

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

# CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL  
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

## **Methodism as Machine**

**Russell E. Richey**

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# CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures  
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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# Methodism as Machine

*Russell E. Richey*

Over machinery — the central, executive, decision-making apparatus of the denomination — American Methodists have *gloried* and *agonized*, from the very beginning. The agonies focused initially on the power and authority exercised by the appointive office:<sup>1</sup>

- by John Wesley, founder of the movement, in his directives from Britain;
- by his assistants in the colonies, Thomas Rankin and Francis Asbury; and
- by the superintendents (bishops), Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, after the church organized in 1784.

Methodists later agonized over the episcopal surrogates known as presiding elders (now termed district superintendents) who functioned regionally with much of the power of episcopacy but, as themselves episcopal appointees, lacked the authority, affirmation, and legitimacy enjoyed by the elected bishops. Recently, agonies focus on the boards and agencies, the topic of the organizational case study and theological essay which follow. Over the machinery, Methodists have agonized. In it they have also gloried. This essay charts the history of that ambivalence. The following case study and theological essay explore the present United Methodist patterns and stratagems that grow out of that ambivalence.

1. The meaning of the phrase “appointive office” will emerge in the course of this essay. It refers to the power in Methodist episcopacy or superintendency — power first exercised by John Wesley — to assign preachers.

## Schism over Machinery

The power and prerogative of the decision makers prompted Methodists to fight and even to divide, again and again. Other traditions experience turmoil over doctrine or liturgy. Such matters certainly do figure in Methodist squabbles. However, authority, its form and exercise figure even more prominently. For instance, the schisms of Methodism's first century all concerned the superintending powers and authorities, typically those of bishops and presiding elders. The more important divisions include the following:

- the Fluvanna schism of 1779-81 that preceded the organization of the church;
- the separate organization of African Methodists, traditionally dated from 1787;
- the 1792 walkout of James O'Kelly and supporters to form the "Republican Methodists" and the coalescence of a Primitive Methodist movement around William Hammett in Charleston the same year;
- the New England-based Reformed Methodists organized by Pliny Brett in 1814;
- the Stillwellite and African Zion movements of the 1820s, both launched in New York City;
- the Methodist Protestants whose reform efforts traumatized successive general conferences in the 1820s and divided Methodism at its heart, in the border states (1830);
- the exiting of abolitionists to form the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1842;
- the split of the Methodist Episcopalians in 1844, north and south; and
- the emergence of the Free Methodists in the late 1850s (formally organizing in 1860).

All of these divisions turned one way or another on the central decision-making power, typically that exercised by bishops or their surrogates, the presiding elders.<sup>2</sup>

2. These divisions figure prominently in virtually every history of Methodism. For a short review of the issues and actors, see my "Is Division a New Threat to the Denomination?" in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, ed. Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, and Dennis M. Campbell, *United Methodism and American Culture*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), pp. 105-16.

## Machinery as Missional

American Methodists also gloried over their organization, over the template sent them by John Wesley, over their improvements thereon, and over what they could and did achieve through its instrumentality. And they explicitly compared Methodism to a machine. Bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury claimed their own role and that of the presiding elders “to preserve in order and in motion the wheels of the vast machine — to keep a constant and watchful eye upon the whole — and to *think deeply* for the general good.”<sup>3</sup> Editor Nathan Bangs, Methodism’s spokesperson for his generation and the “inventor” of Methodism’s early agency apparatus, did not use the *M* word for Methodism. He spoke instead of “system,” but he gloried in the machinery nonetheless. His panegyric also functions as a good description, well worth quoting at length:

Let us now, that we may discover at one view the symmetry of the whole plan, glance at the different parts of the system. In the first place, there are the classes, consisting of from twelve to twenty members, under the inspection of leaders, who are responsible for their official conduct to the preacher from whom they receive their appointment. These meet together weekly for mutual edification and comfort, and to pay their weekly dues for the support of the poor and the ministry.

Secondly: — There are the stewards, who take charge of the class, quarterly, and sacramental collections, and disburse them to the poor and the ministry, and are responsible to the quarterly meeting conference, from which they receive their appointment, on the nomination of the preacher in charge of the circuit.

Thirdly: — There are the exhorters and local preachers, who, together with the leaders and stewards and travelling preachers on the circuit, compose the quarterly meeting conference, from which body exhorters and local preachers receive their license to officiate, and who recommend preachers to the annual conferences to be received into the travelling connection.

Fourthly: — There is the travelling ministry, consisting of licensed preachers, deacons, elders, and bishops; and these compose the annual conferences, who have the power of receiving preachers, of trying their own members, of hearing appeals of local preachers, and of carrying into execution the rules of discipline, in relation to spreading the gospel by means of an itinerant ministry.

3. “Section V. *Of the Presiding Elder, and of their Duty*,” in Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in America* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798), p. 52, the only annotated version of the Methodist *Discipline*.

Fifthly: — The general conference, which assembles quadrennially, and is composed of a certain number of travelling elders, elected by the annual conferences. This is the highest ecclesiastical body known in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Under certain restrictions which were imposed upon this delegated general conference at the time it was organized, in 1808, they have the power of revising the discipline, of electing the bishops, the editors and agents of the Book Concern, of hearing appeals from the decisions of annual conferences, and of reviewing the whole field of labor, whether it be included in the general work, or in the missionary department.

In the sixth place: — the bishops who derive their official existence from the general conference, superintend the whole work, preside in the annual and general conferences, perform the ceremony of ordination, and appoint the preachers to their several stations.

In addition to this regular work, in which we behold a beautiful gradation of office and order, from the lowest to the highest, there is the book establishment, which has grown up with the growth of the church, and from which are issued a great variety of books on all branches of theological knowledge, suited to ministers of the gospel, including such as are suited to youth and children, as well as those for Sabbath schools, and a great number of tracts for gratuitous distribution by tract societies, Bibles and Testaments of various sizes, a quarterly review, and weekly religious papers. This establishment is conducted by a suitable number of agents and editors, who are elected by the General Conference, to which body they are responsible for their official conduct, and, in the interval of the General, the New York Annual Conference exercises a supervision of this estimable and highly useful establishment.

In the last place, we may mention the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which was organized in 1819. . . .

In the work of Sabbath schools, in the establishment of academies and colleges, though the latter have been but recently commenced with any thing like a determination to persevere, this church has taken an honorable stand among its sister denominations. . . .

This is a general outline of the system, the different parts of which have grown out of the exigencies of the times, suiting itself to the mental, moral, and spiritual wants of men, and expanding itself so as to embrace the largest possible number of individuals as objects of its benevolence. I may well be suspected of partiality to a system, to the benign operation of which I am so much indebted, and which has exerted such a beneficial influence upon the best interests of mankind; but I cannot avoid thinking that I see in it that "perfection of beauty, out of which God hath shined," and that ema-

nation of divine truth and light, which is destined, unless it should unhappily degenerate from its primitive beauty and simplicity "into a plant of a strange vine," and thus lose its original energy of character, to do its full share in enlightening and converting the world.<sup>4</sup>

George Cookman, British born, member of the Philadelphia Conference, chaplain of the Senate and fervent abolitionist, viewed Methodism as a machine the flywheel of which was itinerancy.<sup>5</sup> Employing the vision of Ezekiel, he conceded some of Methodism's agony over machinery but warranted its providential design:

The *great iron wheel* in the system is *itinerancy*, and truly it grinds some of us most tremendously; . . . Let us carefully note the admirable and astounding movements of this wonderful machine. You will perceive there are "wheels within wheels." First, there is the great outer wheel of episcopacy, which accomplishes its entire revolution *once* in *four* years. To this there are attached *twenty-eight smaller wheels*, styled *annual conferences*, moving around *once a year*; to these are attached *one hundred wheels*, designated *presiding elders*, moving *twelve hundred other wheels*, termed *quarterly conferences*, every *three* months; to these are attached *four thousand wheels*, styled *travelling preachers*, moving round *once a month*, and communicating motion to *thirty thousand wheels*, called *class leaders*, moving round *once a week*, and who, in turn, being attached to between *seven and eight hundred thousand wheels*, called *members*, give a sufficient impulse to whirl them round *every day*. O, sir, what a machine is this! This is the machine of which Archimedes only dreamed; this is the machine destined, under God, to *move the world, to turn it upside down*. But, sir, you will readily see the whole success of the operation depends upon keeping the *great iron wheel of itinerancy* in motion. It must be as unincumbered and free as possible.<sup>6</sup>

4. Nathan Bangs, D.D., *An Original Church of Christ: Or, A Scriptural Vindication of the Orders and Powers of the Ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: J. Collord, 1837), pp. 348-51.

5. Itinerancy or itineracy, the hallmark of Methodist ministry, was the system designed by John Wesley of appointing preachers, of putting them traveling on a circuit of preaching places, and of moving them periodically from circuit to circuit. The long quotation above from Nathan Bangs describes this system, as does the following statement from George Cookman. The best way to view the itinerant system is by reading the journal of a traveling preacher, and those abound. See, for instance, David L. Kimbrough, *Reverend Joseph Tarkington, Methodist Circuit Rider: From Frontier Evangelism to Refined Religion* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

6. George G. Cookman, *Speeches Delivered on Various Occasions* (New York: George Lane for the MEC, 1840), pp. 127-37.

Writing during the Civil War, when northern Methodism threw its machinery into gear for the Union cause, the historian and apologist Abel Stevens found his image for Methodist machinery not in the scriptural type but in the contemporary antitype. Looking forward rather than backward, he identified two engines that conquered the new world, the steam engine and Methodism. Stevens began his four-volume history of American Methodism with an imagined meeting in 1757 of John Wesley and James Watt in Glasgow. Watt, "the young artisan of Glasgow University, gave to the world the Steam Engine." Wesley fabricated a system, providentially suited, Stevens argued, for the new world, comparable in delivery of morality, values, belief, and commitment to that other engine and establishing a religious economy with its own factories, rails, steamship lines, and infrastructure. Stevens then described the Methodist system, showing how each feature of its machinery suited the American situation. By the conceit of the imagined meeting of Watt and Wesley, Stevens gloried in Methodist machinery: "Watt and Wesley might well then have struck hands and bid each other godspeed at Glasgow in 1757: they were co-workers for the destinies of the new world."<sup>7</sup>

### Structuring for Accountability and Efficiency

On the eve of the war, the southern bishop, James O. Andrew (whose slaveholding, it should be noted, had occasioned the church's 1844 division), observed that Wesley's machine had over time acquired a complexity that now challenged the authority structures of the church — episcopacy and conference. Much of the change, particularly the establishment of institutions and agencies, had occurred during his career: "When we first visited an Annual Conference, the most we had to do was to examine the characters of the preachers, take the numbers, attend to the finances, (a very small business about those times,) read out the appointments, and go home. We had no schools or colleges, no Tract, Missionary, or Sunday-school Societies, to manage. We had not a dozen associations whose complicated machinery requires several days to adjust and keep in proper order."<sup>8</sup>

What Andrew viewed as a challenge, the northern church (Methodist

7. Abel Stevens, *History of The Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, 4 vols. (New York: Eaton and Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1864-67), 1:16, 18, 26-28, 45-46.

8. James O. Andrew, "Bishop Asbury," one of a series of review biographical statements in commentary on Thomas O. Summers, *Biographical Sketches of Eminent Itinerant Ministers*, *MQRS* 13 (January 1859), pp. 10-11.

Episcopal Church, or MEC), by the end of the war, began to recognize as a problem. The machinery, remarkable as it was, could run out of control. In particular, agencies set up as voluntary societies to manage the church's enterprises in publishing, education, missions, freedmen's aid, church extension, Sunday schools — several of these with female counterparts — could operate remarkably independently. A committee set up to study the matter reported to the 1872 General Conference (MEC) on the problem with the whole voluntary organizational plan:

The members of the Board are elected by members of the Society, and the members of the Society are those persons who become such by the payment of twenty dollars or more to its fund.

The General Conference has no legal connection with the Society, except only that by the charter it is provided that the Corresponding Secretaries of said Society shall be elected by the General Conference. . . .

But as the whole management is vested in the Board elected by members of the Society, the Corresponding Secretaries are powerless to represent any interest of the Church or of the Conference independent of the will of the Board. It is evident, too, that the multitude of members of the Society, scattered widely in all parts of the country, either cannot or will not participate in the election of a Board of Managers. It is equally evident that local combinations are liable to be formed each year to change the management of the corporation, and obtain control of its great resources. We do not express or intimate any doubt of the judicious and faithful management of the Society, but it is high time to close the door against the possibility of danger in the future. . . .

The General Conference, as the supreme legislative authority of the Church, and having in charge all its great interests for the diffusion of Christian civilization, should have a controlling power in all the missionary operations carried on in the name and behalf of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

So the northern church, the MEC, in 1872 and the southern, the MECS (Methodist Episcopal Church, South), in 1874 acted to amend the charters of and reincorporate societies so as to make them denominational agencies, accountable to and with boards elected by General Conference.

Over the next century Methodist bodies sought various other efficiencies in machinery, as for instance, centrally determined budgets for all agencies and

9. "The Report of the Special Committee on the Relation of Benevolent Institutions of the Church to the General Conference," *Journal of the General Conference* (Methodist Episcopal Church), 1872, pp. 295-99.

apportionments allocated to the annual conferences, as the MEC bishops advocated in 1912:

As the head of a family anticipates and provides for the incoming year, as a business man estimates the capital required for his contemplated improvements as well as for conducting present enterprises, so should the Church forecast her needs and consolidate her estimates for all connectional demands — not by the uncertain process of five or six boards and committees sitting apart and acting independently, if not competitively, but by a competent connectional board or commission — in which or before which all interests may be represented — and with final authority to fix the aggregate budget and properly apportion the total amount among the Conferences.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1939 union that brought together the two Methodist Episcopal churches and the Methodist Protestants, directors acquired the prerogative of selecting agency heads (general secretaries). And the 1968 union of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches, drawing on the experience of the latter denomination, established a program-coordinating agency, the General Council on Ministries, to work alongside the General Council on Finance and Administration.

### Wrenches in the Works

By the late twentieth century the machine no longer enjoyed Methodist fascination. Steam ran fewer and fewer engines. The railroads clung on with subsidies. Factories folded and slunk off to the Third World. The industrial age gave way to that of the computer, electronics, media and communications. Machinery in human affairs, bureaucracy, and red tape, Americans disdained and denounced. George Wallace launched a presidential bid running against federal machinery and pointy-headed bureaucrats. And subsequent campaigns for House, Senate, and the presidency, both Democratic and Republican but especially the latter, ran on Wallace's ticket. The same script worked famously on the regional and local levels where candidates campaigned against state government or city hall.

So also in religious affairs, what had once been Methodist glory — national standards, centralized production, efficiencies of scale, common resourcing, proportional fiscal obligations, unified decision making, coherent

10. "Episcopal Address," *Journal of the General Conference* (Methodist Episcopal Church), 1912, pp. 198-202.

denominational policy, easily recognized packaging, familiar products, dependable quality — became Methodist-pillory. Bureaucracy has become a slur word.

That negative reading surfaced powerfully after the 1960s — after the Civil Rights and antiwar campaigns and, for United Methodists, after the 1968 union and 1972 restructuring. It has continued ever since. One of the early denunciations came from two of my colleagues, Paul A. Mickey and the late Robert L. Wilson. Their *What New Creation? The Agony of Church Restructure*<sup>11</sup> looked at bureaucracy and denominational reorganization efforts in the American Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Presbyterian, and United Methodist churches. What they found were crises, engulfing the denominations as a whole and focused on their agencies.

Their findings or indictments have become something of a litany. National bureaucracies had been dismantled, reassembled, reshuffled, physically relocated with attendant chaos, confusion, and lowered morale among executives and staff. Funding had dropped as membership plateaued and fell, or as congregations withheld monies in anger over policies. Grassroots anger had indeed focused on a number of controversial and high-profile initiatives, programs had been cut, and distrust toward national and regional offices grew. Such pointed attacks on bureaucracy, sometimes concretized in term limits or other thinly disguised punitive efforts, produced morale problems in the agencies. Caucus attempts to gain footholds on boards and in their staffs intensified the political struggles by which leadership identification took place. Agencies evidenced confusion and unclarity about purposes and goals. The entire connectional scheme seemed in crisis, a crisis Mickey and Wilson insisted derived from underlying crises of denominational belief and purpose.

Since Mickey and Wilson wrote, we have witnessed a whole industry grow up producing books diagnosing the problems in mainline Protestantism and prescribing various antidotes. Many of these treat bureaucracy as a problem and echo the Mickey-Wilson indictments, if not always their vivid conspiratorial style. For instance, two of the volumes in the General Council on Ministries series "Into Our Third Century," *Images of the Future*, by Alan K. Waltz, and *Paths to Transformation: A Study of the General Agencies of the United Methodist Church*, by Kristine M. Rogers and Bruce A. Rogers,<sup>12</sup> treated anticentralization attitudes more as problem than norm, but they recognize the same problematic. Richard Wilke, in *And Are We Yet Alive? The Future of the United Methodist Church*, found plenty of blame to spread around but certainly called

11. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

12. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) and (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

for overhaul, stripping down, streamlining, and reorienting our structures.<sup>13</sup> Longtime church researchers Douglas W. Johnson and Alan K. Waltz, in their volume with the colorless title *Facts and Possibilities: An Agenda for the United Methodist Church*, pointed to the lack of coordination at the national level among the Council of Bishops, General Conference, and general agencies, and this lack of coordination despite the existence and efforts of two coordinating agencies, the General Council on Finance and Administration and the General Council on Ministries.<sup>14</sup> And then a decade ago, the whole Council of Bishops waded in with their prophetic study and episcopal letter, *Vital Congregations, Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church: Foundation Document*.<sup>15</sup> They too treated central agency structures as problems.

### New Machinery for a New Millennium?

The critics of Methodist bureaucracy sound as if they oppose all machinery. However, to view their activities rather than listen to their tirades, one discovers in many of these apparent Luddites incredible institutional ferment, experimentation, creativity, and energy. They denounce old machinery to make space for new — assembled from below; freshly purposive; digital, technological, and media-reliant; highly adaptive; and packaged for business. These Methodists glory over more local or adaptive machinery as they agonize over still-official national structures. This ambivalence runs deep in the Methodist psyche. It derives from habits and patterns and practices that Methodists are much better at doing than explaining.<sup>16</sup> The appointive machinery around itinerancy operationalizes a missional principle, namely, that ministry is sent, commissioned, missionary in character. The superintending or episcopal machinery, at its best, concerns itself with the kingdom, the deployment of each for the good of the whole (earth). The conferences, which Methodists still regard as the basic body of the church, are now being reclaimed as “means of grace,” a phrase Wesley himself applied to the conferencing tasks — conversations about growth in holiness for the whole body. And boards and agencies, even they display, as do these other systems, deep Methodist conviction that connecting in the work of

13. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986). See especially pp. 57-64.

14. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987).

15. (Nashville: Graded Press, ca. 1990).

16. On the following themes, see the several volumes in the United Methodism and American Culture series. My introductory essay in volume 1, *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity*, ed. Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, and Dennis M. Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), pp. 1-20, informs this paragraph.

God is the church, that the church is connectional, that the connection displays God's will.

The *United Methodist Discipline* reads like a book of order or constitution, and that it is. But it derived from a series of conversations that Wesley conducted in conference about how to follow the path to holiness. This counsel about discipline the Americans decided to call *Discipline*. Over time discipline as calling, as response to the divine initiative, as a way of living into God's future has yielded power, structure, and process. Its instrumental value has tended to obscure its missional, gracious, ecclesial character. Nevertheless, the machinery that the *Discipline* describes and for which it calls, Methodists have typically established as an act of discipline. And from time to time they have seen fit to renew or refresh or augment their discipline by adding to or altering the *Discipline*. So their machinery has evolved over time, the acts of discipline over which one generation glories becoming the agonies of a later one.

### Connectional Reform?

Agonies over machinery — the central, executive, decision-making apparatus of the denomination — led the general conference, over the last two quadrennia (1992-2000), to commission various studies and task force inquiries into national connectional structures and processes. It is this organizational work and parallel initiatives by the Council of Bishops that are the foci of the following case study by James Wood and theological essay by Pamela Couture.