

The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This directional mission statement, in use for quite some time by the Council of Bishops, implies the transformation of church and disciple for the sake of the transformation of the world. It makes plain, as some have said, that “the church of God does not have a mission; the mission of God has a church.” The church is called to witness to and actively participate in the transformation of the world into the shalom/salaam of God’s new Realm.

The world God calls us to transform is postmodern, multicultural, multi-religious, and globalized, a world of interconnected differences. Indeed, many of our settings for ministry in the United States and North America are becoming increasingly pluralistic and multi-cultural in new ways. For example, elementary children in the southern part of the United States interact with children of families who come from Pakistan, India, Mexico, Vietnam, Thailand, Bosnia, Romania, Russia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. In one Georgia county, twenty-six languages are spoken by school age children. These same children are reared in Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain and Christian households, as well as those who come from secular families. But all of these religious households and families are not simply Jewish, Hindu and Muslim. They are Orthodox and Reformed and Reconstructionist Jews, Sunni, Shiite or Ismaili Muslims, Orthodox, Evangelical and Roman Catholic Christians.

How are United Methodists to express openness, honest hospitality and faithful Christian understanding when entering into these new and interesting relationships? As religious plurality becomes ever more pronounced and more immediate, the ability to fully engage the world as committed Christians—

loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves—requires new methods of formation.

To engage the world for the sake of its transformation, Christians now require formation that opens outward and equips the disciple to embrace “the present age” as the pluralistic, multi-faith, complex diversity that it is. Christian formation among the people called Methodist must explicitly and intentionally open the disciple *to* the world for the transformation *of* the world. It must engage the disciple in the depth and truth of other living faiths. It must nurture a deep Christian identity that also eagerly welcomes the “other.”

A new model of Christian formation must *teach* the disciple to understand this neighbor in order to not bear false witness against their identity or their faith. It must *shape* the Christian disciple to understand and love this “other” so as to love neighbor as self. And it must *equip* and *empower* the disciple to proactively create new bridges of community and reconciliation.

The foundations for this new model can be found in the work of Wesley himself and in the traditional marks of Methodism. How might we now shape our particular Methodist “way of life” to form a people not only known, say, for our singing and for our commitment to mission, but for our character as bridge-builders, ecumenists, good neighbors to all, and as those who lead the way in every community in seeking understanding and respect? To serve the present age, we must redefine “a Methodist” in an interfaith and richly textured and cultured world as one deeply rooted and grounded in the Christian faith, who is generous, inquisitive, respectful and compassionate towards our “neighbor,” and who actively seeks the welfare of the “other.”

The outlines here of a new model are to be invitational and suggestive, pointing to examples of current practices which can become constitutive components of a full-orbed model of

A New Model of Christian Formation

OPENING OUTWARD



Patricia Farris and
Susan Henry-Crowe

Christian formation, opening the disciple to the world for the transformation of the world.

Commitment to Christian Unity and to the Ecumenical Spirit

Methodists have a deep commitment to building community within the Christian family. This commitment is under-girded by a “reconciling intention,” an out-reaching love. It reflects both the desire to enter into relationship and the experience of opening arms to let the other in. Methodists also have vast experience building community as well as the ability to finding common ground while articulating difference.

We come to interfaith relationships in this same ‘catholic spirit,’ with an eagerness to know the other and with some experience of overcoming fear of the other. To this we add the practice of Christian hospitality, the catalyst of community, in which we receive the other with the same unconditional love as we are received by God. Out of love, respect, openness and humility, we engage the biblical mandate to offer hospitality not only to the friend, but to the stranger and the enemy; moving past stereotypes and prejudice to create a climate in which relationships can thrive. Beyond mere “tolerance,” this is a proactive and engaged intention to engender respect, and to create community and the possibility of real transformation.

Christian Conferencing

Methodists regularly practice “holy conferencing” as the means through which we hear and discern the will of God, build community and overcome differences of interpretation and understanding. It is the foundation and the means by which we confer and vow to live faithfully in community. Based as it is on conversation, dialogue and holy listening, the skill of “holy conferencing” is foundational to the kind of interfaith work so needed for the transformation of the world. In holy conferencing, the other, or the stranger, to be known; for beliefs, thoughts and convictions to be shared; for differences to be explored and mediated; and for community to be created as an alternative to violence.

Commitment to Learning

A critical component of a new model of Christian formation is based in learning. It must intentionally *engage in learning* about other religions and people of other faith, for understanding and insight and lest we bear false witness against their faith or their identity.

Countless settings for serious study of other faiths and cultures and history exist in classes, book studies, and discussion groups. Opportunities can be created to study together with

people from other faith traditions. Bible studies provide settings for careful examination of texts that pose challenges to interfaith work, especially those that seem to imply Christian exclusivism, those that seem condemnatory of persons of other faith and those that seem to admonish against engaging the other. Scripture study can be expanded to include the new practice of “Scriptural Reasoning” in which groups of Christians, Jews and Muslims meet together on neutral ground for careful reading of one another’s sacred texts. Opportunities can be created for learning about other religions/faiths through study and visits. Resources are available for interfaith marriages and families. These might also prove useful to children and youth whose friends at school now include people of other faith. Many resources are available to preachers for sensitive and careful sermon preparation in subjects related to people of other faith.

The Wedding of Knowledge and Vital Piety

The classic Methodist way of holding together knowledge and vital piety brings both head and heart to interfaith work. Through knowledge, prayer and sacramental theology, we learn and experience how to engage one another as adherents of living religions, as people of other faith, and as equal participants in a lived faith. That is, we learn to love our neighbors of other religious traditions as ourselves. A new model of Christian formation must not only provide the disciple with information about people of other faith. It must shape the Christian disciple to understand and love this “other” so as to love neighbor as self.

A transforming gift of interfaith work is the formation of relationships and friendships.

As in all interfaith work, the faith of the disciple is deepened and enriched in relationship with the other. The best of what we bring to our interfaith partners is a passionate, committed witness to our faith in the saving power of the grace of God through Christ Jesus, shared in the spirit of openness to the truth of the witness of the other. The freedom of God to work for good in the world in a variety of ways, the “wideness of God’s mercy” as the hymn puts it, can be shared as a gift.

For example, building upon the familiar Christian practice of *Lectio Divina*, Jews, Christians and Muslims can engage each other’s sacred texts together through contemplation and reflection. Through immersion in diverse faith communities, Christians can learn and experience religious practices that will both deepen relationships with people of other faith and deepen their own spiritual life. Worship is a powerful way to connect across cultures. Praying, singing and worshipping in different languages, modes and styles bridge difference and create unity. Planning worship with interfaith partners insures that the integrity of each is retained.

To engage the world for the sake of its transformation, Christians now require formation that opens outward and equips the disciple to embrace “the present age” as the pluralistic, multi-faith, complex diversity that it is. Christian formation among the people called Methodist must explicitly and intentionally open the disciple to the world for the transformation of the world. It must engage the disciple in the depth and truth of other living faith. It must nurture a deep Christian identity that also eagerly welcomes the “other.”

Emphasis on Social Holiness

A new model of Christian formation must *equip* and *empower* the disciple to proactively create new bridges of community and reconciliation. For John Wesley and his followers, there is “no holiness without social holiness.” This leads Methodists into common witness and mission to transform the world at its places of deepest need. Ecumenical/interfaith partnerships and coalitions create opportunities to both act for the common good AND build deep and lasting relationships with one another, such as interfaith coalitions to address critical global issues such as HIV/AIDS, global warming, poverty and immigration. Interfaith work to overcome violence is having significant impact in places such as the Middle East, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Sudan and Rwanda. The recent agreement signed at the House of Commons between UMCOR and the London-based global relief and development agency, Muslim Aid, is another recent and powerful example of shared outreach.

This “dialogue of life,” this shared advocacy for the full humanity of all men, women and children, can create fruitful, honest, justice-seeking relations with one another to transform this age defined by violence, fear and terror.

The challenge to United Methodists in the 21st Century is that of claiming identity, nurturing faithfulness to our heritage, sources and authority while at the same time being open, and neighborly, working with others to address needs around the world.

Our Methodist DNA makes us uniquely suited to embrace this new reality and live into it with scriptural integrity and grace-filled passion. After all, Thomas Trotter once asserted that Methodists are “*diano iacs*,” those who love God by the way we put our worlds together.

A new model for Christian formation offers tools for interfaith and multi-religious conversation, dialogue, study, prayer, worship, and partnership that will transform the church and the disciple for the transformation of the world. These will be Methodists who are curious, committed and passionate about our own faith and eager to form deep bonds with those of other faiths. They will be characterized by adventure and risk, by pilgrimage and exploration, open *to* the world for the transformation *of* the world. They will be those described by Thomas Merton as having the vocation of unity, persons who are sacraments, who are signs of peace for the sake of the shalom/salaam of the world God so loves. □



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SERVING THE AGE, TRANSFORMING THE WORLD: A NEW MODEL OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION

“Our situation at the beginning of the 21st century is like that of Europe at the beginning of the 17th century. Then, as now, the landscape was littered with the debris of religious conflict. It is fair to say that religion did not distinguish itself at that time. The secularization of Europe grew directly out of the failure of religion to meet the challenge of change. As one who deeply believes in the humanizing power of faith and the stark urgency of coexistence at a time when weapons of mass destruction are accessible to extremist groups, I do not think we can afford to fail again. Time and time again in recent years we have been reminded that religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal, and mild. It is fire, and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.”

— Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*

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The Imperative

The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. At the beginning of the 21st century unprecedented challenges threaten the peace and security of the world, many of

which are grounded in or justified by religion. A defining imperative for our time is that people of faith find ways of relating to one another that do not involve extinguishing one another.

The world we seek to transform is postmodern, multicultural, multi-religious, and globalized, a world of “interconnected differences”. (Mitchell, p. 9) As religious plurality becomes ever more pronounced and more immediate, the ability to

fully engage the world as committed Christians—loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves—requires new methods/ways of formation. To engage the world for the sake of its transformation, Christians now require formation that opens outward and equips the disciple to embrace “the present age” as the pluralistic, multi-faith, complex diversity that it is, created by God, inhabited and animated by God.

Christian formation among the people called Methodist must explicitly and intentionally open the disciple *to* the world for the transformation *of* the world. It must engage the disciple in the depth and truth of other living faith. It must nurture a deep Christian identity that also eagerly welcomes the “other”.

Such formation is not only essential to full-orbed discipleship, it is vital to the future of the world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has asserted that “in our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference”. And we concur that the question we must ask ourselves is: will we endeavor to shape Christian disciples equipped to serve the critical needs of our time for tolerance, respect, understanding and reconciliation?

Nearly four decades ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. described a “world house in which we must all live or perish together as fools.” Unless Christian formation shapes the disciple with a large living, loving faith, we will find ourselves inhabiting a dysfunctional world house marked by violence, insecurity and fear. Because in this new world house our neighbor, that brother/sister with whom we must live, is now likely to be someone of other faith. Engaging this “other” has become a vocational imperative for Christians. With new urgency, Christian formation must engage the ancient, foundational Biblical questions of “Who is my neighbor?”, “Whose neighbor am I?” and “Who is my brother/sister?” To serve the present age, inter-faith work must become a constitutive component of all work of Christian formation.

This new model of Christian formation must *teach* the disciple to understand this neighbor in order to not bear false witness against their identity or their faith. It must *shape* the Christian disciple to understand and love this “other” so as to love neighbor as

self. And it must *equip and empower* the disciple to proactively create new bridges of community and reconciliation.

The foundation for this new model of Christian formation can be found in the work of Wesley himself and in some of the traditional marks of Methodism. There is much in our Methodist “DNA” that inclines us towards this work. As Angela Shier-Jones asserts: “Being a Methodist is a response to a calling to a particular way of life rather than an agreement to a particular set of beliefs”. How might we now shape our particular Methodist “way of life” to form a people not only known, say, for our singing and for our commitment to mission, but for our character as bridge-builders, ecumenists, good neighbors to all, and as those who lead the way in every community in seeking understanding and respect? How might we become those who sincerely pray “Blessèd are you, Holy God, for people of every language and culture and for the rich variety you give to life”? (MWB p.44)

From our perspectives as Senior Minister of a large-membership UM congregation and as Dean of Religious Life at a major university, we will outline a new model of Christian formation based in some of the traditional marks of Methodism. We will offer strategies and best practices for ministry and Christian formation that shape, nurture, inform and challenge disciples to know and embrace the world for the sake of its transformation.

Wesley himself pointed towards this new orientation. In his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* (Dublin, 1749), he urges:

“You have heard ten thousand stories of us, who are commonly called Protestants, of which, if you believe only one in a thousand, you must think very hardly of us. But this is quite contrary to our Lord’s rule, ‘Judge not that ye be not judged’; and has many ill consequences, particularly this – it inclines us to think as hardly of you. Hence we are on both sides less willing to help each other, and more ready to hurt each other. Hence brotherly love is utterly destroyed; and each side looking on the other as monsters, gives way to anger, hatred, malice, to every unkind affection, which have frequently broke out in such inhuman barbarities as are scarce named among the heathens.”

Without formation that intentionally opens disciples *to* the world for the transformation *of* the world, we risk perpetuating Jonathan Swift’s oft-

quoted observation that “we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.” (*Thoughts on Various Subjects*, 1711) To serve the present age, the people called Methodist must become what Thomas Merton called “sacraments” or interfaith “signs of peace” to facilitate healing in a world torn by hatred and violence. (Apel, xix)

Setting The Stage

“We have to be the best global citizens we can be. We cannot retreat from the world. We have to make sure that we get the best of our own imaginations—and never let our imaginations get the best of us.”

- Thomas Friedman

We have suggested that the world which we inhabit and seek to transform is now often identified as multi-cultural, multi-religious, shrinking and postmodern. David Harvey in *Spaces of Hope* says, “The prevalence of the post (and the associated inability to say what it is that we might be pre) is a dominant characteristic of contemporary debate.” Just what is a postmodern world? What is a multi-religious world? In this ill-defined and ever changing multi-religious world, how does any religious tradition find its own theological ground and vantage point from which to listen and to speak? How does it enter into conversation and relationship? How does a particular tradition, in concert with other traditions, both shape and live into the future? Much work is needed to define and deepen understandings of and implications for the role of the church in these new and emerging contexts.

Multi-Cultural and Multi-Religious Contexts

While the United States is a young country that was multi-cultural and multi-religious from the outset, the United States and North America are becoming increasingly pluralistic and multi-cultural in new ways. For example, elementary children in the southern part of the United States interact with children of families who come from Pakistan, India, Mexico, Vietnam, Thailand, Bosnia, Romania, Russia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. In one Georgia county, twenty-six languages are spoken by school

age children.

These same children are reared in Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain and Christian households, as well as those who come from secular families. But these religious households and families are not simply Jewish, Hindu and Muslim. They are Orthodox and Reformed and Reconstructionist Jews, Sunni, Shitte or Ismali Muslims, Orthodox, Evangelical and Roman Catholic Christians and so forth and so on. There is as much diversity within these faith groups as there was in the “Old South” of Methodists, Baptists, Progressive Baptists, National Baptists, Presbyterians, and some few Roman Catholics who were Christian but claimed very different heritages and theologies.

It is the case that in the United States more and more people are finding and making homes in a country that was traditionally identified as Christian. Yet today, the face of religion is rapidly diversifying. There is little understanding of this religious complexity nor of the deep diversity within each religious family. Stereotypes, labels and assumptions no longer work. The question is quickly raised as to how Christians express openness, honest hospitality and faithful Christian understanding when entering into these new and interesting relationships.

To further articulate the situation on a global scale, the following statistics appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor* as the “Top 10 Organized Religions in the World”

(August 4, 1998, p. B2)

Christianity 1.9 billion Islam 1.1 billion Hinduism 781 million Buddhism 324 million Sikhism 19 million Judaism 14 million Baha’ism 6.1 million Confucianism 5.3 million Jainism 4.9 million Shintoism 2.8 million

(Chinese folk religion, secular groups, primal-indigenous, and groups smaller than the top ten not listed)

How do Methodists live out their faith in this world? Some lessons may be learned from those countries and communities which have lived with religious diversity for centuries. For example, without romanticizing the difficulties, many parts of Indian culture have accommodated Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians for six centuries. During the Middle Ages, Spain enjoyed remarkable periods of *convivencia* in which Jews, Christians,

and Muslims shared learning, culture, art, music and rich community life. Many Christian and Muslim communities have lived well together for centuries in parts of Africa. What might Christians learn from these multi-faceted, multi-faith, multi-cultural communities about living and sharing life, neighborhoods, common hopes and dreams?

Social and Economic Contexts

Social and economic contexts are also changing in surprising ways and deeply affect the world in which Methodists find themselves. For example, at present, the G8 includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. By 2040 the G8 will include China, Brazil and perhaps others. There are growing disparities between the rich and the poor with a diminishing middle-class. There are increasing class differences between the cultures and communities of the northern and southern hemispheres. How does the church begin to address the needs of aging populations, less labor intensive economies, younger populations who face unemployment, health care and environmental crises? Who should and who will pay the bills for health care, safe water, education, and a clean and healthy environment? How and what role will the church play in addressing these issues in a serious and faithful way?

Additionally, society and culture are increasingly shaped by a complex culture of media and technological systems. There is very little that happens on the globe stage that cannot be made public to the human family within minutes. The media shape the stories, ignore others, and silence yet others. But whatever the role of the media is and will become, it is true that every facet of life on every continent is affected and cannot be ignored.

The challenge to Christians in the 21st Century is that of claiming identity, nurturing faithfulness to its heritage, sources and authority while at the same time being open, and neighborly, working together to address needs around the world.

Wesleyan Perspectives

“God in his wisdom gave us the garden of religions and made some of us the bees to do the cross-fertilization...the

greatest challenge is to accept the other and to accept the other as a member of God’s family.”

- Prof. Mahmoud Ayoub, Earl Lectures 2007

To serve his age, John Wesley wisely insisted that his Methodists engage in consistent weekly work directly with the poor, both for the sake of the poor and for the sake of the spiritual health of the Methodist people. He knew that in order for the poor not to be stereotyped, romanticized, marginalized or demonized, direct personal relationships were required. As he observed:

“One reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it - and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart.” (Sermon “On Visiting the Sick.”)

It is our contention that many current models of Christian formation contribute to a similar “voluntary ignorance” on the part of contemporary Methodists regarding their neighbor, “the other” who is a person of another faith. Disciples have been too narrowly shaped as Christians—to do “Christian” things, to speak “Christian” language, to practice “Christian” forms of prayer and other forms of spiritual disciplines—all assuming as normative a Christian context and community. This focus has too often been inward and individualistic—all the while leaving the disciple ignorant at best and fearful at worst of “the other,” of anyone who is different.

Wesley’s writings point us in a new direction that intentionally embraces “the other”. He commends a much larger heart and mind for his Methodists. For example, he concluded his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* with these words:

“In the name, then, and in the strength of God, let us resolve, first, not to hurt one another; to do nothing unkind or unfriendly to each other, nothing which we would not have done to ourselves. Rather let us endeavor after every instance of a kind, friendly, and Christian behavior towards each other. Let us resolve, secondly, God being our helper, to speak nothing harsh or unkind of each other. The sure way to avoid this is to say all the good we can both of and to one another; in all our conversation, either with or concerning each other; to use only the language of

love, to speak with all softness and tenderness, with the most endearing expression which is consistent with truth and sincerity. Let us, thirdly, resolve to harbor no unkind thought, no unfriendly temper towards each other. Let us lay the axe to the root of the tree; let us examine all that rises in our heart, and suffer no disposition there which is contrary to tender affection. Then shall we easily refrain from unkind actions and word, when the very root of bitterness is cut up. Let us, fourthly, endeavor to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom. So far as we can, let us always rejoice to strengthen each other's hands in God."

And in "A Caution Against Bigotry", Wesley extends this argument to interfaith relations:

In order to examine ourselves thoroughly, let the case be proposed in the strongest manner. ...Yea, if it could be supposed that I should see a Jew, a Deist, or a Turk [a Muslim], doing the same [casting out demons], were I to forbid him either directly or indirectly, I should be no better than a bigot still. O stand clear of this! But be not content with not forbidding any that casts out devils. It is well to go thus far; but do not stop here. If you will avoid all bigotry, go on. In every instance of this kind, whatever the instrument be, acknowledge the finger of God. And not only acknowledge, but rejoice in his work, and praise his name with thanksgiving. Encourage whomsoever God is pleased to employ, to give himself wholly up thereto. Speak well of him wheresoever you are; defend his character and his mission. Enlarge, as far as you can, his sphere of action; show him all kindness in word and deed; and cease not to cry to God in his behalf, that he may save both himself and them that hear him." (Sermon on Mark 8:38, 39)

Here Wesley outlines a model of Christian discipleship that is not only outward-looking and generous in spirit, but that actively advocates for "the other" before God. In his typically insistent manner, Wesley urges disciples to "go on" much further than they might have imagined to prosper the work of the "other" and to see in it the presence of God.

To serve the present age, we must redefine "a Methodist" in an interfaith and richly textured and cultured world as one deeply rooted and grounded in the Christian faith, who is generous, inquisitive, respectful and compassionate towards our "neighbor," and who actively seeks the welfare of the "other." For this, a new model of Christian formation is required.

Marks Of Methodism As Trajectories For A New Model Of Christian Formation

United Methodist Bishop Hee-Soo Jung said that his personal journey as a Christian leader has convinced him that he needs to build bridges by affirming the dignity and belovedness of people in other parts of the globe and in "different traditions in the universe." "There are many people excluded by human narrowness and prejudice toward each other. This exclusion is, of course, a gross violation of the principles that govern us."

—On the signing of the Covenant between the Northern Illinois Conference and the Council Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, April 2006

The intent of this section of the paper is to be invitational and suggestive. It is our aim to point to examples of current practices which can become constitutive components of a full-orbed model of Christian formation, opening the disciple to the world for the transformation of the world. Several of the traditional marks of Methodism will serve as trajectories of practice into this new model.

These marks of Methodism "derive from the life and work of the Wesleys; have typified the Wesleyan religions impulse; characterize Methodism today; and retain the capacity, when understood afresh, to once again radiate Wesleyan conviction, values, beliefs and hopes." We will "reach back, reclaim, and reinterpret the Wesleyan ideal" (Richey, pp. xiv & 113) to outline a new model of Christian formation.

Commitment to Christian Unity and to the Ecumenical Spirit

"Community cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving way to the coming of others from beyond them."

—Howard Thurman

Methodists have a deep commitment to building community within the Christian family. This commitment is under-girded by a "reconciling intention", an out-reaching love. It reflects both the desire to enter into relationship and the experience of opening arms to let the other in. Methodists also have vast experience building community as well as the ability to finding common ground while articulating difference.

This is reflected in Methodist theology on the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Our theology of shared baptism with all Christians similarly forms us to experience the rituals most precious to us as experiences which orient us to a wider community of love. This theological and sacramental practice of the “open table” expresses an openness to the world and to the workings of the Spirit beyond human categorization and limitation.

We come to interfaith relationships in this same ‘catholic spirit’, with an eagerness to know the other and with some experience of overcoming fear of the other. To this we add the practice of Christian hospitality, the catalyst of community, in which we receive the other with the same unconditional love as we are received by the hospitality of God. Out of love, respect, openness and humility, we engage the biblical mandate to offer hospitality not only to the friend, but to the stranger and the enemy; moving past stereotypes and prejudice to create a climate in which relationships can thrive. Beyond mere “tolerance”, this is a proactive and engaged intention to engender respect, and to create community and the possibility of real transformation.

Christian Conferencing

“The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation.”
— Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Methodists regularly practice “holy conferencing” as the means through which we hear and discern the will of God, build community and overcome differences of interpretation and understanding. It is the foundation and the means by which we confer and vow to live faithfully in community. This is the mode for moving beyond stereotyping, categorizing, labeling by engaging one another face-to-face. Based as it is on conversation, dialogue and holy listening, the skill of “holy conferencing” is foundational to the kind of interfaith work so needed for the transformation of the world.

At the heart of holy conferencing is the importance of centering prayer and the practice of deeply listening to the other. This requires being open, attentive, curious about the other while not being judgmental, listening as carefully as we speak. Christian spiritual director Kay Lindahl describes

this listening as an art, a choice and a gift. It can be practiced daily through centering prayer in which the disciple listens to God. This deep listening “resists reductionism and distortion towards our own perspectives....[by] admitting own ignorance, being genuinely open to the other, bracketing preconceived notions, resisting premature conclusions, and engaging in ongoing respectful inquiry.” (Esterline and Kalu, p. 48) Such deep listening, Lindahl asserts, is “a key to peace in the world.”

Conversation and conferencing across boundaries of identity require forms of speaking and of listening with which Methodists are already practiced. This is the way for the other, or the stranger, to be known; for beliefs, thoughts and convictions to be shared; for differences to be explored and mediated; and for community to be created as an alternative to violence.

Commitment to Learning

“Reading Christians will be knowing Christians.”

— John Wesley

(Letter to Richard Boardman, January 12, 1776).

A critical component of a new model of Christian formation is based in learning. It must intentionally *engage in learning* about other religions and people of other faith, for understanding and insight and lest we bear false witness against their faith or their identity. Methodists must be continually learning about our world, our neighbors and other religions.

Birthered in a university environment, Methodists value the life of the mind. The basic meaning of disciple as “pupil” or “learner” describes us well. Fundamental to who we are and how we live into our faith are the study of God, theology, the world and its peoples, as well as the education of clergy. Countless settings for serious study of other faiths and cultures and history exist in classes, book studies, discussion groups and so forth. Resources are readily available for adults, youth and children.

- Opportunities can be created to study together with people from other faith traditions. As an old Zen proverb puts it: “Some things can only be learned by rubbing two people together.” One example brings Christians together with Jews and

Muslims using resources for reading and discussion based on Bruce Feiler's book, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. Expanding upon the familiar Methodist "small group" experience into Abrahamic faith clubs, these Jewish/Christian/Muslim "small groups" create a context not only for learning but for deep relationship and growth.

- Bible studies provide settings for careful examination of texts that pose challenges to interfaith work, especially those that seem to imply Christian exclusivism, those that seem condemnatory of persons of other faith and those that seem to admonish against engaging the other. Specifically, we must reexamine notions harmful to interfaith work (e.g. Judaism as a prelude to Christianity; Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists as "pagans", polytheists, "heathen", and so forth) and transforming our teachings that have been harmful to the other or have misrepresented the other. "[Our teachings] must be reformulated so as to help Christians to understand that, precisely out of the depth of our faith, we are called to love and listen to others with admiration and appreciation for their lives and their insights. Rather than thinking that the acceptance of other traditions as equal partners in our society is a compromise, we must learn to see it as an expression of our faith in Christ." (Cobb, p.33)

- Scripture study can be expanded to include the new practice of "Scriptural Reasoning" in which groups of Christians, Jews and Muslims meet together on neutral ground for careful reading of one another's sacred texts. Discussions generally focus on a common figure or theme, such as "creation", "work", "sacrifice" or "peace." First begun in academia (including sessions at the AAR), local groups are now meeting in the US and Great Britain. Rich conversation produces new insights, deepens relationships, and fosters respect and trust.

- Opportunities can be created for learning about other religions/faiths through study and visits. An example is expressed in the Journeys' Program at Emory University which brings together students from various religious traditions to examine and explore the root causes of religiously-linked conflict in

communities around the world such as Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine. By exploring the root causes of conflict, establishing relationships with the group and across religious and cultural deep listening and learning takes place. In addition, congregations and churches should include in Confirmation and New Member classes a component on learning about our neighbors of other faith as well as understanding ourselves as part of a larger faith family.

- Many families in which there has been interfaith marriage would benefit from information and understanding. While recognizing the complexities of inter-faith marriage, resources are available for interfaith marriages and families. These might also prove useful to children and youth whose friends at school now include people of other faith.

- Many resources are available to preachers in sensitive and careful sermon preparation in subjects related to people of other faith. Examples include Allen and Williamson's *Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews* and Mahmoud Ayoub's forthcoming book on Jesus in the Qur'an. Classes and seminars in interfaith work should be regular topics for Continuing Education. Additionally, opportunities can be created for pulpit exchange.

The Wedding of Knowledge and Vital Piety

"We share our faith in the hope that my faith will deepen your faith."

— Mahmoud Ayoub (Earl Lectures 2007)

A new model of Christian formation must not only provide the disciple with information about people of other faith. It must *shape* the Christian disciple to understand and love this "other" so as to love neighbor as self.

The classic Methodist way of holding together knowledge and vital piety brings both head and heart to interfaith work. Through knowledge, prayer and sacramental theology, we learn and experience how to engage one another as adherents of living religions, as people of other faith, and as equal participants in a lived faith. That is, we learn to *love* our neighbors of other religious traditions as ourselves.

- While John Wesley was both profoundly influenced by Christian mystics and later skeptical of their elevation of experience above Scripture, there remains throughout his writings an emphasis on the deep and over-arching energy of the love of God and on the admonition to unite in love, overcoming many barriers and distinctions (of opinion, mode of worship, and so forth). There is, he maintained, “a peculiar love which we owe to those that love God” (Sermon 39 “Catholic Spirit”) The Sufi mystic, Rumi, wrote: “I go into the Muslim mosque and the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church and I see one altar.” (Rumi p.246)

Interfaith exemplars as diverse as Islamic scholars, Carl Ernst, Akbar Ahmed and Mahmoud Ayoub, and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, point to the experience of mystics in our various traditions as a cultural bridge, a way to promote understanding and to find common ground. Within mystic teaching is an attitude of greater openness than most formal religious institutions can yet allow.

- A transforming gift of interfaith work is the formation of relationships and friendships. Thomas Merton, for example, found great commonality in the religious experience of others that was for him, the basis of deep friendships and ecumenical/interfaith dialogue. This “personal knowledge” informed his own faith and sense of self in profound ways.

“The more I am able to affirm others, to say “yes” to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone...so, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot “affirm” and “accept”, but first one must say “yes” where one really can. If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.” (Apel, xiv)

- Worship is a powerful way to connect across

cultures. Praying, singing and worshipping in different languages, modes and styles bridge difference and create unity. C. Michael Hawn calls this “polyrhythmic worship” that celebrates the multiple perspectives that arise from “differences in gender, vocation...generations, socioeconomic position, and cultural orientation.”

Yet interfaith worship presents serious and deep theological challenges. Care must be taken to understand and respect differing theologies and practices of prayer and worship. Experiencing one another’s authentic worship is encouraged. Guidelines are available from the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns and various interfaith organizations.

- Building upon the familiar Christian practice of Lectio Divina, Jews, Christians and Muslims can engage each other’s sacred texts together through contemplation and reflection. This allows for a shared experience of the sacred which honors both the integrity and the commonality of the texts. Participating religious communities should together discuss what texts to examine.

For example, one such group at the recent Conference of the Health Ministries Association in the US reflected on three texts related to water from the Qur’an, from Numbers and the Babylonian Talmud, and from the Gospel of John. The session was prefaced with this epigram: “If two sit together and are engaged in the study of Torah (the Word of God), the presence of God comes to rest between them.” (Mishnah, Pirkei Avot—Ethics of the Fathers, 3:6).

Through immersion in diverse faith communities, Christians can learn and experience religious practices that will both deepen relationships with people of other faith and deepen their own spiritual life. Participation in monastic life, forms of meditation, and pilgrimage, as experienced and practiced in other faith communities, can become pathways to understanding, compassion and respect.

Emphasis on Social Holiness

“No one should underestimate the potential for good that Christians and Muslims (working together) can do in the UK and in the rest of the world....This shows what distinctive faiths can achieve when the focus is on shared values.”

—Stephen Timms, British government minister

A new model of Christian formation must *equip and empower* the disciple to proactively create new bridges of community and reconciliation.

For John Wesley and his followers, there is “no holiness without social holiness.” This leads Methodists into common witness and mission to transform the world at its places of deepest need. This is a rich way for people and communities to gather to reach out to those in need. It opens the door to ecumenical/interfaith partnerships and coalitions in which we both act for the common good while building deep and lasting relationships with one another.

- Interfaith partners greatly benefit from studying the basis for such shared work in one another’s sacred texts. For example, Prof. Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, professor of Islamic studies and comparative religion at Temple University, has argued that the Qur’an (Sura 4) does not limit salvation to a name (God, Allah) but is based instead on a person’s righteous works and faith in God. He maintains that the prophetic Hadith tradition expects no more of Jews and Christians, aiming at establishing an *oikumene* of communities of faith. (PSR, Earl Lectures 2007)
- Interfaith coalitions to address critical global issues such as HIV/AIDS, global warming, poverty and immigration are being created. This “dialogue of life”, this shared advocacy for the full humanity of all men, women and children, can create fruitful, honest, justice-seeking relations with one another to transform this age defined by violence, fear and terror.
- Interfaith work to overcome violence is having significant impact in places such as the Middle East, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Sudan and Rwanda. In June of this year, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim leaders from

five countries met in Indonesia to address the “special obligation” of religious leaders to denounce “horrific acts” committed in the name of religion.

- The recent agreement signed at the House of Commons between UMCOR and the London-based global relief and development agency, Muslim Aid, is a powerful example of shared outreach. This new partnership will relieve the suffering of millions of people by providing approximately 15 million \$US in direct relief to disaster, war, and conflict-ridden areas of the world, including Sri Lanka and Indonesia. This landmark interreligious partnership is designed to provide maximum response to global disasters, and enhanced economic and social development, as well as a new peace building model based on cross-cultural understanding. (UMNS)

“But Do Not Stop Here.”

—John Wesley, in “A Caution Against Bigotry”

“The truth is that we’re in this mess primarily because of the religious leaders, and we’re only going to get out of it if we find religious leaders who will have the guts to change this. That’s the bottom line.”

—Rabbi Abraham Cooper, after the “Tolerance Between Religions: A Blessing for All Creation” meeting in Indonesia, June, 2007

The secular world often describes globalization and the current dynamics of the world in negative, even ominous, terms of pressures, conflicts and threat. But the perspective of the world house offers the church possibilities and imperatives for hospitality, relationship, feast, and trust. Together, in such a house, the distancing language of “other” gives way to the familial language of neighbor and of brother/sister, in new relationships of respect and love.

To do so, disciples must develop what has been called “a pluralistic heart.” Douglas Johnston, a retired naval reserve captain and former executive vice president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, now directs the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy in Washington, D.C. In describing essential characteristics of diplo-

mats and peace-makers in today's world, he names this "pluralistic heart" which recognizes the spark of God in others and can reach out in understanding and respect. (Speaking of Faith, 1/26/07)

The same heart is required of disciples formed to recognize all others as brothers and sisters. These are disciples who have grown far beyond voluntary ignorance to love. These are disciples who recognize that we need one another in order to be whole in this world of interconnected differences.

In our postmodern world, this may take us farther than we are comfortable going at present. For many in Gen X and Gen Y, religious identity is becoming more fluid. Multiple truths co-exist. Constructs are temporary and malleable. Denominational identity is augmented by a more holistic and comprehensive Christian identity or by an even more eclectic spiritual identity easily drawing from a variety of traditions. Muslim scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah defines this as "cosmopolitanism", in which all human beings are fellow citizens of the world, where family and tribe are "multiple and overlapping." (Appiah, p.viii) And in Los Angeles, Mosaic Ministry Lead Pastor Erwin McManus asserts: "we don't just live in a world where Hindu and Muslim live side by side. We live in a world where the Muslim and Hindu both live inside one person." (McManus, p. 56)

Perhaps our Methodist DNA makes us uniquely suited to embrace this new reality and live into it with scriptural integrity and grace-filled passion. After all, Thomas Trotter once asserted that Methodists are "*diano iacs*", those who love God by the way we put our worlds together. "The Greek word used in the New Testament for *mind* is not *nous* but *diano ia*....It has the meaning of *coherence*. It may mean this: 'Love God by the way you put things together'...[M]inistry in a world like ours requires *diano ia*—loving God with the way we put our world together in the name of the gospel...we Wesleyan people understand this in our bones." (Conn, pp.24,25)

A new model for Christian formation offers tools for interfaith and multi-religious conversation, dialogue, study, prayer, worship, and partnership that will transform disciples for the transformation of the world. These will be Methodists who are curious, eager, committed and passionate about

those of other faiths. They will be characterized by adventure and risk, by pilgrimage and exploration. They will be those described by Thomas Merton as having the vocation of unity, persons who are sacraments, who are signs of peace. To both serve the present age and transform the world, they will love God through the way they put the world together in the name of the Gospel.

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