begins as we are made new by the Spirit of God as we accept this grace.

Baptism is a deeply transformative experience for both the initiate and the congregation as we grow in relationship with one another and with God. Through Baptism, we experience a transcendent moment in which we are connected to Christ through the shared experience, which is Baptism of water, and then we are connected to Christ through the spiritual baptism of the Holy Spirit. Rowan A. Greer states, “Baptism, for example, is consistently presented in the patristic Church as the exodus and entrance to the true promised land, as the restoration of paradise, and as entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem”\(^92\) I like the imagery of exodus when we describe Baptism. It gives us the ability to envision Baptism into God’s Holy Church as an Exodus from slavery to sin and death and the entrance into the Promised Land that contains eternal life, love, and glory.

The unity found in baptism is incredible as it helps us as we seek to find commonality with each other. Our baptism is a mark of unity with the Spirit of God and with each other. Through baptism we become part of a community which will not be split apart by the struggles and strife found in this world, but instead it is a sacrament which urges us to see our immortal kinship found in Christ. To be a member within The United Methodist Church you have to be baptized. The Discipline states,

The United Methodist Church is a part of the holy catholic (universal) church, as we confess in the Apostles’ Creed. In the church, Jesus Christ is proclaimed and professed as

Lord and Savior. All people may attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, and become members in any local church in the connection.\footnote{The United Methodist Church, \textit{United Methodist Hymnal}, 155.} Baptism and Communion as the sacraments of The United Methodist Church each point towards Unity within the church which is necessary if local congregations are going to achieve the potential they have. The Discipline clearly makes space for anyone who desires to come and worship and receive the sacraments. This intentional unity put forward by the church’s doctrinal and theological understanding of sacraments places a burden of inclusive unity on the church. There is no limiting factor. Anyone who wishes to experience the transformative grace of God is welcome. If the church leans into this and embraces the universal nature of the love and grace of God, there is no end to the good the church can do in this world and the souls it might be a part of saving and transforming for the world that is to come.

\textit{United Methodist Polity and Christian Unity}

The final section of this chapter will address how the polity of The United Methodist Church supports this gift of grace filled inclusivity and through this inclusivity is built for Christian unity. To do this we must define how the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These found marks of the church tell the story of grace filled inclusivity within the structure of The United Methodist Church. This structure helps the church live into Christian Unity as it seeks to meet the needs of people in local congregations and communities all over the world.

\textit{How the Church is One}

First, we must answer the question: how is The United Methodist Church one? When addressing this mark of the church David M. Chapman writes,

The unity of the church is necessarily visible in common structures of ministry and oversight, as well as being invisible (as a spiritual and sacramental reality). Visible unity expresses the social reality of a gospel of reconciliation, anticipating the final
recapitulation of all things in Christ...Unity will be achieved through mutual recognition (where possible) or an act of reconciliation that involves an exchange of ecclesial gifts.\textsuperscript{94}

His argument is based primarily in how the church is structured. This oneness of the church is intrinsic to United Methodist doctrine. Part of how the structure of the church is shaped is a process called holy conferencing. This holy conferencing is a process by which representatives elected to serve gather to do particular tasks as are assigned by them based on which type of conference is being held. This holy conferencing is an essential part of United Methodist polity and helps guide the church as it goes about doing its work. This conferencing builds unity as it brings people together as decisions are made democratically.

The most basic unit of The United Methodist Church is the General Conference. The general conference is a gathering of delegates from each annual conference from around the globe to help refine our theological, doctrinal, missional objectives of our denomination. The General Conference is the most un-uniform body within The United Methodist Church one can imagine. People with different cultural values, societal norms, languages, nations, and any other demarcation of diversity come together to try and make decisions for the general church.

Most recently the General Conference of The United Methodist Church has been making waves as it has been debating and working on the denomination’s stances around the issue of human sexuality. The only conference which can make decisions which would change church law in the Book of Discipline is this General Conference. The way it goes about its work is a very inclusive process. Having delegates from all over the world come together to make these decisions might sound clunky or a bit tough to manage, and it is, but this way of conferencing speaks to the importance of unity within the church. We believe in everyone having a voice and

vote at the table. The representatives at general conference are voted for by their annual conferences and gather every four years to discuss how our theology and polity can be refined to meet the needs of the world today.

The next level of conferencing which occurs in The United Methodist Church is Jurisdictional Conference. These Jurisdictional Conferences have many functions that have to do with setting the missional goals and executive leadership for the Jurisdictions in which they serve. The Jurisdictional Conferences elects bishops, defines Annual Conference boundaries, and performs several other functions in order to help Jurisdictions of The United Methodist Church continue their missional work. Jurisdictional Conferences are formed around geographic areas and allow these regionally connected annual conferences an opportunity to more fully explore how the church can be missionally deployed and resourced with leadership in each area. The work of the Jurisdictional conference is important because bishops within an annual conference typically help shape the missional goals of an annual conference.

The next conference we have is the Annual Conference which is a gathering of representatives from local church congregations and clergy to set missional goals and administrative policies and procedures for a defined area of episcopal authority. Annual Conferences are typically held with churches who reside within a relatively small geographical area. Annual Conferences not only provide clergy to local churches, but they are the gathering of laity and clergy who represent each congregation within a local church in an Annual Conference. Within this gathering localized mission initiatives are created, extension ministries are formed, legislation is passed to help churches do the mission and ministry of the church, pastors are assigned churches to serve, and new clergy are licensed, commissioned, and ordained. The work
of the Annual Conference is all about deploying resources into the world for the sake of achieving ministry.

The final conference we will discuss which occurs in The United Methodist Church is the Charge Conference, which is a conference consisting of a local congregation, their pastor, and a presiding elder to help set the missional goals and set the administrative future for a local congregation. In these conferences the administrative work of the church is ratified, candidates for ministry are put forward, new building and ministry initiatives are launched, and the church is deployed into ministry in the world.

While this organizational structure might seem cumbersome it reinforces this notion of grace filled inclusivity. It does this by offering representation at every level of administrative oversight and leadership within the denomination. The church is one because it deliberately and intentionally makes a seat at the table for people who are elected by their congregations, and conferences to represent them and their concerns to the entire denomination in the hope that much like in our individual lives our corporate expression of Christianity found in The United Methodist Church would be perfected by the grace of God as we seek to walk more faithfully with God as time moves forward.

Clergy within The United Methodist Church are itinerant in part to help reinforce the notion the church is one. As a clergy person a pastor is not a member of a local church. Instead, a pastor is a member of the annual conference. This conference membership structurally denotes an emphasis at a local pastor level of understanding the connectional nature of the congregations which all are connected within not only our annual conference, but also our jurisdiction and our denomination. Through itinerancy clergy, not only belong to the conference in membership but are also encouraged to work as a support network for one another. Generally, the pastor who
served a church prior to a new pastor coming in does quite a bit of work to prepare the way for the next clergy person who is coming. Very often pastors lean on one another as they lead churches to new places by reaching out to the former pastors of local churches to hear how the past of the church might inform and influence its work in the future. This collegial network of clergy, when working properly, creates a community of leaders who can meet the needs of congregations while having a network of support around them as they do the hard work of leading congregations in mission and ministry to the world. Within this network of clergy diversity is also very apparent. United Methodist clergy are not uniform in their makeup. They don’t all go to the same seminaries. They don’t all come from the same cultural backgrounds. They aren’t all the same gender. The unity found in United Methodist clergy is the response to the call to serve within the United Methodist Church and their willingness to uphold and teach its polity, doctrines, and theology.

This idealistic system doesn’t always function as smoothly as it might seem on paper. In fact, much of The United Methodist Church’s current struggles around polity and doctrine are happening because the clergy have found an impasse where they aren’t unified. Some are angry with denominational structures which haven’t always functioned as smoothly as desired. Some are angry with political and ideological stances which have created tensions within the body of the church, and others are just exhausted with the infighting and arguments which have occurred within our connectional system. Many of these tensions are highlighted in the first chapter. If the church is going to be unified in the future the clergy of the church are going to have to become more unified. Later in this dissertation we will explore how pastors can lead local congregations for unity, but the first step for clergy to have the resources to do this unifying work is to find a way to create unity within the ranks of the clergy. This doesn’t mean there won’t be
disagreements or differing viewpoints in how the church should do its work. It does mean relationships between clergy colleagues should be tended to in a fruitful and edifying way. Simply setting up times to meet with local clergy colleagues within the denomination for lunch and coffee can take people who have extremely differing viewpoints to one another on some issues within the local church find common ground.

If the church is going to be a place of unity clergy need to set the example. In times past it has been the practice for clergy to create accountability groups which is a good practice, but I argue the clergy of The United Methodist Church should take the next logical step. If we as clergy truly hope to create unified spaces of worship and community for our people, we should go about the work of creating this community within clergy ranks. Clergy should get together if for no other reason than just to have community with people who face similar pressures and stresses as they lead local congregations. Clergy should gather with one another to get ideas of how to deal with issues facing our churches and gain inspiration from one another as they seek to launch and sustain viable and vital ministries. Accountability may be a part of what clergy groups create, but truly clergy should focus their hearts and minds on creating a space where the people who are leading our local churches gather and support one another. What we need is to build our relational power within our denomination so the church can in fact lead from a place of unity.

Relational power is built, according to Robert Linthicum, by, “intentionally building relationships that engage people in public life.”95 In my context there are three centrally located regions within my district of the annual conference which could host such a gathering. These should be places where pastors of local congregations intentionally come together to build

---

relational power. In the past United Methodist congregations were known for being congregations which supported and enhanced each other’s ministries. This practice has virtually died out in many places as congregations operate more and more independently rather than embracing the unity of mission and purpose which their denominational ties offer them. Unity within the church is found not only within the local congregation, but in intentionally embracing the unifying nature of the connection within the United Methodist system.

*Holiness and Unity Within the UMC*

As we contemplate unity within the church, we inevitably have to ask ourselves the question of how the church maintains its holiness as it seeks to meet all people where and as they are in an effort to bring them into discipleship of Christ. In The United Methodist Church, practical holiness is the way in which holiness is expressed. As a general rule The United Methodist Church, though complex in many ways, seeks to simplify the discipleship process of its people into practical and tangible expressions of faith which can be lived out by its members in meaningful ways. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* states,

The church is holy in the sense that its members are called from the world to live and grow in fellowship with God and one another. Holy living is doxological and not deontological, a life not of obligation but of beatitude, through participation in the means of grace and by showing forth the fruit of the Spirit in acts of faith and love that are transformative of self and human society.96

We, as United Methodists, are called to live out the grace that we have been given. Our very lives which are sanctified by the grace of God are meant to be intentionally lived as a response to the grace which we have been given. This means that each person who professes to follow United Methodist doctrine and polity must use their lives as a living representation of the grace filled inclusivity that first welcomed them into the fold of God. The Discipline states,

96 Avis, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, 323.
The ministry of all Christians consists of privilege and obligation. The privilege is a relationship with God that is deeply spiritual. The obligation is to respond to God’s call to holy living in the world. In the United Methodist tradition these two dimensions of discipleship are wholly interdependent.97

If we are going to create holy unity within our church, we have to take seriously as individuals the need for our faith to be lived out in the world. By its very nature this will not and cannot be a uniform and prescribed process. The cultural realities of the Gulf Coast where I am located and the cultural realities of a church in the Midwest are going to be different. So how does the United Methodist Church live out its holiness needed by the church in the world? This looks a lot like living into the membership vows each person who joins a The United Methodist Church takes. The way in which we are loyal to our church and uphold it with our prayers, presence, gifts, witness, and service matters.98 It is through this lived holiness the church shows how powerful the unity of the church really is. When a local church prays together, shows up together, supports the mission and ministry of the church, and then goes out and sacrificially serves its community and the world we truly see God move in the world. If we hope to see the church be unified, each congregation must make a decision to live out holiness in the world.

While we can quibble over theological disputes which, when taken within the fullness of theological understanding, are minute issues the church cannot be distracted from living out its mission. The local church exists to make disciples and deploy them into the world as agents of transformation for the kingdom of God. We are called not only to be holy, but to make the world around us a holy place. For this holiness to occur we all have to work together in unison. When churches work together for the glory of God incredible things can happen. The *Book of Discipline* states,

98 The United Methodist Church, *United Methodist Hymnal*, 48.
The local church provides the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. It is a community of true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.99

One way churches can do this is by taking an entrepreneurial approach to how their faith is lived out. St. Mark United Methodist Church which I named earlier was facing dire straits as it had been in decline for over a decade. Its membership began shrinking and no one was coming back into the area. The neighborhood the church was in was facing hard times. A gentrification process had begun in the neighborhood the church was in, and it became increasingly clear the church was going to have to make some hard decisions. Some of its members were selling out of their homes and moving with a substantial gain in their pockets to other parts of town. Others who were renting were facing the reality of being priced out of the place they lived.

The church was also facing the same struggle. It got so bad the church’s leadership, and I had a meeting to discuss whether it was going to close in the next six months. At this meeting the church decided to do something it hadn’t done in decades. We decided to intentionally begin working towards inviting all the community in. This process started with a prayer meeting. Everyone in the church and community were invited to come and pray for the community and write their hopes for the future on cards which would be looked at by the church leadership to see how the church could help.

This prayer meeting and visioning process opened the hearts and minds of the church members at this time. The church started senior adult ministries, it created community events tied to the seasons, it brought in local cover bands and gave them rehearsal space and took

99 The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 147.
performances in worship and events in lieu of rent. Finally, it took a house it owned and turned them into rental properties offered for affordable rates to help keep some of the members of the church who felt like they were being priced out of the community within the neighborhood. These actions of this church were done out of necessity, but arguably should have been things they were doing all along in their ministry.

Everything this church did wasn’t perfect, and it didn’t stop gentrification from happening. The efforts of the church did make an impact on lives. Their efforts brought the community closer together. It made space for people who otherwise would have never walked through the doors of a church. It gave hope to people who felt like they were having their community taken away. It also helped merge the community that would remain after the gentrification process with the community which was arriving in a safe space. The community transformed not only in income, but also in compassion. This all happened because the church made unity during this deeply difficulty and transformative time its primary goal. The church grew. The community changed. The church became the hub of this newly emerging community. This is what unity in the church can accomplish when it seeks to live out its holy mission in the world.

Ecumenical Relationships and Unity

The next step towards local churches achieving Christian unity is found in the way churches treat ecumenical relationships. David M. Chapman writes,

Methodists interpret catholicity quantitatively as denoting the universality of the church. Following Wesley’s lead, the Holy Catholic Church is perceived to be the sum of Christians living and departed, a universal community in which Methodism claims and cherishes its place.100

---

100 Avis, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, 324.
The United Methodist Church, from its inception, has an interesting and rich history when speaking about its formation. There is a real sense in which, had history been just slightly different, The United Methodist Church would be a part of the Anglican connection. There has been much work in modern history to try and bring this thought into reality. As an offshoot from the Church of England, the Methodist movement has always had its roots found in another tradition. Perhaps this is why The United Methodist Church is always looking at how it can be refined and informed by other Christian traditions all while clinging to its authority to ordain its clergy to serve its congregations. In this way The United Methodist Church shows its desire for unity. The Discipline defines the church as,

The community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ…It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.101

Because we are a tradition that is formed primarily through a historical connection to a faith tradition to which we do not belong we must be people who embrace and are unified with those who believe differently than us. We understand the reality that not all Christians are going to be uniform in every way, but we can be united in our love, service, and witness to Christ.

John Wesley never left the Anglican Church to become a Methodist. It is debatable as to whether the Methodist Church would have ever started if the Revolutionary War had not taken place as the Methodist movement took off within the Anglican Church. Because of this history, the DNA of accepting of ideas from other places and from other people is a part of the Methodist church’s theological tradition. This is played out in the real world as The United Methodist Church.

---

101 The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 73.
Church continues to seek to be reconciled with Christian faith traditions outside of the Methodist denominations.

Currently The United Methodist Church is in full communion with several Methodist traditions; The Evangelical Church in America, the Uniting Church of Sweden, and the Moravian Church. The United Methodist Church is seeking similar arrangements with our mother church, the Anglican Church, and hopes to continue the path of reconciliation until all Christian people might be reconciled. This desire for reconciliation is, once again, an indicator the desire for unity within The United Methodist Church. The grace filled inclusivity of The United Methodist Church draws people more closely together rather than splitting them apart.

This ecumenical unity in local congregations should be utilized at every reasonable opportunity. Partnering with local churches around United Methodist congregations is the best way for churches to multiply their efforts as they seek to offer the love of Christ in the world. Missionally churches are stronger when they work together. In multiple cases I have witnessed the powerful ability for churches to affect change in towns and cities as congregations band together to face the deep issues many of our communities face. Providing food for those who are hungry, shelter for those who are homeless, assistance for those who are without power and water, and resolving generations old conflicts around cultural struggles. Churches have the power to change the world when they walk united through faith in Christ and believing in the transformational power of the Spirit of God. Ecumenical unity leads to communities growing stronger and thriving together.

---

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome about just this type of ecumenical need as the church was just beginning to get organized. He writes,

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to do this and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.  

Paul, in this letter, is writing about how the churches are supporting one another and how this support helps them all. Jerusalem provided the spiritual blessings needed for the churches in Gentile regions to flourish. The Gentile had the material wealth needed to help those who were in Jerusalem be able to continue their spiritual work. The churches banded together to make the work of the Kingdom of God possible in the world. Our current context has so much more than our ancestors in the faith. It is imperative we strive to work together ecumenically in unity for the work of the church to flourish in the world.

Christena Cleveland argues the church needs to take the jigsaw approach to solving problems in the world. This jigsaw approach is derived from a teaching method. Cleveland when explaining the jigsaw classroom approach writes, “In these classes all of the assigned material is divided into as many parts as there are students in the group. Each student then learns his or her part of the material and is responsible for teaching it to the rest of the group.”

This method is one which local churches should take when seeking to solve problems in an ecumenical way. Each church and tradition provide a level of understanding on issues other traditions can learn from. Cleveland writes, “Church groups can and should adopt the jigsaw classroom approach when engaging in cross-cultural situations. The truth is that we are a body

---


104 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 159.
composed of interdependent parts, each with unique, God-given abilities and perspectives.”

Her argument here is churches should intentionally engage in bringing everyone to the table when tackling ecumenical cross-cultural work. In American local congregations we have these cross-cultural needs almost universally in every small town and city. If we hope to make an impact and live into Christian Unity, we have to place value on all perspectives when tackling the needs of our communities.

This may look like intentionally creating leadership groups for ministries which setup this type of inclusivity in its bylaws, or intentionally creating pastoral leadership groups which span denomination and tradition. Whatever form this takes in communities it is needed if the church universal is going to impact the world in a way which will do the best for the most people.

**United Methodism and Apostolic Succession**

The final piece to our theological and doctrinal case for unity within The United Methodist Church is how the denomination is apostolic. The *Book of Discipline* states, “United Methodists share a common heritage with Christians of every age and nation. This heritage is grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching.”

This statement means The United Methodist Church claims an apostolic heritage but does not claim apostolic succession. This understanding of being apostolic isn’t unique to United Methodism as other traditions have similar arguments. Rather than apostolic succession The United Methodist Church follows the apostolic tradition. In this way The United Methodist Church is more open to hearing and understanding the ecumenical world in which we find ourselves. People from many varied traditions find a home in The United

---

105 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 160.

Methodist Church as their understanding of following in the footsteps in the apostles. This openness helps cultivate an environment which emphasizes unity as it welcomes diverse people into both its membership and into the ranks of its clergy.

David M. Chapman describes the apostolic nature of the Methodist church this way, “Methodists seek to confess, to interpret, and to live the apostolic faith, the faith once delivered to the saints’, but do not regard continuity in ministry as a guarantee of apostolicity. Methodists interpret apostolicity as continuity in the apostolic mission.”\textsuperscript{107} This view on apostolic succession opens the doors for people to enter the work of the church more freely than if their only pathway to the church were through apostolic succession as is found in other faith traditions. The goal of The United Methodist Church is to help people live into the call of apostolic faithfulness and witness as described in scripture to the best of our ability.

\textit{Conclusion}

In conclusion, The United Methodist Church’s theology and doctrine embrace a grace-filled inclusivity which blesses the world as it seeks to empower people from all walks of life. If local congregations within The United Methodist Church are going to make a significant impact in the world, we have to claim our theological and doctrinal heritage and put them into use. We need to share the grace of God through baptism and communion. We need to embrace the call to be one church living out our \textit{holiness} in practical ways, \textit{catholic} in our approach to ecumenical relationships which can enhance and enrich the work of the church in the world and \textit{apostolic} in the way we continue to share the traditions of the church in the world. If we can do this well, we will be able to form our congregations around Christian unity without forcing them into

\textsuperscript{107} Avis, \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology}, 325.
uniformity. God’s love for us goes beyond our differences and gathers us together through grace, mercy, and love.
Chapter 4

Leading For Unity: Being the Clergy Unified Congregations Need

One of the most critical pieces of building a unified congregation is developing leadership that inspires unity rather than uniformity. Clergy play a pivotal role in building congregations who are focused on unity. The voice and vision of the pastor, even when the church has strong lay leadership, needs to be a guiding force within the church. In many local congregations, failures to succeed in the mission and ministry of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world can, in some part, be attributed to leadership struggles. These failures come often because the church’s vision isn’t aligned with the needs of the community surrounding the church.

In my current ministry setting at Navarre UMC on the panhandle of Florida evidence of this tendency is evident. The church has made many changes over the years. Pastoral changes, staff changes, worship changes, and even building projects. The church continued for a decade in a season of decline in the midst of all these shifts. These changes the church made were not bad in and of themselves, but there didn’t seem to be a guiding purpose to the changes. Instead, new things were tried just to try something different. The church owns and operates a preschool and a thrift store on top of all the functions of the church. The organization became unwieldy and unstable.

Shortly before my tenure at this church began the church decided to sit down and set some goals. The beginning step of this process was stating why the church was important to the community. What they found in this process was the functions of the church didn’t hold the same importance to the community as their missions. Their preschool and thrift store provided much needed help to families, but the church had become inward focused and desired to maintain
traditions and program ministries which had long since outlived their hay day. Out of this study the church decided to rectify this and embrace the call to not only seek to help its community but be in relationship with it. Community groups were invited in. New small groups and bible studies were formed. And finally, the church took space which had once housed run down offices and turned it into a communal space intentionally renovated to meet the needs of young families in the community. Those who the church once viewed as projects to be worked on became foundational members who helped the church make disciples. The result of this church’s work to intentionally create a leadership plan shifted it from a church which was barely hanging on to life to a church which is thriving.

Unity can only occur in a church when it realizes and recognizes its planning must include the desire to be unified. Dana Fearon in his book Straining at the Oars: Case Studies in Pastoral Leadership writes,

Planning keeps an organization fresh since it continually uncovers new directions. At the same time, it offers opportunities for discontinuing practices that have outlived their usefulness. In summary, planning develops new missions, enlists more members in the church’s ministry, and makes it possible for members to experience a renewal of faith and hope.108

Planning a leadership process for a church is not always a clean process. I can assure you not everyone will agree with very decision made. The goal of planning for a church is not always to make everyone happy, but it should be about meeting the needs of everyone possible. Navarre UMC had to make difficult decisions. In our follow up planning meetings, we deal with a myriad of issues the church still has. Good planning and church leadership focuses on making sure we are honest about our struggles, and finding ways to stay at the table together as we seek solutions.

Pastoral leaders in local churches must embrace a vocational call to help local congregations embrace a vision of mission and ministry which helps the church adapt and make progress as it seeks to serve its community. Christopher Beeley in his book *Leading God’s People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today* writes,

At the end of the day and at the end of a lifetime of ministry, the only thing that matters is whether we have made the love of God and spiritual growth of our people the top priority. What most excites a true pastor is not his or her reputation or advancement, but the growth and well-being of the church.109

For a pastor the focus of church leadership should always be the health of the congregation first and foremost. Planning and organizing the church’s work to create disciples who transform the world is essential and holy work. Each church has unique ways it is able to meet the needs of the community in which it resides. Leading churches in these efforts and casting a vision of how the church can serve its community is of paramount importance in our present age. The role of the pastor is to help congregations meet their potential. This is needed now as churches within the United Methodist Church were already in steady decline before this season of disaffiliation and church division occurred.

It is no secret worship attendance trends have been in decline in the United States for quite some time. According to Jeffrey Jones who works for Gallup,

The pandemic had a profound effect on U.S. society, and it continues to have an impact in some ways. Americans have been less likely to attend religious services over the past three years, and at this point, it does not appear that church attendance will revert to pre-pandemic levels. These recent trends have added to the longer-term decline in religious participation that Gallup has documented over the past two decades.110

---

This trend is one which should be troubling to every leader of a church in the United States. Within The United Methodist Church the trends are similarly troubling. Compound this with the departure of many churches through disaffiliation from the denomination and it would be easy to envision a doomsday scenario for The United Methodist Church as we know it. Pastors within the United Methodist connection have a decision to make. It is time to decide whether we are going to be a part of a new thing God is doing in the world or decide to quietly wait out the death of the denomination. I believe God is not through with The United Methodist Church yet, and because of this belief I hope clergy within The United Methodist Church will make the decision to embrace a call to unite its congregations into something truly transformational for our world today. The time for fighting over uniformity has to end if we are going to build a united denomination which can serve the needs of our local congregations.

To achieve this goal pastors first must vocationally embrace a call to create communities which seek to work together in unity to do the bring about the kingdom of God in our world. Clergy can achieve this by working to create, establish, and order the life of communities of believers who work towards actively being the body of Christ engaged in transformational mission and ministry in the world. This call to vocational service and unity through witness and ministry is what I will explore and seek to articulate in this section.

**Embracing the Call to Fearless Leadership**

If pastoral leaders are going to make a positive impact on leading churches to serve from a place of unity, they must fearlessly pursue unity within the structures and systems of the local church. One of the struggles most churches face is their fearfulness of doing what is necessary to pursue the mission and ministry of the church in a way which will lead to meaningful transformation. The *Book of Discipline* articulates the role of a pastor as a “fourfold ministry of
Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service.” To effectively lead each of these areas of ministry must be tended to. Though we will be dealing with them a bit out of order and have already discussed the importance of sacrament, in this section each of these areas of pastoral responsibility, when utilized well, can help bring the church into Christian Unity.

Order

To begin we first must define what the vocational role of a pastor is within the context of the local church. Pastors, vocationally, are members of God’s holy church who are called into leadership amongst fellow disciples of Christ. The Book of Discipline Outlines ordering the life of the church as a part of the vocational call of the pastor of the church. When describing the role of ordering the church the Book of Discipline states the pastor’ role is,

(1) To be the administrative officer of the local church and to assure that the organizational concerns of the congregation are adequately provided for.
   a. To give pastoral support, guidance, and training to the lay leadership, equipping them to fulfill the ministry to which they are called.
   b. To give oversight to the educational program of the church and encourage the use if United Methodist literature and media.
   c. To be responsible for organizational faithfulness, goal setting, planning and evaluation.
   d. To search out and counsel men and women for the ministry of deacons, elders, local pastors, and other church related ministries.

(2) To administer the temporal affairs of the church in their appointment, the annual conference, and the general church.
   a. To administer the provisions of the Discipline.
   b. To give an account of their pastoral ministries to the charge and annual conference according to the prescribed forms.
   c. To provide leadership for the funding ministry of the congregations. To ensure membership care including compliance with charitable giving documentation requirements and to provide appropriate pastoral care, the pastor, in cooperation with the financial secretary, shall have access to and responsibility for professional stewardship of congregational giving records.
   d. To model and promote faithful financial stewardship and to encourage giving as a spiritual discipline by teaching the biblical principles of giving.

\[111\] The United Methodist Church., The Book of Discipline, 275.
e. To lead the congregation in the fulfillment of its mission through full and faithful payment of all apportioned ministerial support, administrative, and benevolent funds.
f. To care for all church records and local church financial obligations, and certify the accuracy of all financial, membership, and any other reports submitted by the local church to the annual conference for use in apportioning costs back to the church.

(3) To participate in denominational and conference programs and training opportunities.
   a. To seek out opportunities for cooperative ministries with other United Methodist pastors and churches.
   b. To be willing to assume supervisory responsibilities within the connection.
   c. To lead the congregation in racial and ethnic inclusiveness.\(^\text{112}\)

This list of responsibilities of the pastor help guide and define the role and work of a pastor. To lead a church is not an easy or simple thing. The pastor of a congregation is the missional leader of the local congregation who helps connect the congregation to the denominational missions and ministerial focuses. This list of items a pastor is responsible for can sometimes seem overwhelming and daunting, but this is the role, at least in part, effective pastors must play if they hope to build communities of believers who are table to accomplish the important work of creating disciples whose faith and spiritual strength are strong enough to walk alongside the Spirit of God to transform the world. The task is not a light one.

This calling to serve as a pastor is one that must be cultivated. Prior to the acceptance of the role of pastor The United Methodist Church requires those who are experiencing a call to ministry to go through a candidacy process, but this process is only as useful as the candidate truly makes it. To lead a church people who feel called to ministry need to spend time in intentional discernment and formation before they step into the role of pastor. Some of the most tragic struggles in ministry occur when people decide to be a pastor without fully exploring and understanding their calling and the responsibilities which come with accepting the leadership

\(^{112}\) The United Methodist Church., *The Book of Discipline*, 276-277.
role of being a pastor. It is difficult to lead a church no matter how you arrive at the place of becoming a pastoral leader but to be effective careful attention to equipping is needed. When writing *The Book on Pastoral Rule*, the first thing St. Gregory the Great writes about are the issues with bringing in a pastor who has felt the call to ministry but is not prepared. To prepare for the role of pastor, Gregory argues we first need to study.\(^{113}\) He is trying impress upon any who seek to live out the call to ministry the nature and weight of the decision they are making. Vocationally clergy need to spend a significant amount of time in study.

One of the issues seen most often in local congregations with newly licensed pastors is the unpreparedness for ministry many recent seminary graduates or newly licensed local pastors seemingly possess. Within The United Methodist Church there are many different types of pastors. There are ordained elders, ordained deacons serving in a pastoral appointment, commissioned persons who are working towards ordination, licensed local pastors, and lay-supply pastors. Each of these groups come with their own requirements and signify different levels of preparation and study which have gone into each candidate. The ordained elders and deacons have finished their required theological education and have been tested and scrutinized to see if they are capable of understanding and applying the education they have received. Commissioned persons have finished their theological education but are yet unproven. Licensed local pastors are required to spend time as they serve completing various course of study requirements, and lay supply pastors are trained by each annual conference to help fill ministerial needs of congregations around the connection when pastoral leadership is in short supply. These

trainings and educations received by each different classification of pastor are helpful and are very good, but sometimes they are lacking in practical ministerial education.

Much of this lack of preparation is not necessarily the fault of the seminary or of those who have sought to train those who are pursuing local or lay pastor credentialling. A theological education whether it be a Master of Divinity, or the completion of a United Methodist Course of Study are not focused on practical ministry. They are concerned with teaching and equipping clergy with the theological and doctrinal underpinnings necessary for successful ministry in The United Methodist Church’s denominational structure. These degree programs and trainings are very important in shaping the theological adeptness of clergy leaders, but they fail in teaching the practical professionalism required in the real world when leading churches.

To be effective in ministry, pastors also need to be aware of and understand the business aspects of the church. Gone are the days when a pastor cannot understand budgeting, marketing, strategic business planning, and corporate logistics necessary to organize and maintain a church. Many churches struggle with putting mission and ministry to work effectively in the world because their leadership doesn’t have the insights or the knowhow to make critical decisions. Pastors need to gain at least basic understandings of how the business of the church is done if they are going to lead effectively. Jeff Brumley, currently the senior news writer for Baptist News Global, writes, “Most church financial woes result from honest mistakes in an environment where the laity is often all too trusting of religious leaders who are, in turn, usually untrained and uninterested in administration.”¹¹⁴ This quote is from 2009. I believe it is still relevant in today’s ministry.

¹¹⁴ 1. Jeff Brumley, “Experts Say Financial Transparency, Accountability Key to Church Health,” The Florida Times-Union, August 16, 2009,
When a pastor understands these basic underpinnings of how to run and promote a small business, they will have a better understanding of how to reach people in the world as it is. In the United States we exist in a capitalistic corporate culture. People lose faith in their church when they feel it is not being run with sound financial principles. They lose interest when the missional goals of the church aren’t clearly articulated in a digestible way. They leave when leadership can’t provide clear and concise plans for how the mission and the ministry of the church are going to be accomplished. The culture we live in expects corporate professionalism from those who lead their churches. We can lament and decry this reality all we want, but if the church is going to be effective at reaching souls for Christ, then it must understand the cultural realities which most of the people who it is hoping to reach live in.

When churches blunder business decisions or fail to adequately communicate their initiatives and plans they fall short of their potential to make impacts. Pastors, to lead fearlessly, must gain knowledge about how to operate and navigate the corporate side of church life. This education also helps create a unified form of communication and goal setting. Setting goals and budgets and communicating these things in efficient and effective ways can increase a church’s capacity to reach people for Christ even if they launch no new ministry initiatives. Running a church effectively and professionally promotes church unity. It provides transparency when done well and communicates and articulates goals, initiatives, needs, and can give important insight into the missional strategies churches need to employ to be successful at building communities of faith.

This education which is needed does not have to be a costly one. In most congregations there are business owners, accountants, lawyers, and other professionals who would be happy to share a cup of coffee and knowledge with their pastor. So often clergy are the ones who are sought out for help, but effective and wise clergy will seek the knowledge they need to help navigate their church into more effective leadership and planning. When pastors lean on their congregation and gain insights and knowledge from those in their congregation they not only grow, but they also build relational capital with their congregation. We are not meant to lead alone. Heifitz, Grashow, and Linsky argue in their book *The Practice of Adaptative Leadership*,

Whether you are taking on a small initiative (such as planning to raise a difficult issue at a team meeting) or a large one…do not go it alone. Find partners who will share the dangers and the exposure. Together, you’ll stand a far better chance of avoiding attacks from opponents and keeping your initiative alive.\(^\text{115}\)

**Service and Word**

In this section my intention is to speak frankly about the reality of what it takes to serve and proclaim the gospel in a local congregation. Serving, preaching, and teaching local congregations is holy and challenging work. We are called as United Methodist pastors to go where we are sent and to serve local congregations faithfully. This service we are called to is incredibly important. To this end I plan to lean on Gregory the Great’s *Book of Pastoral Rule* as well as other church leaders from the early church to gain some insight into what it means to serve as a pastor. If we are going to take this role of serving, teaching, and preaching as a way for us to build churches of unity we have to understand what is required of us as clergy persons.

One of the things we are woefully underprepared for as clergy is the emerging ways we need to work in order to help people experience the love of God in the world. Bernard of Clairvaux in his work *On Loving God* gives support to this idea of being prepared for the vocational call to ministry when he argues the happiest person is the one who is not able to even love themselves apart from their love of God.\textsuperscript{116} His teaching about loving God points towards what we call Christian perfection in The United Methodist Church. To attain a love so pure in which even self-love is impossible without first the love of Christ can only occur by the careful study of scripture combined with a holy and disciplined way of life. This idea of loving God to the degree our entire being would be utilized as nothing more than a vessel for the light and love of God in our community is one which is needed in our churches, particularly from those who would serve as vocational leaders.

This seeking of Christian perfection is one of the greatest ways to lead for church unity. If we love God perfectly then we will be capable of loving each other perfectly. I freely admit I am not yet perfect. It is something I hope to experience in this life, but I will never achieve Christian perfection if I don’t pursue it. Part of our service to the church is being people who are seeking to love God and each other the way Christ has loved us and to share that love through the way we serve, teach, and preach.

In my current context as a pastor in the Alabama-West Florida conference of The United Methodist Church I know preparation for ministry is sorely needed. Many pastors who have been appointed or are seeking appointment to the local church are woefully unprepared for the lived witness that comes with being called to the vocation of pastor. I know this because I lived it. I

was appointed to my first two-point charge upon my acceptance to seminary. A two-point charge in United Methodism is one pastor serving two congregations at once. When Jesus told us not to serve two masters, he may have had two-point charges in mind. It is hard enough to serve one local church, but two at once is a tough job! John Wesley would argue we needed to do a better job at forming our people who feel the call to ministry. Wesley’s doctrines of grace and his emphasis that he placed on communal life and development speak to the issue of making sure people are formed over time to take on more and more responsibility within the church. His process of sanctification is one that argues our life as Christians who are called to work together for the good of the church is filled with this preparatory spiritual development.117 This process doesn’t end with acceptance to the call to ministry. It doesn’t end with a seminary degree. It is a lifestyle expected of all Christians and should be exemplified by those who wish to lead local churches.

I was twenty-one years old at the time of my appointment and only had a youthful experience of being a church member, and a week of essential training on the core functions and role of the pastor to prepare me for my vocational calling to ministry. I was not ready for the rigors of pastoral life and my story is not unique. I am so grateful for the compassion and patience of Seale and Alexandria United Methodist Churches who were subjected to my lackluster attempts at living out the vocational call to pastoral ministry. Their patience with an excited yet very unskillful pastor was deeply appreciated. The best compliment I have ever received was from the church matriarch my last Sunday appointed to this charge. She said, “after your first sermon we didn’t know if you would make it. We sure are glad it only took you a

couple of years to get better.” The good news is over time I did get better, but I learned very quickly as I attended seminary, everything I was learning in the classroom was not enough to teach me the foundations I needed to be truly successful as a pastor. I needed more preparation if I was going to live fully into the call to ministry I had been given. I needed more perspective on how to live into a balanced lifestyle that stayed true to my call, my faith, and my family.

One of the first things pastors have to discern in their call to ministry is the missional nature of our work. If we are going to be leaders who promote unity within our congregations, we must be able to live into the servant leadership required of pastors. We are not called to be ladder climbers or to be people whose career is focused on worldly success. We exist to help churches live out their missional duty to make disciples.

The first step towards leading a church to become unity oriented is to accept humility as a key ethic while serving as a pastor. Many foundational leaders from early Christianity offer words of warning to those whose calling is wrapped up in prideful or covetous notions. For Augustine of Hippo, pride is the root of all sin. One of the hardest things to admit as a pastor is susceptibility to the sin of pride. Very often pastors fall into the trap of replacing God with oneself. 118 This temptation of pride for Christian leaders as we seek to be successful for the sake of our churches is very difficult to avoid. Very often the success pastors have in winning souls to Christ leads to pride, arrogance, and forgetting the humility needed to remain rooted in the mercy and compassion of God. We need to be conformed to the mercy of God while we offer works of mercy to our neighbors so we might become living vessels of mercy in the world. 119 As pastors

we can only achieve a state of humility which honors God by remembering we share the same status as those whom we serve.

Many pastors get trapped by this disconnect with their understanding of the position of pastor. Very often they believe the title Reverend comes with inherent honor and respect, and we crave this attention which might elevate our social standing within their community. Augustine, when describing bishops who were performing poorly in their role as bishop, argued that those who loved their status more than they loved serving, providing for, and loving the people they had been entrusted with to serve were anathema to the role they had been given. They weren’t real Christian leaders. They were imposters seeking to live into a life of comfort and ease at the expense of those who would otherwise have been about the work of the church. They didn’t seek to serve Jesus, but instead sought to serve themselves.\textsuperscript{120} The same is true for pastors of local congregations.

As pastors it is not enough for us to hold offices of influence and power. We are meant to use our offices to affect good works in the world that bring unity and continue the faith for the future of the church irrespective of the cost. To sit back and indulge in the preservation of our comfort and ease is to abandon the call to ministry.

Gregory the Great, in his Book of Pastoral Rule, describes those who are unfit for the role of pastor. Any who would seek the role of pastor by the means of vanity put the church in a precarious position. Not just the pastor would be at stake, but the whole flock. If someone sought to be a pastor but was unfit, he writes, “Indeed, pastors ‘drink the clearest water’ when with an

accurate understanding, they imbibe the streams of truth. But the same ‘disturb the water with their feet’ when they corrupt the study of holy meditation with an evil life.’”\textsuperscript{121} By making this statement he is sharing the gravity of why we need pastors who are called to do the work and who are prepared to shoulder the burden of pastoral leadership. A careless, untrained, or unfit pastor doesn’t just harm themselves. They harm everyone they are responsible for shepherding in the life of faith. Gregory argues the people with the ability to hurt the church the most are the same people who sit in the positions of power. Pastors who are unfit for the call to humble servant community leadership can cause incredible vocational harm to not only themselves, but also the community of faith.\textsuperscript{122} This harm disrupts the unity of the church. It causes churches to stumble. Those who are fit for ministry must be people of moral character. They must be seeking this position to submit to the work of Jesus not for their own accolades, glory, or honor, but instead purely out of a desire to love God and God’s people within the Church. This humility circumvents the temptation for uniformity. When pastors are humble, we are much less likely to demand everything be the way we desire it to be and instead are willing to listen and allow the Spirit of God to lead our actions.

What is needed in the church is humble, dedicated, and well-equipped leadership. Gregory the Great argued that we are meant to model our leadership in the church after Jesus. Jesus offered himself as an example to those who would be his disciples. He turned down the worldly offering of kingship and instead went to the cross willingly. Jesus ran away from the glories and exaltations people offered him and instead chose to die a shameful death so that his disciples and those who would seek to lead in his church would learn to ignore the praise of the

\textsuperscript{121} Demacopoulos and Gregorius Magnus, \textit{The Book of Pastoral Rule}, 31.
\textsuperscript{122} Demacopoulos and Gregorius Magnus, \textit{The Book of Pastoral Rule}, 32.
world and instead seek to live into a life that is more focused on storing up treasures in heaven.\textsuperscript{123}

People come to the calling of service through pastoral leadership by different ways and knows we each have different gifts and graces for ministry. These differences are good. Some of us, like Isaiah, go and offer ourselves up to the life of ministry. Others, like Jeremiah, are reluctant, but do not completely refuse.\textsuperscript{124} No matter how we arrive at the position of pastor, we are each required in this role to put our pride, our selfish ambitions, and our comfort aside for devotion, “to the example of good living. [We] must be dead to the passions of the flesh and live a spiritual life. [We] must have no regard for worldly prosperity and never cower in the face of adversity.”\textsuperscript{125}

In my current ministerial context, the issue of those becoming pastors who perhaps should have been counseled otherwise is very prevalent. I sit on my Annual Conference’s Board of Ministry. We interview candidates each year, and each year there are serious concerns about some of our clergy candidates’ fitness for ministry. We are pressured by the need for pastors to make decisions which we are uncomfortable with. Our clergy burnout rate tells the tale of people who were either ill-suited, underprepared, or perhaps just unsupported in ministry stepping away from serving in the local church. Amy Frykholm wrote an article for Christian century detailing the realities of clergy burnout. In it she states thirty percent of pastors are experiencing burn out.\textsuperscript{126} While this article is striving to make the argument clergy are not as mentally unhealthy as

\textsuperscript{123} Demacopoulos and Gregorius Magnus, \textit{The Book of Pastoral Rule}, 33.
\textsuperscript{124} Demacopoulos and Gregorius Magnus, \textit{The Book of Pastoral Rule}, 39.
\textsuperscript{125} Demacopoulos and Gregorius Magnus, \textit{The Book of Pastoral Rule}, 43.
one might think it is becoming more and more difficult to find clergy who are willing to devote their lives to the service of churches. This trend has only continued during the current stresses and pressures of serving in a local church. I would argue the cultivation of call, and the proper preparation of candidates for ministry needs to be more intentionally taught. We are good at studying history and theology, but we lack training in practical ministry. We should be teaching the pitfalls of ministry to those who are seeking to serve God while at the same time finding ways to edify and encourage those who have taken up the mantle to serve.

To fulfill the vocational position of pastor once the call to serve had been taken up there are some very practical insights Gregory offers to us that are valid today. For Gregory, it is necessary that pastors be excellent examples of Christianity and be skilled in their work not for their own glory, but for the edification and equipping of the community in which they serve. He calls for a faithful, balanced life of both communal work as well as personal study. So often in churches I have had the privilege to serve the stories of previous pastors (and of myself after my tenure) offered up uncomfortable truths about the leadership of pastors. I am guilty of being much more concerned with the pursuit of academic understanding and my own personal spiritual growth than living into communal life. This tendency can be to the detriment of the churches I serve if left unchecked.

One important way to achieve this balanced life while serving as a pastor is to have an active prayer life. Part of our job as pastors is to model what faithful living looks like. To that end it is important for us to model an active prayer life not only for our own tremendous personal benefit, but also because it shows our congregations how to be engaged in regular prayer. Laurence Stookey in his book *This Day: A Wesleyan Way of Prayer* says, “All Christian prayer

---

is corporate; that is, it pertains to the whole body of believers…Even if a Christian is alone in one room of an otherwise empty building, she or he at prayer is united to every other praying and serving Christian. As pastors we must take this call to pray seriously. If we do, we will lead by example for our churches what it looks like to be people who believe in the power of prayer and God’s action in the world.

Not only should we lead by example and pray for corporate good of our church, but we should also pray for ourselves. Pastoral leadership is not something any one can do on their own. We need God, lots of good help, a counselor, and hopefully support from family and friends to truly do our job well. The most important thing most pastors can do is pray.

Personally, I joined a contemplative prayer group about six years ago led by a retired pastor in the church I was serving. Rev. Virginia Beckham led this group each Tuesday morning, and for thirty minutes we spent time in silence as a group listening, breathing, and reveling in the presence of God. We would finish our time together naming anything we would like the group to pray for in the coming week and then go home. After I moved away from this group, I continued this practice and now begin each day with a 20-minute time of contemplative prayer. It centers me and helps me reach a mental state of peace to go about the work of the church.

Prayer for a pastor can literally change our ability to do ministry. It is a unifying practice. It connects us to our God and to each other. It gives us hope, peace, and helps us to feel in relationship with God as we live our lives. Stookey writes, “The consciousness of this bonding of all who are in Christ should pervade and thereby alter our understanding of personal prayer, which can never be properly thought of, let alone be called ‘private devotions.’” Always and

---

everywhere, we pray with all of God’s people united in praise and petition.¹²⁹ When we pray, we are actively promoting unity because when we pray, if Stookey’s supposition is correct, we are united with all people of faith who pray and serve in the world. Our prayers connect us to the living God who loves us, saved us, and continually offers us provision and hope. It connects us to one another as we share in the experience of God’s providence and grace. Prayer for pastors is essential for building communities of unity. Prayer helps us to see people as God sees them.

This prayer life will lead us to places where our mission and ministry within our churches becomes more relational and transformative than before. Gregory of Nazianzus, in Oration 14, offers an insight into building a community of united believers when he argues we are all equal in the eyes of God. Gregory felt we should be as charitable as possible with the poor who are in our midst. This charity was not meant to be something that was a handout or a way of feeling superior. Instead, we give out of our love for one another because we are all the same. We are all formed in the image of God, and none of us are superior. Christ is in the poor just as Christ is with is. For me this speaks beyond the physical poverty of people, but also into spiritual poverty. We are called to love one another radically regardless of station.¹³⁰ This love helps us to transcend our worldly ranking of one another and instead embrace one another as fellow image bearers of the living God.

Much of our calling is meant to be lived out through being in and working for the communities in which we serve. Gregory the Great argues those serving in the vocational role of pastor should be the first in service so his example offers a living window into what the laity’s

¹²⁹ Laurence Hull Stookey, This Day, 26.
¹³⁰ Brian Daley, Gregory of Nazianzus (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 83.
life is supposed to be. This argument is one that convicts me, and if my assumption by way of experience is correct it also convicts many of my predecessors and colleagues in ministry in my local context. Many of us have lost our way in being in active service to our communities beyond the work of administration and preaching. We must be willing to go and serve within our communities, and to do so with joyful enthusiasm.

What is needed in pastoral leadership is balance. We must be willing to go out into our communities and serve the real needs in our local contexts. It is no longer sufficient to just be in a building in the middle of the community with a cross emblazoned on our doorstep and the doors flung open wide for worship on Sundays. We must back up our exhortations on scripture with real, tangible action for the sake of sharing the gospel as well as teaching those in our parishes how to live out our faith in tangible ways. Dietrich Bonhoeffer couches his argument on the issue of communal holiness within the concept of *Diakonia*. We are called to serve one another within the church. We are called to live and serve one another in a faithful cooperative way as a universal priesthood. Spiritual care for one another helps us to achieve greater piety and faithfulness by uncovering sin and creating people who can hear the gospel. One way that we care for one another is by hearing the confessions of one another. Bonhoeffer’s preparation for hearing confessions through preparing ourselves as pastors is powerful. Having the ability to be candid about the sin in our own lives helps us to be able to hear and help with those who are suffering with sin in their own lives. The burden of spiritual care for our parish is too heavy

---

for pastors to carry on our own. We must have someone who holds us accountable in our own spiritual lives if we seek to serve one another faithfully.

Gregory the Great offers to pastors similar advice on how to care not only for our local communities, but for the individuals within our ministry contexts. Gregory focuses on the need for us to develop close and meaningful relationships with the individuals in our congregations so that we can serve them faithfully. He states,

What often helps some people will cause harm in others, just as herbs that are nutritious to some animals will kill others or the way that gentle hissing will calm a horse but excite a puppy. Likewise, the medicine that cures one disease will spur another, and the bread that fortifies a grown man can kill a young child. Therefore, the discourse of the teacher should be adapted to the character of his audience so that it can address the specific needs of each individual and yet never shrink from the art of communal edification.\(^{134}\)

Gregory wants us to be cautious in the way that we offer care to the individual souls within our contexts. He even goes so far as to say we pastors are to exercise caution in the way in which we deal with sin in our congregations. Some parishioners can handle stern and decisive direction from an authoritative pastoral figure, while others need understanding and care even while still actively amidst their sins. I can’t help but think this speaks to our current struggles within the church. We live in a polemic time where people seem to be more concerned with being right than being kind, loving, or compassionate. Perhaps discernment on how we handle different individuals in our shared ecclesial life would go a long way in helping us to not only begin healing the hurts within our churches, but also it might make our churches spaces where people know they can bring their brokenness and be accepted as they work on their journey towards salvation.

\(^{134}\) Demacopoulos and Gregorius Magnus, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, 87.
Gregory’s final admonishment to those who would be pastors is this; “But in the midst of these considerations, we are brought back in the zeal of charity to what we have already said, which is that every preacher should be “heard” more by his deeds than by his words.” Perhaps, like Jesus, our love for God and each other will speak louder than any words possibly could. The role of the pastor is to live out a life of faithful obedience and service to God and the body of Christ called the church.

To serve in a local congregation faithfully we have to be willing to preach and teach our congregations in a way that unifies them. As faith leaders who seek to unify our people, we must use our opportunities in the pulpit to inspire and encourage our congregations to be who God needs them to be to meet the needs of a broken and fallen world for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Our congregations need to be inspired to faithful unity. For that to occur we have to preach from a place of authentic faith. Fred Craddock writes, “the preacher is expected to be a person of faith, passion, authority, and grace. Faith makes one believable, and if the messenger is not believable, neither is the message.” Preaching is one of the greatest tools of a pastor to affect change in the local church. Our voice can be used prophetically, to inspire transformation, and to motivate our congregations into action for the sake of the kingdom of God. No matter how we use our voice it must be used authentically. Authentic faithfulness inspires congregations.

Not only do we need to be faithful and authentic in our preaching, but our preaching also needs to be well prepared and delivered. Thomas Long writes, “Congregations may be satisfied when sermons are simply lively, engaging, and not boring, but wise pastors know that

---

135 Demacopoulos and Gregorius Magnus, The Book of Pastoral Rule, 207.
congregations desperately need preaching of substance, preaching that is more than mere religious entertainment.”¹³⁷ The preaching we engage in as pastors needs to be more than just moral platitudes and feel-good religion. Our preaching should inspire unity amongst our people. It should carefully help our congregations understand the work of the church, the spiritual disciplines which undergird our faith, and bring our doctrines and theology into life. When we breach our job is to unify our congregation around the scriptural truths, we experience in worship each week.

In conclusion the role of a pastor is one which has many facets. If we are going to be leaders who help our local congregations to be grounded in unity we have to seek out the education we need to be effective, embrace the call to servant leadership, guide our churches in their mission and ministry, help lead the church in its administrative processes, spend time leading our church in prayer, care for our congregations, spend time in scriptural study, and proclaim the word of God in a powerful and transformational way. This job is not an easy one. It takes diligence, prayer, support, and a deep commitment to our call to servant leadership to see us through. The good news is as we build churches for unity, we will not be doing any of these things on our own. We will have a congregation and, in some cases, a staff around us helping us lead, taking ownership of parts of the work, giving us the grace support we need to continue to make disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world.

Conclusion

To conclude this dissertation, we have to finally bring the argument to its head. Throughout this paper I have made the claim church unity should be valued above uniformity for the sake of advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ and creating stronger congregations. I say this not only because of our present issues within the denomination, but also because of my lived experience as a senior pastor of local congregations. The churches I served were plagued with issues surrounding this concept of being in unity. The churches were, to varying degrees, siloed in their missions, their ministries, their programming, their staffing, and even amongst the clergy and laity. Unity is needed in congregations. It creates harmony out of chaos. It gives direction and purpose to churches who feel directionless and without clear missional goals.

Unity and uniformity are two different ideas within the religious life of the church. For church unity to occur there has to be space for diversity. Uniformity argues we should all be the same. To be uniform is to think, act, believe, and to function the same. Within The United Methodist Church the current division has, at least in some part, revolved around the two slightly different viewpoints of church unity and church uniformity. Unity within the church looks like people who are not uniform in all of their theological and scriptural beliefs existing under a unifying polity. It looks like space being made for others, outsiders, sinners, and seekers. It looks like the church actually having open hearts, open minds, and open doors.

Uniformity isn’t evil, but it cannot be the only foundation the church is built on. The church needs both unity and some sort of uniformity to accomplish its work in the world. Uniformity, however, should only be reserved for non-negotiable doctrinal beliefs. These non-negotiable doctrines are found in the constitution of the Book of Discipline. Beyond these things we are going to have to learn how to be a church built on unity as we discuss and debate these
things which are non-essential, yet extremely important, to our life of faith. General Conference exists to do this work. The work of the local church is to create space for all people to be discipled with our United Methodist doctrines, theology, and polity. All of this is held together as we all spend time carefully interpreting scripture and finding new ways to create unity with God and with each other.

Uniformity is the love of sameness. I will admit there is a temptation to lean towards uniformity within a vast system such as The United Methodist Church. It makes life easier. It makes it easier to itinerate as pastors, easier to administrate churches, easier to set expectations. Uniformity, in theory, should create a system in which expected outcomes can be easily tabulated. Church growth and success would be easily replicated in a uniform system, but we don’t live in a uniform idealistic world. The reality is churches cannot be uniform by the very nature of what they are. Local congregations all across the United States are diverse places whose uniformity is only truly found in the God we worship and the essential doctrines of the church. This is the way it has always been because churches are places where human beings, in all of their diversity and uniqueness, gather together to worship, pray, organize, and go out into the world as agents of God’s grace and love. The needs of each community are different. The lived reality of each community is different. Building churches whose defining characteristic is Christian unity is our only hope to move forward faithfully as congregations to make disciples who transform the world. It is time for us to value unity more than uniformity and build our churches with the understanding that every soul is precious to God, formed in the divine image, and of incredible sacred worth.
Bibliography


Dorrell, Jimmy. *Dead church walking: Giving life to the church that is dying to survive*. Biblica, 2011.


