

# Too Late For Another Denomination?

By Dr. Maxie Dunnam

April 2020

My wife Jerry and I are self-quarantined. We “go out” only to take walks in a wooded, lake area on the grounds of our life-care retirement village. I’m seeking to keep a patient heart in these coronavirus days. Those who know me, especially my family, know this is tough. Patience is neither a virtue for me, nor a gift that I have cultivated.

Constantly aware our troubled nation and our painfully divided denomination, for months I have been more passionate in praying for revival. On a recent Sunday we shared in meaningful on-line worship with our Christ UMC community. My normal pattern would be to spend the afternoon catching up with what I consider optional reading, magazines, etc. That changed. The virus has made my praying for revival more intense, and I had this deep inner conviction that I should read again Leonard Ravenhill’s *Why Revival Tarries* which I read over 20 years ago.

Because ministry changes and geographical moves I have given away over half my library, so I was surprised to find the book. But there it was, with notes throughout, and I spent the balance of Sunday and a half-day Monday with Brother Ravenhill. Though I have some “issues” with his notions about “Rome” and preoccupation with preachers who are “weighed down with degrees and doctorates,” causing many to “know only a slick, tearless, passionless, soulless round of preaching that passes for the minister’s office these days” (p. 53), I was tempted to review it. His passion for, and clear Biblical teaching on the absolute essential of prayer, is both confronting and challenging. Instead of review, I believe it more urgent to deal with his claim which had not gotten my attention years ago, “*The hour is too late for another denomination to be born.*” (p. 49)

Given our situation of conscience driven conflict in how the church moves forward in mission and ministry in our present pronounced division, I share the “general agreement” that our present denominational expression of the faith will best be served by at least adding a “new expression.” The fact is the new expression will result in a new denomination. I contend that it is not too late for that, *in fact it is essential in our circumstances.*

I honor Brother Ravenhill. He is pleading and praying for revival. He followed his claim about too late now for a new denomination, saying, “Right now, God is preparing His Elijahs for the last great earthly offensive against militant godlessness (whether

political or wearing a mask of religion.)” Then came the telling word which we must take with utter seriousness. The last great outpouring of revival, Holy Ghost born and operated, will *be* new wine bursting the skins of dried-up sectarianism.” (50)

It *is too late* for revival of dried-up sectarianism. It *is not too late* for a new expression of a world Methodist/Wesleyan evangelical movement. For that to happen we who share in the movement must keep a penitent heart, committed to Gospel certainties without being bigoted. In prayerful humility, I share my vision of what I believe are some foundation certainties.

## MINISTRY BELONGS TO THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD

We must begin courageously practicing the fact that ministry belongs to the whole people of God. As a pastor, I have heard it far too many times: “I am just a layman.” I wish I had never heard it, and I hope it will be forbidden language in our new movement. Many persons making this statement think they are being asked to do something that a “professional” Christian is called to do...the “professional Christian,” being a pastor or some person working as a paid vocational staff person in the church.

What concerns me most is that the statement usually comes from persons being invited to share in ministry that belongs to “the whole people of God.” “I am just a layman” is irreverent and demeaning. It denies that God has gifted and called all, offering us the incredible privilege of being co-lovers and co-laborers with God.

The way we are seeking to express church these days of the coronavirus should teach us how critical this understanding of ministry is. Without the times of coming together as community for worship, ,” the “professional” ministry is spending a lot of time and energy seeking ways to keep the sense of caring and community alive. What is happening is that lay people are coming alive in these expressions. A few days ago, a Christ Church member was diagnosed with aggressive cancer. A dozen fellow members of his Sunday School class, hearing the news, organized by phone, went to his home, but did not enter. Practicing “social distancing,” they surrounded the bedroom area of his house, and sang Christian hymns for about twenty minutes.

Think about it. We have more unsaved and unchurched people in our nation than ever before in our history, more that 172 million. What would happen if the sense of ministry of that dozen people who sang to their friend was cultivated in our congregations? That ministry belongs to the whole people of God does not mean we will not have “orders” of ministry. It does mean that we must pay more attention to calling and anointing. Gifts for ministry must have as much consideration as

certification. Equipping for ministry must be more closely connected with the local Christian community and culture. It is clear, when we contemplate Paul's New Testament teaching, and grasp the image of the church as "the body of Christ", it is difficult, if not impossible, to make any case for not having orders of ministry. In the section of his teaching on the church as *the body of Christ*, he closed by naming different functions or particular expressions of vocations: apostles, teachers, prophets. He listed particular giftings: healing, administration, helping others, speaking in and interpreting tongues. Even as early as the New Testament Church, there was no effort to eliminate particular functions, the living out of particular gifts and graces. So when we talk about ministry belonging to the whole people of God, in no way do we suggest eliminating "roles" and "functions;" rather, we are insisting that we must diminish the way we have established these in hierarchical fashion.

Again, this does not mean the role of orders and ordination is diminished, nor does it mean we lessen our emphasis on an "educated ministry." It means *equipping the whole people of God*. Seminaries must be servants of the church. The shape of theological education must come not alone from the university, but from partnership with the church. It may, in some instances, mean less than an MDiv degree for ordination, but it means far more. It means "equipping" the whole body.

Whether deacons, elders, or bishops, *orders* are more about calling and ministry, and less about status and authority. That means our new movement must foster bivocational ministry and be more attentive to, and affirming of, lay and local pastors.

## THE WESLEYAN JOURNEY

In our new movement we must stay constantly aware of our Wesleyan Journey which is a salvation journey. In our Wesleyan tradition, we talk about *going on to salvation*. The Wesley brothers used the term *salvation* in reference to the entire saving activity of God in human lives.

In our preaching and teaching, we too often put most of our emphasis on coming into the Christian life; in confessing, repenting, and trusting Christ as Savior, and receiving his forgiveness. The theological or biblical term for God's work in this dynamic is justification. When we think and talk about salvation, this is often where we center. John Wesley cautions us here. "By salvation I mean, not barely...deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its...original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth" ("A

Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by G.R. Craig; Abingdon, 1989; page 106).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul calls us to "grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). It is a call to *full salvation*: maturity in Christ, spiritual adulthood, perfection in love.

“In the Wesleyan tradition, we acknowledge this and talk about going on to salvation. Beginning with justification, full salvation includes sanctification, which is the theological word for God’s cleansing and purifying work within us. In his sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Wesley used the term “full salvation,” saying, “It is thus that we wait for entire sanctification; for a full salvation from all our sins—from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief; or, as the Apostle expresses it, ‘go unto perfection’” (sermon 43; Thomas Jackson, editor; 1872 edition).

“The climactic work of full salvation is glorification, the answer to Jesus’s prayer for his followers: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). (Maxie Dunnam, Introduction, *The Wesleyan Journey*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2020, pp. v-vi)

Our UMC, in the United States, has been losing membership from the beginning of our becoming a United Methodism in 1968. We became preoccupied with structure and ecumenical relations, flirted with, and almost became married to, theological pluralism as the tide of disagreement over human sexuality became a raging river. A major General Board Evangelism was encompassed by a new General Board of Discipleship. Boards and agencies have increased in attention and funding as emphasis on evangelism has diminished.

The human sexuality issue, particularly expressed in commitment to same sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexual persons by conscience driven persons, is the presenting issue of a “house divided.” This and other issues have birthed the general conviction that we need a new expression of our Wesleyan movement that must stay centered on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers, and that means being theologically and practically centered on *the Wesleyan Journey of salvation*.

William B. Fitzgerald summarized Wesley’s theology of salvation with this fourfold dictum: All people need to be saved from sin, all people can be saved from sin,

all people can know they are saved from sin, and all people can be saved to the uttermost. (*The Roots of Methodism*, London: Epworth, 1903, p. 191-217)

Two of those “alls” are especially Wesleyan: all can know they are saved, and all can be saved to the uttermost; giving us our doctrine of assurance and sanctification. Aldersgate was Wesley’s watershed experience which gave him the assurance of his salvation. He knew, in his words, “Christ has taken away my sin, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Assurance is the privilege of all believers set against the grim reality of sin, which can and often does persist in the life of the believer. This is what separates a Methodist understanding from those who believe in eternal security. While sin *remains* in the life of a believer, it does not *reign*. If we preach and teach this message of assurance joyfully in our new movement, we will not constantly be on the defensive with “Calvanism” and Christians whose core conviction seems to be eternal security, “once saved always saved.” It is not a matter of whether God is able to keep us from falling; of course God is able. It is a matter of whether we are vigilant in responding to God’s grace.

Which suggests the fourth all...“all can be saved to the uttermost.” For Wesley, saved to the uttermost meant Christian perfection, which is another term for *sanctification*. “Just as justification and regeneration are thresholds for the Christian life in earnest (‘what God does for us’), so also sanctification is ‘what God does in us,’ to mature and fulfill the human potential according to his primal design” (*The Works of John Wesley*, page 97).

The work of the Holy Spirit is transformative. We can better understand the full impact of that transformation by reflecting on the distinction between God’s action *for* the sinner—pardon and justification—and God’s action *in* the pardoned sinner’s heart—restoration of the broken image of God and of the human power to avoid and resist intentional sin. Again, Albert Outler expresses it clearly. “We have no part in our justification before God, save the passive act of accepting and trusting the merits of Christ. But we have a crucial part to play in the further business of ‘growing up into Christ, into the stature of the perfect man’” (*Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, p. 58).

In the dynamic process of sanctification, “Christian perfection,” we work out in fact what is already true in principle. In justification, our *position* in relation to God is that we are new persons; now, in sanctification, our *condition*, the actual life we live, is

brought into harmony with our position. We will discuss this more when we consider holiness as one of the nature of the Church.

Our new movement must keep the Wesleyan journey of *full salvation* at the center of our preaching and teaching and incorporated in our personal and corporate life.

## THE CHURCH: HOLY, CHARISMATIC, APOSTOLIC

How we think about the nature of the church is critical as we move forward in our new movement. As indicated, from the beginning of our United Methodist Church, we “fought” over human sexuality. Underneath that struggle was the whole notion of theological pluralism. Keeping a clear vision of the nature of the church will not save us from disagreement and conflict, but it will keep clear the importance and measure of the conflict.

We must keep asking ourselves the question, “How do we live as church that is transformational at the root, rather than stereotypical “against the world” as our tactic?” As is true presently, we will be accused of being *exclusive* as we hold fast to the claim of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the life...no one comes to the Father but by me.” But what can be more inclusive than “God so loved the world...Whosoever will may come”? As stated earlier, we can have our certainties, without being bigots.

Speaking from our Wesleyan perspective, our new movement has the awesome privilege and responsibility of holding fast the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which the Methodist movement first set out. I am bold to suggest that the church we have the opportunity of shaping must be a Church that is holy, charismatic, and apostolic. We need a synthesis of holiness and charismatic experience. We also need an apostolic vision for the mission of the Church.

### *FIRST, HOLY.*

There is no question – either in Scripture or in our Wesleyan tradition – the community of faith is to be a “holy people.”

Bishop William Oden gave a devotional talk at the beginning of the second session of the United Methodist Dialog on Christian Unity, in which I participated. He told of a visit with Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of liberation theology. Bishop Oden was eager to discuss theology; Gutierrez wanted to discuss Methodism. The bishop wanted to hear about Gutierrez’s Lay Academy in Lima, Peru, and his being silenced by Rome.

Gutierrez wanted to talk about his Methodist friends, Mortimer Arias, Emillo Castro, and Justo Gonzales.

“Tell me about Methodism in America,” he said.

“We are struggling to find our center,” Bishop Oden responded. Gutierrez looked at him. “You already have a center. “Share it with me,” the bishop implored.

This is what Gutierrez said: “It’s scriptural holiness. You inherited that center from Wesley. Don’t you see that scriptural holiness is the exact word needed today? Wesley’s theology of holiness comes out of the merger of a theology of creation and the experience of God’s grace. The holy earth and the holy life cannot be separated.” He shook his head. “Holiness has been reduced to neurotic perfectionism by some. It’s not. It is the joyous response to the grace of God. Holiness is the movement of both creation and Church toward fulfillment in God’s love. Wesley called it ‘Christian perfection’ and he organized his movement to be small cells of nurture and growth to that end.”

Their time was up. Gutierrez embraced Bishop Oden and said, “Friend, if Methodism can keep its center, it will be a faithful force for God. If not,” he shrugged his shoulders, “God will raise up another community with the same biblical and theological vision.”

The movement we are fostering may be what Gutierrez was predicting. Holiness is not an option for Christians and is at the center of our Methodist faith and way.

### *TWO, CHARISMATIC.*

The Church will be holy, and also charismatic. We can never be holy within our own resources; the Holy Spirit is the provider of power.

By charismatic I mean that the Church came to birth through the Spirit, thus the Church lives and functions by the Spirit. Theoretically, no one would disagree with that. But functionally, we do disagree. Where is the mainline denomination or the classic evangelical denomination that incorporates this conviction as a core principle by which the congregation orders her life?

The charismatic nature of the Church underscores not only a dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit for life and sustenance, but an ongoing expectation of a Spirit-empowered community, where love and mutual caring, where forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, and deliverance, Breaking down racial, economic, and social barriers are anticipated as the norm, not the miraculous.

This connects with Wesley's notion of "saved to the uttermost." Consider that in relation to the "brokenness" all around us...sexual brokenness reflected in addiction to pornography, adultery, serial divorce, homosexual practice; the widespread alcohol and drug addiction that impacts families and almost every sector of society, the destructive habits we develop to tolerate uncertainty and all the things that bring emotional discomfort. At least, being saved "to the uttermost" means deliverance and healing which we know experientially is the work of the Holy Spirit. Hopefully, from the beginning in our movement, our desire and expectation will be that the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit will be the norm and will not have to be relegated to some "special ministry."

The churches I know in the United States who are:

- winning the more people to Jesus Christ, abolishing social, economic, and racial barriers by bringing diverse people together in worship,
- most effectively freeing people from drug addiction,
- expressing care and concern for the poor are churches that know themselves to be charismatic.

Look beyond the United States. I recently visited Cuba. I had visited Cuba twice in the 20 years before, and I knew revival was taking place, especially in The Methodist Church. I was not prepared, however, for the robust power of the Holy Spirit being demonstrated there.

There were 37 missionaries in Cuba when Castro came to power in 1959. All of them left the country during the next few years. The Methodist churches, for the most part, were closed. Only two or three Methodist preachers were left. For many years the church was barely holding on, not publicly visible in any significant way. But something happened.

About three decades ago, beginning with young people coming together for prayer and fasting, people began to experience the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and the Church began to come alive.

Reluctantly, the bishop supported the movement. By his own confession, he had great reservation. Now, he shares excitedly his support of these young people. Not only so, early on, he joined them in an all night prayer vigil. Something, unexpected and unplanned for, happened to the bishop. He talks about it in terms of a "powerful infilling of the Holy Spirit." He readily confesses that he was transformed and his leadership

changed. He claimed the power of the Holy Spirit, and the church is being transformed by his leadership.

Now, because of their faithfulness, their praying and fasting – the Church is growing dynamically. The government will not allow them to build churches, so they establish “house” churches, usually in the home of the pastor or a new convert who has become a “missionary.”

When I reflect on the Cuban church, I remember as word of Paul Rees: “Revival and evangelism, although closely related, are not to be confounded. Revival is an experience in the Church; evangelism is an expression of the Church.”

The church that does not pay attention to its intrinsic charismatic nature will be far less than God’s dream for her. What was Jesus’ last promise before his ascension? “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

J.I. Bruch observed that “the Church has halted somewhere between Calvary and Pentcost.” Whether so or not, I am more than excited--I am ecstatic when I imagine our emerging movement with these two crucial dynamics realized – holy and charismatic.

### *THREE, APOSTOLIC.*

I shared about the charismatic dimension of The Methodist Church of Cuba; we also see the apostolic dimension as a core expression of that church. When persons share with the bishop that they are feeling a call to ministry, the bishop tells them to go out and win ten persons to Christ. When they have done that, confirming their apostolic passion, they are called “missionaries,” and can get on a ministry track which goes on for three years. During that time, most of them are spiritual leaders of a house church, made up of those they have won to Christ. Along with these new Christians, they continually share the gospel with people around them. The present oppressive communist government of Cuba will not allow them to build churches, but these new “missionaries” and converts are establishing house church which are springing up all over the island.

In 1990 there were less than 2000 members in The Methodist Church; in 2005 there were over 16,000, in 2010, over 27,000. Today there are 52,000 baptized members, but weekly worship is over 100,000. In 2018, it was announced at the Annual Conference that the Methodist Church has a presence in 99% of the capital centers of the country. 70% of the membership growth is under 35 years old.

All indicators picture the Methodist Church of Cuba as holy, charismatic and apostolic. As a new movement we need to learn from Cuba, not only about the nature of the church, but about bi-vocational ministry, planting new congregations, and how the seminary is to serve the church. Only a Church that is holy, charismatic, and apostolic is going to be the powerful Kingdom witness to challenge the “principalities and powers” that are holding sway in our day.

*That’s the kind of new denomination we have time for.* I’m excited about being a part of and giving the balance of my life to such a church.

Implicit in this Trinitarian dynamic is a warning against seeking to live and express the Christian life alone. Expressing it dogmatically, there is no such thing as a solitary Christian; “individual Christian” is an oxymoron. This was a huge principle in John Wesley’s teaching. The notion was planted in Wesley’s mind even before he was converted. To one whom he called “a serious man” Wesley wrote, “Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them: the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.” (Howard Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*, Downer’s Grove, IL, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, p. 148)

This notion did not begin with Wesley; Paul used the image as he instructed early Christians. His most used image for the church was “the body.” An entire chapter in his first letter to the Corinthians discusses the nature of the Christian life, the church and the gifting of individual Christians, using the metaphor of the body, with a few verses summarizing his teaching: *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by<sup>1</sup> one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”* (1 Cor. 12:12-14)

He then used body members--the foot, the hand, the ear, the eye--to talk about the diversity of gifts, and the necessity of every gift. *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.* (1 Cor. 12:21-26 NIV) Lest they missed what

he was saying, Paul followed this very practical description of the church with his direct word, *“you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.”* (vs. 27)

When we contemplate Paul’s teaching, and grasp the image of the church as “the body of Christ”, it is difficult to make any case for a hierarchy of ministries. In this section of Paul’s teaching, he closed by naming different functions or particular expressions of vocations: apostles, teachers, prophets. He listed particular giftings: healing, administration, helping others, speaking in and interpreting tongues. Even as early as the New Testament Church, there was no effort to eliminate particular functions, the living out of particular gifts and graces. So, when we talk about ministry belonging to the whole people of God, in no way do we suggest eliminating “roles’ and “functions;” rather, we are insisting that we must diminish the way we have established these in hierarchical fashion. The task of leaders in the congregation where the priesthood of all believers is taken seriously will take the form of motivation, training, and empowerment.

It is clear that Peter’s letter is not addressed to a set-apart class of ordained clergy, since none existed in the church at the time of his writing. The letter is addressed to all the church. Christians are all "a royal priesthood."

To be a priest is to be one who goes between God and the people. It is to be one who communicates the word of God to the world. It is to be commissioned with the task of carrying the caring ministry of Christ into the community, to be the ones who break the bread of reconciliation and bear the cup of Christ’s mercy to those who are hurting and in need.

Peter’s letter is not addressed to a set-apart class of ordained clergy, since none existed in the church at the time of his writing. I happen to believe in the role of the ordained—I’ve spent over 60 years doing this—but Peter’s letter is addressed to all the church. You are all "a royal priesthood." We are priests 24/7, all the time in all places. In contrast to the priests of the pagan temples around them who were venerated, pampered and out of touch with the common people, Peter calls the whole church to the task of servanthood, the calling of Christ.

We must become convinced and become passionate about what Christ can do for persons and for society. Our big task is to contextualize the message to the culture...because what Christ can do for persons and society is universal, not culturally bound, but is culturally adaptable.

This means, among many things we don't have time to explore, that much of the ministry in the future, in this country especially, will be led by bi-vocational and/or lay pastors. The question then arises: Will the seminary continue to see itself as an academy for graduate theological education alone, or as a servant of the Church to educate and equip the whole people of God? The Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is apostolic in style and passion, will necessarily see itself as existing for the sake of mission in the world. It will see itself not as having a mission, but as being mission, with the world as our parish. This will require a paradigm shift of rather monumental proportions. The Church will have to change from seeing itself as an institution, or as an organization, to seeing itself as a Movement—an organism. This will require a move from being clergy-centered to ministry as the responsibility of the whole people of God? Put simply, the ordinary Christian is a minister and a missionary. This ministry and mission takes place in one's personal life—home and family; in societal occupations -- in the workplace and in politics; and in one's corporate life in the church. The role of pastor within the congregation will take the form of teaching, vision casting, motivation, and empowerment.

This paradigm shift will also require moving from individualism and individuality to community. Also, it will require a shift from program orientation, which is a come-to dynamic, to unleashing gifted people for marketplace discipleship, to do Kingdom work in the world.

I like the way our own Howard Snyder has contrasted our stereotypical understanding of church to the Kingdom of which the church should be a sign:

Kingdom people seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice; church people often put church work above concerns of justice, mercy and truth. Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world. (Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom*, page 11 as quoted in the book *The Other Six Days*, page 212).

Well, we have a lot more to do—both in reflection and action—in filling in the blanks for this next season of our life here at Asbury. But the big idea is clear: moving the church and, by necessity, the seminary from a clergy-centered, mainline church-centered institution to a Holy Spirit Kingdom movement, an organism of mission and ministry by the whole people of God.