



# WHO ARE WE?

A FEW YEARS AGO I MET MY WIFE FOR LUNCH AT THE HIGH SCHOOL WHERE SHE WORKS AS AN ENGLISH TEACHER. BEFORE WE WENT OUT FOR LUNCH, I GOT A CHANCE TO MEET A FEW OF HER STUDENTS. LATER THAT DAY, MY WIFE TOLD ME THAT ONE OF HER STUDENTS BLUNTLY ASKED, “WHERE IS YOUR HUSBAND FROM?” MY WIFE REPLIED, “MICHIGAN.” FRUSTRATED, THE STUDENT RETORTED, “NO, NO — I MEAN WHAT IS HE?” COMING FROM A MEXICAN-GERMAN-IRISH-AMERICAN BACKGROUND, I AM USED TO QUESTIONS ABOUT MY ETHNIC IDENTITY. I HAVE BEEN MISTAKEN FOR ITALIAN, CHALDEAN, JEWISH, AND INDIAN. I ALSO KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO HONESTLY STRUGGLE WITH ONE’S IDENTITY, TO OPENLY FACE THE BRUTAL REALITIES OF HISTORIES FILLED WITH PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION AND TO SEEK AN EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY THAT IS CULTURALLY AND PERSONALLY AUTHENTIC. I HAVE ALSO COME TO UNDERSTAND THIS CRITICAL QUESTIONING OF IDENTITY TO BE CENTRAL TO BEING CHRISTIAN, FOR I AM DISCIPLE OF THE ONE WHO ASKED HIS FRIENDS, “WHO DO PEOPLE SAY I AM?”

Paul Perez

**T**he Study of Ministry Commission’s report is, ultimately, a plea for the UMC to enter into intentional conversation its ecclesiology, or, in other words, its identity. I want to thank the commission for their courage to admit that they—and the UMC—need more time to sort through the theological complexities of Christian ministry and ecclesiology. While there was an expectation that the commission would produce a definitive document like “By Water and the Spirit” or “This Holy Mystery” and propose legislative changes, the commission has chosen a much more risky course of action. It is risky because their call may go

unanswered and because it creates a “legislative vacuum” at General Conference. But the soul-searching necessary for critical reflection on one’s identity is an action of risk and vulnerability. It is with this in mind that I encourage United Methodists, especially delegates to General Conference, to read and discuss the commission’s report together and restrain themselves from rushing forward with legislative solutions to the current questions of ministry. While some may see ecclesiology as a form of navel-gazing that detracts from the church’s mission, I believe that it is for the very sake of the church’s mission, its identity, to make disciples of Jesus Christ

that United Methodists must enter into sustained and meaningful conversation about its identity as a church.

## Identity and Authenticity

Besides my ethnic identity, there is my perspective as a young person that gives me a certain postmodern sensibility when approaching the question of ecclesiology. I am most aware of my postmodernism in my interest and concern for the issues of identity and authenticity. Having come of age surrounded by the simulacra of suburban malls and the virtual world of

the Internet, I find that I have an acute concern for discerning between what is real, genuine, and authentic and what is false, constructed, and fake. Many Christians who self-identify as emergent also share this concern. I do not label myself as an emergent Christian, but I do share their concern for authentic Christianity. In fact, I would argue, anyone who claims to be part of the Wesleyan tradition ought to also share this concern.

John Wesley was also deeply concerned with authentic Christianity, using many adjectives like real, genuine, altogether, and scriptural to express his concern for what was authentically and truly Christian. His deep fear about the future of the Methodist movement was that it would become a “dead sect having the form of religion without the power.”<sup>1</sup> It is a fear of fakeness, a fear that Methodists would simply construct an ecclesial and liturgical simulacrum that was almost, but not altogether, Christian. One could argue that in the vacuum of critical ecclesiological reflection, mainline Christianity in North America, United Methodism included, has adopted a default ecclesiology based on consumerism. In this ecclesiology, the Christian is not a disciple but a religious consumer and the church is his or her religious vendor. It is for this reason that I share the commission’s concern for ecclesiology.

I find myself influenced by two contemporary streams of ecclesiological thought: communion ecclesiology and missional ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup> The former focuses on the gathered nature of the church, the latter its identity as a sent people. Both ground their understanding of the church in Trinitarian theology. For communion ecclesiology, the perichoretic life of the Triune God offers the fullest expression of what it means to live in communion. Missional ecclesiology emphasizes the *missio dei*, the Father’s sending of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit in mission to the world. While I have yet to encounter an attempted synthesis of these two streams, I believe that United Methodism, with its sacramental and evangelical heritage, would benefit from reflecting on how its common life is a communal mission and missional communion. Or, to put it in uniquely Methodist terms, an ecclesiology that is simultaneously connectional and itinerant.

But what does ecclesiology have to do

with ministry and the confusion we find ourselves in? For starters, perhaps the UMC’s inattentiveness to its communal identity and authenticity, its calling, has affected its ability to encourage response to the personal calling of Christian ministry. Too often the church’s response to personal call to ministry is impersonal and bureaucratic. Again, a lack of clear theological reflection has left us to embrace the familiar professional models. This is damaging for both the candidate for ministry and those who test and vali-

**This relational model of ministry evokes the memory of the early American Methodist experience where itinerants were appointed in teams of two. This destabilizes the romantic image of the lone, brave circuit rider, and replaces it with a relational, cooperative model of ministry that is connectional and itinerant, communal and missional.**

date the candidate’s calling. This process of discernment and validation is a sacred task that requires trust, vulnerability, and humility from all involved. The UMC needs powerful and evocative descriptions of the candidacy process that stresses its sacred and spiritually formative dimensions.

## A Trinitarian Perspective

Also, one of the issues of UM ministry is the multiplicity of certified, licensed, commissioned, consecrated, and ordained ministries in the life of the UMC. Many of these different forms of ministry overlap in their functions and responsibilities, blurring the boundaries and distinct identities of these ministries. Here a Trinitarian perspective that is both communal and missional provides a helpful way forward.

The Triune God is not one then three or three then one, but is simultaneously three in one. Likewise, Jesus always spoke about his ministry and mission in relationship to the Holy Spirit and the Father. The doctrine of the Trinity, with its simultaneous affirmation of unity and diversity, of distinctiveness and interdependence, offers a theological grounding for understanding the relationship between the various ministries the UMC recognizes. Ministry, from a Trinitarian

perspective, is interdependent; it is a shared responsibility, not the domain of a lone ranger or self-sufficient professional.

This relational model of ministry evokes the memory of the early American Methodist experience where itinerants were appointed in teams of two. This destabilizes the romantic image of the lone, brave circuit rider, and replaces it with a relational, cooperative model of ministry that is connectional and itinerant, communal and missional. What if the church were to make cooperative

appointments today, teaming elders, deacons, and lay ministers and appointing them together? How would this affect the relationship between these various ministers and their understanding of their calling and ministerial identities?

I am excited about the possibility of a churchwide conversation about the identity and mission of the UMC, not because I think we will be able to clarify every issue of ecclesiology, but because it calls the church to be critical of itself, to ask how it is shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe that this critical, reforming stance can lead to creative and provocative proposals and help the UMC live boldly into its future. □

1. John Wesley, “Thoughts About Methodism,” August 4, 1786.
2. Good introductions to communion ecclesiology are Dennis M. Doyle’s *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* and John Zizioulas’ influential *Being As Communion*. For an introduction to missional ecclesiology see Darrell L. Guder’s *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.



**Paul Perez is Deacon and Director of Youth Ministry at Dulin United Methodist Church in Falls Church, Virginia.**