

**The Four Wheels of United Methodist Connectionalism:
Imagining God’s Superabundant Grace at Work in the Indiana Area UMC**

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[I pray] that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. . . . Now unto him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever. Amen. – Ephesians 3:18-21

To be “connected” in the 21st century is to be privileged.¹ Living in a world that is increasingly perceived to be “flat”, those of us who have access to the internet are able to be competitive in economies of money, education, and well-being (or health). And we can do so virtually any time in the day in the so-called “24-hour global economy” in which CNN never sleeps and “ebay” is always open for us to buy and sell, whether we need to do so or not. By contrast, those persons *who do not have access* to the internet by virtue of not having a computer are likely to be vulnerable due to the absence of money, a lack of education, and/or the curse of being uninsured.

To be “connected” in the 18th and 19th centuries in England and America *was also* to be privileged. Although Methodist in the 18th and 19th centuries lived in a very different world of monetary exchange, educational opportunity, and communications ability Methodist at that time understood the benefits of being a “connectional” people. With their imaginations enriched by the metaphors and stories of the Old and New Testament scriptures, they celebrated the *superabundance* of God’s grace made possible through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that Methodists displayed vivid imaginations of the ways that God

¹ One of the responsibilities of those who are privileged to be connected as United Methodists is to be grateful for the benefits and blessings one experiences in the context of shared endeavors. I am grateful to the following United Methodists for their assistance and encouragement in the preparation of this paper. The Rev. Dr. Andy Kinsey, pastor of Vincennes Community UMC; the Rev. Bob Walters, Associate Director, South Indiana Conference Council on Ministries; and Ms. Cindy Tyree, Office Manager of the Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs at the University of Indianapolis.

was using the church as the means for communicating the good news of the gospel to the principalities and powers of the world (Ephesians 3:9-10).

One of the scriptural metaphors to which Methodists in England and America turned to help illustrate the benefits – or God-given blessings – of connectionalism was Ezekiel’s mysterious “wheel within the wheel” image. In the first chapter of Ezekiel’s prophecy, this image is laid out in vivid detail (Ezekiel 1:9-20). With Ezekiel, early Methodists were captivated by the spectacle of a chariot that moved with four sets of wheels within wheels as a metaphor for God’s transformative work in the world. In time, they would come to interpret their experience of God “raising up a people” for gospel ministry organized in bands, societies, circuits, and conferences with the image of the wheel within the wheel. As such, it became a primary image in what might be called the Methodist connectional imagination.

Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic used Ezekiel’s image in different ways as they attempted to discern the activity of God’s Providence in the “wheels” of human history. This imagery of the “wheel within the wheel” can be found in several prominent documents of early Methodist leaders, including the 1778 sermon (No. 113) of John Wesley “On the Late Work of God in North America” and the 1798 “Explanatory Notes” to *The Book of Discipline* written by Bishop Francis Asbury and Bishop Thomas Coke.

Drawing upon these materials, I will describe how it is possible to discern four such connectional “wheels-within-the-wheel” in the United Methodist tradition:

- 1) The Itinerant Wheel (the interlocking patterns of conferences & appointments)
- 2) The Potter’s Wheel (“Probationary” membership and Christian Formation)
- 3) Wisdom’s Wheel (spiral of learning)
- 4) The Macedonian Wheel (reaching out in Evangelism, Witness and Mission).

Each of these images corresponds to a different feature of the Methodist connectional “economy” – ways of organizing the various temporal and spiritual dimensions of the household of faith that we know today as the United Methodist Church

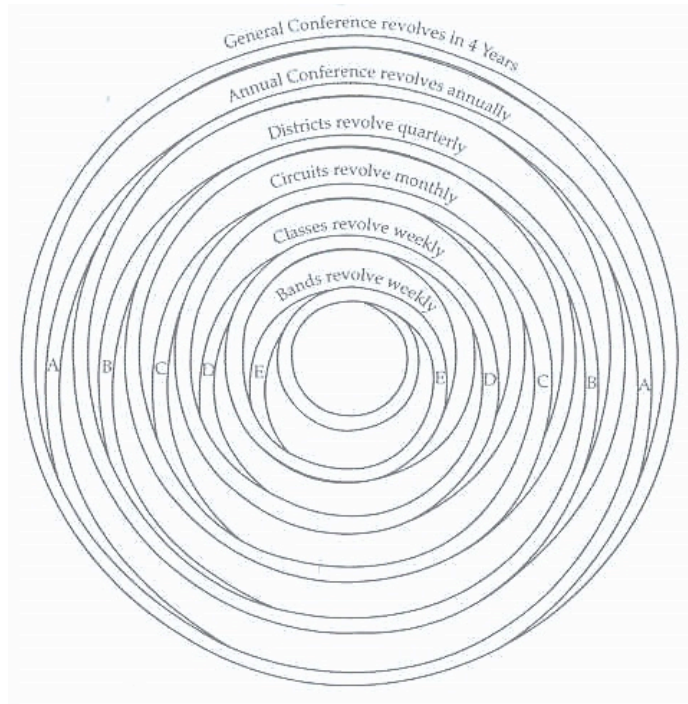
In the concluding section, I will briefly explain why there are no “fifth wheels” in a United Methodist understanding of connection. The “surpassing abundance” of God’s grace (Ephesians 3:19-21) is what continues to make it possible for United Methodists to

discern God’s work in us and in the world no matter how “flat” and/or one-dimensional the economies of the world may seem to be in our time and place.

I. The First Wheel within the Wheel: Itinerant Ministry (the Temporal Economy)

One of the most widespread images of the Methodist connection as a wheel within-the-wheel was the cycle of conferences associated with itinerant ministry. To take but one well-known example, on the occasion when American Methodists celebrated the centennial of the birth of Methodism in England, a clergyman from New York, used Ezekiel’s image of “the wheel within the wheel” in a speech that described the work of God in Methodism since 1739.

The Itinerant Wheel



At the end of a lengthy set of declarations about the “glories” of Methodism, the Rev. George Cookman asks his readers to consider a question: “*What is Methodism?* Methodism, sir, is a *revival of New Testament primitive religion*. . . .It is above all a *revival of the missionary spirit*, which . . . goes forth aggressively, under the external promise, to the conquest of the world. If, then, sir, this be a true version of MethodismWhat is the grand characteristic, the distinctive peculiarity of Methodism? I would answer, it is to be found in one single word, ITINERANCY. Yes, sir, this, under God, is the mighty spring of our motive power, the true secret of our unparalleled success.”

As Russell Richey, one of the leading historians of American Methodism, has observed, the fact that Rev. Cookman imaged Methodism as a “machine” is an indicator of the ways that the industrial revolution of England also funded the emerging Methodist “connectional imagination.” At a time when the centuries-old work of “cartwrights” (wagonmakers) and other forms of manual labor was beginning to be transformed, Methodists in America and England alike were fascinated by the “steam engine” and other labor-saving inventions that used wheels to perform work in new ways. As a result, they tended to image *God’s work in the world in their lives* as a series of interlocking wheels, each of which turned the other, within a set of weekly, quarterly, annual and quadrennial gatherings of Christian conference.

The more successful American Methodists were in carrying out their mission of “spreading Scriptural holiness across the continent and reforming the land beginning with the church,” the more they admired the beauty of the connectional as a “machine” that works. At their best, they gave the glory to God in the spirit of Ephesians 3:18-21 as they bore testimony to one another and the world to *the superabundance of God’s grace that makes it possible* to carry out this mission. At their worst, Methodists tended to admire the machinery of Methodist connectionalism as if it were the result of human ingenuity. Within this early 19th century example of Methodist connectional imagination, as Russell Richey has pointed out, “Methodism orbits from class to circuit, without housing itself, so to speak, in building or society. Methodism imaged itself, after the vision of Ezekiel, as intact, integrated, whole, perfect . . .”

(Many United Methodists are puzzled when they first encounter this image because this particular version of “the itinerant wheel” *does not include* the very entity that today seems to dominate our connectional imaginations – namely the congregation or “local church.” From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to imagine being “Methodist” *without* inhabiting congregations. At the same time, it is not always clear whether we have come to think this way because of the actual strength of particular congregations in which we participate or because of the perceived weakness of other connectional entities such as the circuit, district, annual conference, etc.)

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that Methodists in England and America ignored what took place in the face-to-face gatherings of local communities of Christians. Far from it! To bring this part of the Methodist connectional imagination into view, I need to call attention to a *second* wheel within the wheel image, one that has less to do with the construction

of organizational machinery and more to do with the transformation of human lives in the power of the Holy Spirit resulting in the creation of “earthen vessels” to be used for God’s purposes.

II. The Second Wheel within the Wheel: Shaped for Service by the Potter’s Hand (the Spiritual Economy)

More than four decades before George Cookman wrote about “the wheel within the wheel” as a figure for imagining Methodist itinerancy, another pair of prominent Methodist leaders argued that something else than itinerant ministry was the heart of the matter for the Methodist “connexion.” In their “Explanatory Notes” to the 1798 edition of *The Book of Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America*, Bishop Thomas Coke and Bishop Francis Asbury contended that “probationary membership” in the Methodist societies as *the most important* feature of the Methodist economy.

One of the reasons that the bishops gave for this contention was because probationary membership in a Methodist society – or the experience of being “on trial” – was *where discernment began for those who believed that they had been called to lead the church as traveling preachers*. While they acknowledged that some observers felt that the “the whole process of probationary membership in all its parts” was too rigid, Asbury and Coke nonetheless argued the *central* importance of this kind of training for accountable discipleship for the health of “the whole economy” of Methodism. In fact, they went so far as to “attribute to it, under [God’s] grace and providence, the purity of our ministry.” For these first two Methodist bishops, the probationary process associated with keeping the General Rules was best understood as a kind of “school” in the Lord’s service. Accordingly, the Methodist “societies” located on various circuits should be understood as “universities for ministers of the gospel.”

Contemporary readers of the “Explanatory Notes” to the 1798 *Discipline* probably would not have been surprised by this contention as much as 21st century readers are likely to be. What the bishops had in mind was the *lifelong formation* of Christian disciples in the context of disciplined Christian community. In the context of their participation in the intense fellowships known at that time as class meetings and societies, Methodists experienced the discipline of “watching over one another in love” as they so winsomely described it. This phrase, which is taken from “The General Rules of the People Called Methodists,” refers to the ongoing process of mutual accountability in which ordinary Methodists covenanted with one another to avoid evil

– especially that which is most commonly practiced, to do good in all ways possible, and to practice the “ordinances” of God, also known as the instituted means of grace.

The part of the *Book of Discipline* that described this part of the Methodist connection was known as “the spiritual part” of the Methodist economy whereas the sections of the Discipline that focused on Christian formation were called “the temporal part.” Following John Wesley, Methodists reminded one another that it wasn’t enough to have a great organizational scheme for itinerant ministry. Discipleship *must be embodied* in the disciplines of Christian living in the context of mutual accountability. This is where the Methodist connectional imagination had more of a down to earth character; the kind of Christian formation that the General Rules describe is a *daily process of being re-shaped* for life in the reign of God.

The annual Wesleyan Covenant Renewal service served as an occasion for *recommitting* in the presence of one another to this lifelong process of Christian formation in which ordinary men and women acknowledged year by year: “*I am no longer my own, but Thine. . . Let me be employed for Thee or laid aside for Thee. . .*” In such occasions, Methodists reminded one another of their primary identity as children of God, baptized into the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They reaffirmed the pattern of holy living, with the stated objective of “going on to perfection” and celebrated the many ways in which God is at work in one another’s lives.

Across the past two centuries, Methodists in America have evolved in our understanding of Christian formation. The Methodist Episcopal Church and its successor bodies changed – split in the 1840s, reunited in 1940 and merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968– to form what we know as the United Methodist Church. In the process, there have been significant losses as well as gains. We no longer use the category of “probationary membership” except with respect to clergy-in-training for ordination as elder or deacon. In other ways, however, I believe we have retained enough of the early Methodist patterns of Christian formation to be able to recognize what Bishops Coke and Asbury had in mind when they called attention to the formative power of face-to-face relationships as “universities of the gospel.”

For example, our active participation in covenant groups and other accountability relationships provide the context in which God’s grace is received and the journey of discipleship is embraced. This is the wheel-within the wheel of God’s providence where “love feasts” and “covenant renewal services” and “camp meetings” offered space for

testimony as well as spiritual encouragement and admonition. Here also Methodists learned to engage in acts of devotion such as prayer and fasting and participate in the “works of mercy” such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting those who are sick and in prison (Matthew 25:31-46).

The Potter’s Wheel



If we attempt to imagine Christian formation as another one of Ezekiel’s wheels within a wheel, we might recall another prophetic image – that of the potter’s wheel (Jeremiah 18-19). Unlike the itinerant wheel, which images the way we participate in the temporal economy, this “potter’s wheel” refers to a *lifelong process* of Christian formation whereby we as Methodist “brothers and sisters in Christ” share our experience of being shaped by the hand of the potter. In the context of such Christian practices, as individuals we rediscover true identities, namely that “we were ordained to be . . . transcripts of the Trinity” (Charles Wesley), but we also continually are reminded that the “peoplehood” of Methodism is created out of the ordinary stuff of the created order – human beings like you and me.

The synergy that is produced from such examples of human response with divine initiative displays the economy of this *third* wheel-within-the-wheel of United Methodist connectionalism. Here we need to be especially careful in how we think about God’s work in and through us. One of the ways that we can register the imaginative power of United Methodist connectionalism in our time is to stop making connectionalism first and foremost an object of human invention and learn to look upon ourselves as part of that earthy stuff that God is (re-)shaping on the potter’s wheel. That does not have to be taken

to mean that United Methodists in Indiana have to think of ourselves as having little or no agency in the connectional process; it simply means that we are *not the primary agents* in this synergistic process. To be clear about the *limits* of our role in the connectional process may be the first step toward being able to imagine ourselves in a new conference structure at the United Methodist Church in Indiana.

Today, in the 21st century, I am pleased to see that Indiana-area United Methodist congregations are recovering the importance of Christian spiritual formation in the context of Covenant Discipleship groups and Disciple Bible studies as well as in ventures such as Emmaus Walk, and the Academy for Spiritual Formation. It is also possible to experience this kind of covenantal fellowship in the context of groups of United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women as well as in the Conference Board of Youth Ministry (CBYM). In such fellowships, we continue to have the opportunity to be shaped by God in the context of the mutual accountability of “watching over one another in love.”

III. The Third Connectional Wheel: Wisdom’s Wheel (Economy of Prayerful Attentiveness & Wisdom-Seeking Preparation)

As emphatic and early Methodists were about the importance of organizing for mission through the temporal economy of the itinerant wheel and the spiritual economy of being shaped by the potter’s wheel (in the context of “classes” where they watched over one another in love), they were also keenly aware of the fact that these were *not* the only dimensions of God’s economy. In addition, Methodists reminded one another of the significance of participating in a *third* wheel-within-the wheel, what might be described as an economy of attentiveness and (wisdom-seeking) preparation for service. Like the itinerant wheel, this third image of connectionalism is temporal in character, but here the cycles of time are better imaged as rhythms of prayer, study and reflection that exist alongside the patterns of itinerant ministry and Christian formation. This wheel of attentiveness, then, pertains to the economy of “wisdom seeking” efforts to “raise up leaders” who are being prepared to serve the church in its mission of going out and gathering in.

Here also, we find evidence in the “Explanatory Notes” of Coke and Asbury. After having described the full set of responsibilities of Methodist preachers, the bishops turned their attention to what Methodists were to do with their time when they were “not traveling or

engaging in public exercises.” Here, their advice was to “employ” *the rest of the time* each day (as well as other cycles of time, e.g. weeks, months) in “useful” patterns of rest, reading, and reflection that would prepare them to be able to carry out their responsibilities as they are called upon to do so in the context of God’s providence. The Bishops are emphatic that Methodist circuit riders are not to waste time in idle pursuits. Nor are they to engage in idle chatter. Their daily lives are to be punctuated by prayer and meditation as well as reading the kinds of books that will enable them to become wise leaders.

Many 21st century readers of the 1798 “Explanatory Notes” are initially surprised at the sense of urgency that is conveyed in such texts. But, if we stop to think about the circumstances of the lives of early Methodists, we can locate this emphatic concern to be wise “stewards” in their very different experience of time. To begin with, they did not think of time as something that they possessed so much as it was a gift of God’s providence to be employed for God’s purposes. They also did not have the same average lifespan. Some Methodist preachers were “worn out” before they reached 40 years of age, and more than a few would die early or become invalids who had to take honorable location. Moreover, they lived their lives in the context of the hopeful expectation of Christ’s second coming as well as the awareness of Judgment Day, a disposition that was reinforced by their reading of the gospels, particularly the parables of Jesus.

According to Bishop Coke and Bishop Asbury, the primary goal of taking time to be attentive by engaging in prayer, study and wisdom-seeking reflection was to become “more knowing and more holy” *in order to be ready and able* to address the needs of the people around them in discerning ways as called upon in God’s providential work in the world. Here we engage the “experimental” character of Methodist connectional imagination, but the experiments were by no means haphazard. Rather, Methodists were engaging in what they called “practical divinity.” To paraphrase John Wesley, they did not think that they had learned all that there was to learn. It is in that sense that we need to think of the practice of “searching the Scriptures” (John 5:39). As Wesley avowed in “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” attentiveness to wisdom characterizes the reading habits of Methodist clergy and laity alike: “*We are always open to instruction, willing to be wiser every day than we were before, and to change whatever we can change for the better.*”

Similarly, the bishops specifically invoked the gospel image “scribes of the kingdom” (from Matt. 13:52) to remind American Methodists of the importance of “much reading and

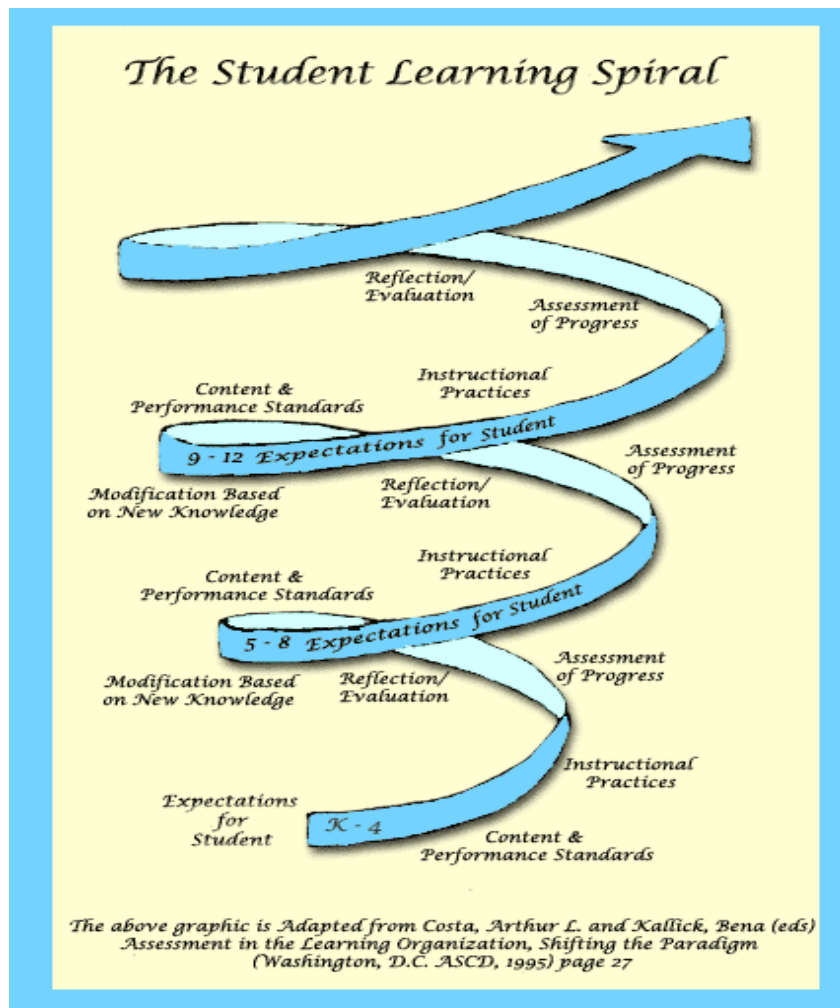
study” so that they would be able to carry out their responsibilities in discerning ways, like the householder who brings forth out of the storehouse, “treasures things new and old.” Such statements by Asbury and Coke display the expectation that Methodists will become wiser in the context of a collective *spiral of learning* that is enabled by disciplined attention to reading, meditation and reflection. Accordingly, this feature of the Methodist connectionalism can be imaged as a *third* kind of wheel within the wheel – namely a spiraling wheel of wisdom-seeking practice as Methodists individually and collectively prepared to go out into the world for service. This is where we take stock of the *timeful* character of God’s work in the world by paying attention to the importance of Sabbath time as well as setting aside time for prayerful reflection.

This is but one way that we can look back and see how the earliest architects of the American Methodist connectional system recognized that the itinerant “machine” that they had articulated was *not* a closed system, but rather remained subject to ongoing changes and required *setting aside time* for ongoing opportunities for reflection and study in order to sustain the disposition of attentiveness to the Spirit’s call. The other temporal cycles associated with the appointed meetings of the societies, circuits, and conferences would go on, but these “orbits” of Methodist connection must also be punctuated by opportunities for study, renewal, and Sabbath and self-care. The bishops specifically commend the “curriculum” that Mr. Wesley had put together in this set of directives

Here, we also see the bishops acting in much the same way that John Wesley did during his own lifetime. They actually refer to Mr. Wesley’s habits of prayer and study at several points as exemplary. But, as Ted Campbell has persuasively argued, Wesley’s entire ministry can be seen through the lens of Matthew 13:52 if we pay close attention to Wesley’s careful stewardship of “treasures old and new” in a time of remarkable social change. In fact, conference records in early Methodism indicate that from 1746 on, John Wesley repeatedly petitioned the conference of preachers on several occasions for permission to “travel less so that he could write more.” This is the conviction that informed Wesley’s effort to assemble a 50-volume “Christian Library” for use Methodists. This same instinct led him to start *The Arminian Magazine*, the quarterly collection of testimonies and narratives of saints of old as well as stories about the experiences of ordinary saints in the Methodist societies whom God was transforming by grace through faith. Over time, this call for disciplined attentiveness through prayer, study, and reflection took institutional forms in the founding of various educational institutions.

The directives that Asbury and Coke gave to the conference of preachers in their 1798 commentary hardly constitutes a fully developed course of study, of course, but they do indicate that the founders of American Methodism recognized the importance of educational endeavors for sustaining the connectional machine – at least with respect to clergy. This connectional sensibility also has taken shape in various ways across the past two centuries: courses of study, schools of Christian mission, lay pastors schools, local license to preach schools, colleges and seminaries. Then as now, American Methodists have tended to be more articulate about how theological education should be ordered – for *training ministers of the gospel* – than the role to be played by undergraduate institutions in the Methodist connection in cultivating “scribes of the kingdom.” I would argue, however, that at our best this is what church-related colleges and universities can and should do. The effort to cultivate attentiveness to Christian vocation by cultivating a “culture of call” in our time expresses this same connectional sensibility.

Wisdom’s Wheel



In the 21st century, the United Methodist connection is being *re-shaped* for purposes of clergy training and/or formation as we experience the raising up and letting go of institutional structures. We no longer have a “School of the Prophets,” but we do have Pastor’s Schools and convocations, and in our own ways we are experiencing the spiral of learning that emerges from taking the time to practice wisdom-seeking attentiveness that is required to be available to respond to the spirit’s call. The South Indiana Conference’s collaboration with the University of Indianapolis to create the Wesleyan Connexion Project is one such example of the kind of leadership development, but I suspect it would also be possible to identify others kinds of connectional ministries, including in the areas of healthcare, volunteers in mission, etc.

IV. The Fourth Connectional Wheel: Reaching Out in Response to “the Macedonian Call” (The Apostolic Economy – Witness, Evangelism and Mission)

Amid the many differences of Methodists across the centuries and throughout the world, there is at least one thing that Methodists of all times and places probably share in common. Namely, we are repeatedly surprised at how God chooses to work in human history. There is something rather improbable about the prospect that God would use *ordinary people like us* to accomplish God’s extraordinary purposes of making all things new. We can discern a fourth kind of connectional wheel when we look at the ways Methodists have understood themselves to be commissioned to go forth and serve and return to testify to the evidence of God’s work in the world. Bishop Coke and Bishop Asbury were certainly aware of this aspect of Methodist connection because in large part it was in response to the pleas of American Methodists that Wesley took the extraordinary action to ordain Francis Asbury and company to oversee the Methodist mission in America.

Wesley and the people called Methodists saw themselves as acting like Paul and the apostles did when they responded to “the Macedonian call” (Acts 16:6-10) by going out of their already existing circuit of newly founded churches to engage the needs of people elsewhere. Their Methodist connectional imaginations were inspired by the saga of how God reached into human history to “raise up a people” to carry out God’s purposes. Paul and Silas had made plans to revisit the congregations on that first Christian circuit in Asia Minor, but God had other plans. First Paul has a dream in which he hears the people of Macedonia calling them. So they changed course and headed for the city of Philippi in Macedonia where they began to gather a community

of disciples. Before they knew it, they had released a young woman from bondage to demons in the city of Ephesus, only to then find themselves thrown into jail charged with having deprived the woman's owners of their livelihood from her fortune-telling. The apostolic pattern of witness to the way of salvation in Jesus Christ is one in which evangelism, mission, and confronting injustice are conjoined.

Like the apostles, Methodists in England and America were both awed and amazed by the ways God's Holy Spirit interrupts the stable patterns of itinerancy and Christian formation to call men and women into leadership. And in their attempts to make sense of the mysterious Providence of God, they turned to images such as Ezekiel's wheel within the wheel. In fact, when John Wesley attempted to account for "the late work of God in North America," he did so in a sermon (No. 113) based on the text of Ezekiel 1:16. John Wesley's interpretation of "the Wheel Within the Wheel" narrates what happened before and after he acted in response to the pleas of Americans who had responded to the great Awakening. Wesley represented his decision to send Methodist preachers to America as a response to the Macedonian call to "come over and help them." Moreover, Wesley called attention to the fact that "God raised up many natives of the country who were glad to act in connection with them." The net result, according to the founder of Methodism, was that "The work of God then not only spread wider . . . but sank deeper than ever before."

It is worth pausing to observe that Wesley's observations about the origins of what we now think of as the United Methodist Church are offered in a sermon in which he was confidently predicting that the wheel-within-the-wheel of God's Providence will result in the overturning of "every hindrance" to the work of God – *including* the Revolutionary War against the British! Ever the English Tory, John Wesley turned out to be wrong in this respect. By his own logic, however, the surprising outcome (to him) to that war is nonetheless consistent with the freedom of the Holy Spirit to move the people of God into new frontiers of ministry.

Although the leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America may not have been as surprised as Mr. Wesley at the outcome of the American Revolution, this same disposition to be open to being *sent forth beyond our comfort zone* is reflected in the "explanatory notes" of Bishops Asbury and Coke. In their address to the "Dearly Beloved Brethren" who were "members of the Methodist Societies in the United States," the bishops recalled "the rise of Methodism" in various locations beginning in England and later in North America. They declare

their belief “that God’s design in raising up the preachers called Methodists, in America, was to reform the continent, and spread scriptural–holiness over these lands.”

The first few generations of American Methodists had many examples of this as the American frontier spread further west. Jason Lee, among other itinerant preachers, responded to what he understood to be “the Macedonian call” of Native American peoples in the Northwest – communicated in person by a pair of Native American Christians who presented themselves to Methodist leaders in Independence, Missouri in 1804. As a result the Methodist mission in Oregon began to unfold initially in the context of bringing the gospel to “the Indians,” but very soon also in the creation of an institution that today we know as Willamette University. Today Methodists in Oregon encounter the disconcerting prospect of living in what is described as “the None-Zone” – an area of the United States in which the single largest aggregate of religious preference is “none of the above.” United Methodists on the faculty at Willamette University engage students who are living in what some describe as a Post-Christian culture.

Of course, once upon a time, Methodism in Indiana was also thought of as a “Northwest Territory” but that designation no longer defines the geography of our outreach. The “map” of Christian mission and outreach for Hoosier United Methodists is increasingly global, and as a result our connectional sensibilities are much more expansive than they once were. Today, United Methodists in Indiana participate in a variety of ministries. Some of us go to Poland where we work with fledgling congregations and pastors like Janusz Daszuta at Kielce UMC in summer Bible camp for non-English speaking youth and children. Others of us help gather supplies for Operation Classroom in Liberia and Sierra Leone. And in recent years more than a few of us have heard the haunting cries of the hungry in Darfur while many congregations from Indiana have gone to Mississippi and Louisiana to help with efforts to reconstruct homes and communities in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In all of these ways and more we respond to what we discern as a “Macedonian call” in our time and place. We return from such experiences to share with our United Methodist congregations how we have been changed by what transpired during our sojourn with these new brothers and sisters.

In taking such stands, we sometimes find ourselves engaging “the principalities and powers” in ways as confrontational as what Paul and Silas did in the Macedonian city of Philippi (Acts 16: 12-24). For example, United Methodist opposition to the expansion of gambling in the state of Indiana places us in opposition to civic and governmental leaders who do not or cannot

yet see “the menace to society” (see UM Social Principles) that is caused by slot machines, horse racing, and casinos. For reasons that are quite similar, in recent weeks some United Methodist leaders in Indiana have engaged in acts of civil disobedience as examples of public witness to the injustice of paying people wages that are insufficient for them to be able to making a living. Such acts of witness call us out of our comfort zones and remind us that we must engage in acts of justice as well as acts of compassion. The cycle of going out and returning in response to the promptings of God’s Holy Spirit continues in a variety of ways, through United Methodist mission endeavors, as well as in the works of mercy as we engage in acts of justice and compassion.

Amid all the changes in human history, including the transition from the age of the so-called Industrial Revolution through what has aptly been described as the “Information Revolution” of our own Computer Age, United Methodists have continued to respond to God’s disconcerting call to take the Good News of the Gospel. We hardly know how to describe the wheel of Providence that has us going out into the world in response to “the Macedonian call” any more than we know how to grasp the ways in which the American continent has become a mission field for others including Methodists from Korea, Africa, and Europe.

The Macedonian Wheel



In some instances, once again we United Methodists in America are calling out to Methodists in the rest of the world to “come and help us.” General conference is becoming more of an international body, and the globalization of Methodism can be seen in Youth conferences and gatherings of United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women. As we look to the future, in truth, it does not yet appear what United Methodism will look like in the coming years but we know it will not be simply “American” anymore.

It is in the context of this *fourth* wheel of connectionalism that I believe we can locate our own efforts to imagine the mission of the United Methodist Church in Indiana in the present and future. We are being called out of familiar patterns of itineration in response to the call of God to embrace *a new apostolic mandate* that seems to be taking us into unfamiliar territory. One of the beauties of telling the saga of the multiple “rises” of Methodism is that we remember the storied character of the work of God in human history in other times and places.

In the midst of the “raising up and letting go” that is beginning to take place in our time and place, there is much that we cannot yet discern in the operation of the wheels of God’s providence. We are still trying to figure out what it will mean to have relationships with institutions like Clarian Health and the University of Indianapolis. We don’t know what the new configurations of charges will be or even if we will have districts in the same sense that we have thought about them until now. We don’t yet know where annual conference in 2010 will be held or where the new “headquarters” for Indiana Methodism will be.

One thing we do know, however, is that each year at annual conference, we will gather in song as we announce “And Are We Yet Alive” to one another and the world: “*And are we yet alive, and see each other’s face, glory and thanks to Jesus give for his almighty grace! . . . What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fightings without and fears within, since we assembled last! . . . Let us take up the cross, till we the crown obtain, and gladly reckon all things loss so we may Jesus gain*” From where I sit, on such occasions, the four “wheels” of Methodist connectionalism converge with one another in service to God, each performing their role in ways that only God fully understands. Certainly, in those moments once again we have the opportunity to “comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge” (Ephesians 3:18-19) as we experience “the fullness of God.” And if we are paying attention, *we might just see a vision of God* like Ezekiel once did.

V. Why There Are No “Fifth Wheels” in the United Methodist Connectional Imagination



Abba Dorotheus described the connection between people and God this way—“God is the hub and we are the spokes; the closer we get to God, the closer we get to one another.”

United Methodists are by no means the only Christians to have been inspired by the imagery of Ezekiel’s wheel-within-the-wheel. One of the “Desert Fathers” of Egypt, Abba Dorotheus, used a similar image to teach a plain and simple truth: “God is the hub and we are the spokes; the closer we get to God, the closer we get to one another.” Methodist connectionalism has been built on a wider set of Christian insights like this sixth century example displays. Just as John Wesley borrowed the “covenant renewal service” from English Presbyterian leader Richard Allein and the “quarterly meeting” from English Quakers, we have learned new ways to connect with one another from Moravian Pietists and we have adapted sacramental practices associated with the “means of grace” from Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox sources. In the process, we have accumulated what might be called a “connectional imagination” that informs how we carry out the mission that God has entrusted to us in our time and place.

Even though John Wesley ended up being wrong about the outcome of the American Revolutionary War, he was certainly right that God’s providence remains sovereign in the midst of the unfolding American experiments with democracy. Indeed, Wesley was both humble and wise enough to acknowledge that there is “an endless variety of wheels within wheels” of God’s providence. In his sermon on “The Late Work of God in North America,” Wesley only discussed two such “wheels” because he wanted to highlight the ways God was bringing good out of evil amid the social ferment of the years immediately following the Declaration of Independence by the United States of America in 1776. In describing these four *economies* of Methodist “connexion,” I have tried to call attention to features of Methodist identity that in our time seem to have become a bit blurred compared with what previous generations.

I would also take this opportunity to note that each of these expressions of the Methodist connectional imagination has its own set of “blindspots” and biases. From time to time, historians and critics have pointed out ways in which the particular images and schematic images of Methodist connectionalism “leave out” features that subsequent generations of United

Methodists have come to think of as essential. As noted earlier, on the face of it, George Cookman's "itinerant wheel" does not appear to have a place for the congregation, a fact which seems counterintuitive for contemporary Methodists given the prominence of that feature of church life in our experience. For George Cookman, by contrast, *too much of a focus* on congregationalism seemed to detract from the centrality of itinerant ministry. As Cookman put, it, if you "[s]top the itinerancy, let congregationalism prevail for only twelve months,--Samson is shorn of his locks, and we become as other men. . . ." By contrast, many 21st century United Methodists seem to think that congregational life is absolutely essential, but many United Methodists in our time tend to display ambivalence about the necessity of itinerancy.

Similarly, some United Methodists may be a bit startled to discover that the first two bishops in American Methodism assigned a greater significance to the mutual accountability of ordinary Methodists in face-to-face communities of discipleship than many Methodists appear to do in our time and place. This aspect of the United Methodist heritage of connectionalism poses a challenge to all concerned in a world in which the "voluntary" character of church membership often is lived out in ways that make commitments more self-determining (contractually speaking) than covenantal. If we should recover a thicker understanding of what it means to participate in a membership, then we are likely to find ourselves seeing the connective character of spiritual formation too.

Or to take yet another example, the 1790s era invention of the role of the "presiding elder" – what we now call the district superintendent – concerned many Methodists who worried about the emergence of more differentiated set of roles within a Methodist connexion in order for the Bishops to be able to "watch over the wheel within the wheel" of the Methodist connective economy. Often overlooked in these protestations of change, however, was the way in which this new office served to *circumscribe* the authority of bishops by limiting their oversight of the "wheels" of the connection and entrusting others to play their own roles in God's economy.

Those of us who are attempting to "imagine Indiana" in the 21st century face a different set of organizational challenges than Asbury and Coke did, but we should be no less aware of the possibility of having our own "blind spots." Whenever we attempt to define the Methodist "connection" as if it is *only* about itinerancy, we impoverish it. At the same time, when we act as if the United Methodist connection can be sustained *without* itinerancy we are guilty of the kind of wishful thinking that results from not being attentive to the purposes of God operative within

the finite constraints of human history. To seek wisdom in a Wesleyan mode is to acknowledge our finitude while praising God for continuing to stir up our imaginations to discern new ways to connect with one another in carrying out the mission to which we have been entrusted: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In one of his recent *E-pistles* (May 14, 2007), Bishop Coyner wisely reminded the clergy and laity of the Indiana Area United Methodist Church that “the heart of what it means to be connected” involves more than conference structures, committee meetings, apportionments, pension programs, medical insurance, itinerancy, and even our appointive system.” More specifically, Bishop Mike reminded us that “Being connected means that we are part of the Body of Christ, and that we United Methodists live that theological reality by keeping covenant with one another.” He went on to tell a story about how a pastor in Muncie has found a way to help a small congregation in rural, Western New York state by using sharing videotape recordings (dvds) of sermons preached by ministers at Union Chapel UMC.

As Bishop Coyner aptly observed, this is *but one way* that United Methodist congregations “can pray for one another, celebrate one another’s successes, and support one another through tough times.” The challenge is to develop our connectional imaginations in ways that help us to see what God is doing in the world, and I would argue that we need to keep *all four* “wheels” of Methodist connectionalism in view if we are going to be faithful to the challenges of our time and place. Like Methodists of previous generations in other precincts, we will draw upon the material culture of the world in which we live even as we draw upon the scripture and tradition of the church to make sense of what we have been called to be and where we have been called to go. I take it for granted that we will do so imperfectly--like John Wesley and the people called Methodist we too “see through a glass darkly” – but I also claim the hope that as long as we can remind one another of the superabundance of God’s grace as the writer of Ephesians so eloquently describes, we will be able to stretch our imaginations to discern the length and breadth and height and depth of God’s work in our midst.

I do not pretend to know or understand all of the reasons why (in recent decades) United Methodists in Indiana and elsewhere have tended to think of connectionalism primarily as an “itinerant wheel” and have not emphasized the generative importance of what I have described as the second, third and fourth “wheels” of Methodist connectionalism. I strongly suspect, however, that it may have something to do with the proposition that God actually might have

some *extraordinary purpose* for us (individually and collectively) that goes beyond *what we think* we can do. When we think this way, we need to remind ourselves that it is a form of false humility to tell ourselves (and others) that we know that God cannot do anything significant with the lumps of clay that we are. *True humility* involves submitting ourselves to the possibility that our lives are also caught up in the work of God in human history imaged by Ezekiel's four creatures moving about via a set of four wheels-within-the-wheels.

At the same time, if we are able to recover *a more vivid* connectional imagination, we will need to learn to think about connectional "initiative-taking" in healthier ways. To talk about "inverting initiative" may not be that helpful if our imaginations remain focused within a one dimensional economics of scarcity. Rather, I believe that United Methodists in Indiana need to find ways to *integrate* our various initiatives – wherever they may originate – with a spirituality that is robust enough to sustain us in this time of "raising up and letting go" (as the United Methodist Council of Bishops has aptly described our circumstance). Here again, perhaps we need to recall *that other set of images* of the potter and the clay that is deeply embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Jeremiah 18-19) as well as the New Testament (Romans 9:19-20) in texts of righteous judgment as well as amazing grace. If we take seriously the prospect that sometimes earthen vessels have to be destroyed before a new glob of clay can be thrown onto the potter's wheel to be shaped for service, we might yet dare to image ourselves – individually and collectively – as being part of the ongoing work of God's redemptive purposes.

Admittedly, it can be rather daunting to consider the prospect that what we have known and loved within the familiar connectional frameworks of Indiana Methodism in particular – and American Methodism more generally – needs to be "let go" in order to embrace the work that God is doing in our midst. Certainly, Methodists of all times and places have on occasion exhibited somewhat limited imaginations about God's work in the world. At our best, though, I think we have recognized with the writers of Ezekiel and Ephesians that God's mission is most aptly characterized by *superabundance*. We are rightly awed when we attempt to fathom "the height, breadth, depth and length" of God's gracious work in the world.

Whatever else it may be understood to be, Ezekiel's image of the four wheels within the wheel was a figure that the prophet used to convey the vast extent of God's work in the world. In that sense, we also can say that United Methodist understanding of connectionalism, there are no

“fifth wheels” quite simply because *no one* stands outside the compass of God’s mission of reconciliation that has been initiated in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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