

On Pittsburgh Chasms and other Quasi-geographical Phenomena in United Methodism in the Year of Our Lord 2004

William J. Abraham

Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies
University Distinguished Teaching Professor
Perkins School of Theology
Southern Methodist University

The initial question before us invites us to think of United Methodism in terms of geography. Is there a chasm that cuts through our church? What ground lies on either side of the chasm? Is there any way that we can build a bridge or a landmass across the chasm?

I take it that the concern is to come to terms with the divisions that exist, to understand them as best we can, and to find a way beyond them in the service of the church as a whole.

Let's begin with the divisions. The image of chasm suggests that we have two radically different banks separated by a wide expanse of water or open space, with folk standing on one side ranged against the other in a mood of suspicion, hostility, and war. The obvious way to spell out the metaphor is that we have one group on the Left and another on the Right getting ready for combat.¹ This is exactly how our political instincts will kick in, borrowing our images from contemporary politics, as these have played themselves out since the Enlightenment. Immediately we are in trouble, for as soon as we make this distinction, a third group will shoot up a hand and demand to be recognized. We will have to acknowledge not just the left and the right but the center and the middle. So now we have those on the left, those on the right, and those in the center. We will have the Left, the Right, and the Center. This in turn precipitates further possibilities. Before we know where we are we will have those on the far left, matched by those on the far right, and the middle will divide between the extreme center and the moderate center. So we now have six groups, the far left and the far right, the left of center and the right of center, and the extreme center and the moderate center.

If this makes you dizzy, then that is exactly my intention. The truth in this little exercise is that United Methodists are divided along a variety of axis. Folk will line up in different ways and in different groups depending on the issue in hand. The chasms and the grounds they represent keep shifting depending on our angle of vision. It would be convenient if we could line everything up neatly and then look for bridges or common ground, but this is not available. Take seven highly contested issues: the content of the gospel, homosexuality, mission, the authority of scripture, the war on terrorism, the future of ecumenism, and church restructuring. I guarantee that if we knew where someone stood on one of these hot issues that it would be quite impossible to predict where he or she would come out on the others. To be sure, there would be some characteristic groupings and divisions, but the divisions would form and reform depending on the issue. It is simply a wild goose chase to look for simple divisions; folk will come and go once we change the subject matter.

¹ Or perhaps we want to put the division in terms of literalists and non-literalists, or conservatives and liberals, or absolutists and relativists. In the eighteenth century the dogfight was between ancients and moderns.

This also applies if we make an appeal to scripture, or to Wesley, or to a central theme of our theological heritage. Whatever we appeal to turns out to manifest another network of divisions that fail to convince the other side, or better, the raft of other alternatives. It was hoped in the early seventies that the Quadrilateral would do the job; if only we could agree on the appeal to scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, then we could find a consensus across our divisions and move on. This has not worked. Using the Quadrilateral is like playing with a kaleidoscope; there is so much data within it that every shake displays a very different pattern. There is no bottom to the debates or to the chasms. In some cases it is obvious that scripture, or Wesley, or our theology is being shoehorned into a predetermined outcome on the particular issues. In most cases folk are making a good faith effort to be fair to the relevant evidence.

In the light of these developments, I am convinced we need to work from another set of angles. I have two comments and four suggestions.

First, conferencing exists in part precisely because there are divisions and chasms.² This was so in Acts 15 at the first conference on record; and we borrowed this model in Methodism from the early Church. If we all were in agreement, we could simply record our agreement on the Internet and stay home. If the quadrilateral worked, we could slot in the issue and our work would be over. We gather in conference together precisely because we disagree, and thus we must sit down face-to-face and work things out. Sustaining unity is the goal; division is the ongoing reality that requires us to meet in conference.

Second, Wesley was well aware that preserving what unity we have achieved is a constant, ongoing challenge.³ He wrote aggressively about the dangers and effects of schism, and I think we should heed those worries. Let me give you some reasons why we should be extra-vigilant about unity this year.

To begin, once we cave in to political and secular descriptions of our differences then the temptation to reach for the cheap analysis is always before us. The current effort to speak of some groups in our church in crassly political terms is the obvious example to cite at present. Paranoia is alive and well in some circles, and it now takes the form of conspiracy theories, where ready use is made of guilt by association and hasty generalizations.⁴ Moreover, we are now in the thick of a presidential race. It is obvious that the rhetoric and tactics of secular politics will spill over into our debates. A friend once pointed out to me that United Methodists have a good General Conference if the economy is in good shape. At present the economy is shaky, and our ordinary political discourse has become exceptionally strident, so be ready for a bumpy ride in the secular and religious press that will constantly surface in commentaries that totally depend on division and controversy. Furthermore, given what has happened within the Episcopal tradition, folk are nervous. It would not take much to tear our church apart in ways that are analogous to the Episcopal tradition. So the challenge at preserving such unity as we possess is more severe than usual.

² There are, of course, very positive reasons for conferencing in our tradition, but one way conferencing works as a means of grace is by working through our disagreements to fresh insights and better practices.

³ This applies equally well to Francis Asbury who was deeply troubled about the prospect of division and worked very intentionally to prevent it.

⁴ The result is reactionary analyses that raise important questions, but reach for closure through character assassination and accusations of power plays.

How might we hang together through the next several months? We now move to my four prescriptive suggestions. All four are clearly visible in our heritage.

First, let's be ourselves and make no apology for our convictions, passions, and goals for our church. As Wesley would put it, let's speak plain truth for plain people. Integrity is indispensable in working together. I sometimes tell my students that I am an eighteenth century Irish Methodist Pietist with an Oxford education and an Eastern Orthodox upgrade. In one recent history book I was identified as a postconservative Evangelical. One former professor of mine, on reading my book, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism*, recorded in an email that I was a wolf in sheep's clothing and was more dangerous to United Methodism than Jimmy Creech of Nebraska fame. So here I am. I make no apologies for what I am, for what I believe, and for what I hold dear for the future of the church. I expect no less of my colleagues.

Second, let's recommit to being connexional. This is the great insight of Methodist ecclesiology. Here I am concerned with being connexional in terms of the style of our work together.⁵ Thus we will show up physically, eyeball-to-eyeball, determined to stay the course. Positively, this means entering into a tacit covenant of listening, setting aside stereotypes, and speaking the truth in love; negatively, this means eschewing all forms of manipulation, emotional blackmail, and coercive forms of persuasion. Balloons and key-rings, sit-ins and walk-outs, table-thumping and tear-jerking, do these sorts of practices really belong in a connexional church? We are committed to due process, to persuasion, and to intellectual virtue; we eschew emotional blackmail, intellectual vice, and strong-arm tactics. The former are essential to any serious connexionalism; the latter undermine it, so let's foster the former and eliminate the latter.

Third, I have a historical comment and a theological prescription. The analogy with our early history will be obvious as I proceed.

Almost all contemporary mainline churches are now constituted as uneasy coalitions of interest groups, caucuses, reform groups, renewal movements, and agenda activists. We United Methodists went so far down this road in the nineteen seventies that we baptized it and called it pluralism. Theologically I have never been persuaded of the merits of this move. Pluralism is not true to our heritage in Wesley; it is incoherent; it is a stopgap experiment with a precarious shelf life; and it is unworkable in practice. In reality we have become a soft confessional denomination committed to a non-threatening form of liberation theology where children have become the point of entry to bring us

⁵ There is also, of course, a structural dimension to our connexionalism. We have long believed that there are things in the church that must be done together, not least because they cannot be done alone. It is clear that there are very serious challenges on this front. 1. Our denomination has become increasingly congregational in orientation. 2. Connexionalism has been reduced over the year to appointments and apportionments. 3. It is extremely difficult to secure consensus on our general orientation and identity, and thus it is difficult to act together. We have the apparatus without the ethos and commitment needed to work it really efficiently. 4. There is a suspicion overall in our culture with central bureaucracies and agencies that also shows up in the church. 5. Providing sufficient funding for the organs of connexionalism has become a serious challenge. 6. There are many who do not think that connexionalism really works for them and have started their own parachurch agencies. 6. If we look at the situation in the round, we clearly face a crisis in our connexionalism, but I have no competence to address this here or anywhere else. My concern here is with connexionalism as an ethos and style for making decisions together.

into commitment to the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. The Quadrilateral and the pluralism it was meant to uphold are now idling; the real heavy lifting is taken up in a version of liberation theology.

However, I have found a way to make sense of our pluralism and, dare I say, to get beyond it and the interests of liberation theology without losing their virtues. Mainline Christianity in the USA is in a period of stress and incubation. Interestingly, the different groups that exist within our borders are held together by occupying the same territory, by sitting close to each other on the terrain of renewal. Each has its description of our current situation, a diagnosis of what has gone wrong, and a prescription on how to fix things. Consider the following list of movements: the Ecumenical Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Charismatic Movement, the Church Growth Movement, the Feminist Movement, and so on. Each of these spotted a problem: division in the Church, racism and poverty in Church and society, apathy about the work of the Holy Spirit, incompetence in evangelism, and exclusion of women. Each movement sought to renew and reform the Church along the lines indicated by their diagnosis and prescription. Put this all together and note what is happening: we are in an intense period of self-criticism, of incubation, of efforts at renewal.

Here is the payoff from this analysis. Rather than work at cross-purposes and constantly attack each other, let's listen for what lies below the surface. What problem is presupposed? What prescription is being proposed? What practices and ideas are being implemented? This shift of perspective will not bring agreement! Folk differ radically in description, diagnosis, and prescription. However, if we try to internalize the other positions in the air, we will cease to demonize our neighbors, and we will gain a better grasp of our varied passions, and we might even find ways to co-operate across our competing agendas. We might even study scripture together from this angle and be amazed at how much we can learn from other.

One fourth and last point needs mention, and it follows from my last one. It was Jesus who instituted the Church, but it was the Holy Spirit who birthed, led, and sustained the Church down through the ages. Closer to home, Methodism was a wonderful hiccup of the Holy Spirit in the eighteenth century. Now the Holy Spirit is not a laborsaving device! In thinking long haul about renewal, if there is one insight I would want to lay on the table concerning renewal, it is this: it is only the Holy Spirit who can truly renew the Church.

Now, of course, we will as quickly disagree about the work of the Holy Spirit, as we will about everything else. Despite that caveat, permit this two-sided observation. I have long compared the Holy Spirit to my mother. She is the shy Person in the blessed Trinity. My mother was ill most of her life until she died last summer. Her six surviving sons carried her on their shoulders to her grave; a thousand people showed up on a Sunday afternoon to say goodbye and to watch the Abraham brothers carry the coffin of their mother. Because of her health my mother was not the best of churchgoers. When she went to church, she insisted on sitting at the back; she was reserved and shy and waited to be asked to come to the front. In this she was like the Holy Spirit. There was one other feature of her life that I cherish. Shy as she was, once she decided to sort things out, there was no stopping her. This too is a fair analogy for the work of the Holy Spirit. I think it might help to bear both of these features of the Holy Spirit in mind as we move into the work that lies before you. The Holy Spirit is truly personal, and she really

can heal the Church. Hence we need to be radically open to the rich working of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

So here is my conclusion. Let's be ourselves, as we now are, and as we hope to be in the gospel. Let's really work at being connexional, committed to due process, persuasion, and intellectual virtue. Let's listen for the promise and potential of renewal across our disagreements. In all things let's pray: Even so, come, Holy Spirit, come!