



Leading the Church: Insights and Ideas for Implementation

Paul W. Chilcote

Director Centre for Global Wesleyan Theology

Wesley House sponsored a significant webinar symposium on 15-16 October 2021 as part of its centenary on the theme 'Leading Like a Methodist – Intercultural Perspectives'. This event brought together Methodist and Wesleyan leaders and scholars from around the world to engage critical questions and work together constructively on what, in the tradition of the Wesleys, it means to lead in our multiple contexts today.

The Centre for Global Wesleyan Theology hosted a segment of this event related to 'Leading the Church'. Participants not only celebrated and promoted the work of Wesley House as a global resource for leadership and scholarship for the church, but engaged in holy conferencing about issues of critical interest in Methodism's world parish that directly affect the lives of Methodist people and those outside the church. This segment included a panel discussion of experts on the theme from around the world. Participants addressed specific questions in small group interaction, and insights with plans for action were fed back to the leadership of the symposium and the plenary community.

The panel included the following of international scholars and practitioners -

The **Revd Dr. Lovett Weems**, who serves at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC as Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership Emeritus and as senior consultant and founding Director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership. He is the author of many books on leadership including *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit*.

The **Revd Dr. Paw Liang**, a minister of the Methodist Church in Indonesia, serving as pastor of Damai Sejahtera Methodist Church in Jakarta. This is a multi-ethnic church out of which she also coaches pastors, youth leaders, and church leaders on disciple-making. Paw Liang is a distinguished alumna of Wesley House.

The **Revd Dr. Derry Long**, Professor of Christian Leadership at Yellowstone Theological Institute in Bozeman, Montana. He has served in ministry for over 45 years, including the superintendency of the Western Conference of the Evangelical Church from 1994-2000. One of his passions is helping leaders identify and use the giftings of those with whom they work.

The **Revd Dr. Julius Kithinji Kiambi**, Head of the Department of Theology, Philosophy, and Biblical Studies at St. Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya, with particular interest in postcolonial biblical studies. He is an ordained minister of the Methodist Church in Kenya having served as superintendent minister, synod secretary, and the director of connectional mission.

The **Revd Dr. Jane Leach**, Principal of Wesley House since 2011, engaged the panel members as an expert questioner following their presentations. Prior to her current role at the House, she served as Director of Pastoral Studies for ten years. She was the founding chair of the Association of Pastoral Supervisors and Educators and her pioneering work in reflective supervision is now extending into other parts of the globe.

Each of the panelists prepared a presentation of ten minutes, having been asked to reflect on the following questions. What are the most critical issues facing the life of the church in your own context? What resources from our Wesleyan heritage have you found helpful in the process of navigating these issues? How does our particular way of being/known/doing as Methodists, from your perspective, provide guidance as we face these challenges?

Dr. Weems named two particular issues in the United States and identified three Methodist resources that speak to the life of the church today. The issues of schism and racial justice have captured the attention of many Methodists today. Methodism has a long history of divisions, many of which seemed inevitable at the time. In retrospect, however, it seems as though so many could have been avoided. The crucible of division hardly seems exemplary in terms of leading like a Methodist. Likewise, American Methodism is plagued today with the legacy of racism. Weems reported being an eye witness to the awful Jim Crow racism as a pastor in Mississippi. But racism today is endemic, and the history of Methodism in this regard is mixed at best. The larger story is that complicity with racism began within months of the Christmas Conference of 1784 and has continued all too frequently over the decades. Two things, Weems argued, make racial justice more critical today: the public occasions of deaths from racist practices and systems and the growing diversity of the United States as reflected in the recently released 2020 census report, which showed a loss of white people in the country for the first time in history.

In light of this situation, Weems offered three Wesleyan resources.

1. Leading like a Methodist begins with theology. God's love, God's call, God's people, and God's vision must take priority for the sake of the world. There is no way to understand Wesley apart from his lifelong spiritual pilgrimage and his passion that all humanity come to know the love of God known in Jesus Christ. Wesley understood and practiced the distinction between 'essentials' and 'opinions'. When we have remembered this distinction, things have gone well. When we forget it, there is always trouble.
2. Leading like a Methodist is always for others. Methodist leadership starts with the people God has given us. People don't exist for our theology; theology exists to connect the needs of people with the love of God. Wesleyan theology revolved around a 'holistic concern for the well-being of God's creatures—mind, body, and soul'.
3. Leading like a Methodist exemplifies humility, grace, and generosity of spirit. While Wesleyans talk a lot about grace, Weems observed that the world experiences the church as judgment. We talk about grace within the church and yet others within the church experience more judgment than grace. He advocated a 'presumption of grace' where we assume the best in others. John Wesley understood and practiced this generous spirit.

Speaking from the very different cultural context of Indonesia, Rev The discussed the current spiritual leadership crisis, the disruptions caused by the pandemic in a communal culture, and the growing gap between the rich and the poor as critical issues facing her community of faith. She explained how, after serving some years, many pastors have lost a clear sense of calling. In her view, pastors need to have a covenant community for mutual accountability, a concept not yet fully introduced to churches in Indonesia. Covid 19 has challenged so many in a communal culture; isolation and private worship leave people depressed and disengaged. The church will need to navigate the way forward in this disruption. Rev The shared statistical reports related to cultural changes in Indonesia that demonstrate the disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Concerns about justice loom large in relation to these seismic changes.

Rev The identified mutual support and disciple-making as well as the concept of social holiness as important contributions from the Wesleyan heritage. She used band meetings in her urban congregation composed of many

young families which facilitated connections among the members of the church and encouraged their spiritual growth. In response to growing needs among the poor, she has reintroduced the concept of works of mercy and ministry to the poor as salient themes in Methodism. She described these two practices mentioned as the primary ministries of a post-pandemic church.

Drawing on his many years as a specialist in Christian leadership, Dr. Long brought his knowledge of 'empowerment' and 'social systems theory' to bear upon the topic. The most critical challenges he discerned in a North American context are a radical view of individual leadership, the sense of a lack of community among leaders and with the people, and the need to fall in love, as John Wesley had, with the disenfranchised of the world. With regard to these issues, he felt that the Wesleyan heritage had so much to offer leading to a healthy and faithful vision of leadership in the church.

The Methodist focus on religious experience reorients the leader around the most important aspects of faith and life. The focus on the community and the spiritual growth possible only in intimate circles of spiritual friends resituates Jesus' followers in a proper location for faith formation. He maintained that the Wesleys' emphasis on the restoration of goodness in people as a consequence of an optimism in God's grace lifts people from a pessimistic attitude about life. He emphasized the positive aspects of Methodist pragmatism and a focus on people as opposed to methods. Perhaps most importantly, in his view, a Wesleyan emphasis on inclusiveness and a love for all people moves the church beyond itself and engages them in God's mission.

Professor Kithinji of Kenya described three major issues of concern in his context: nominal Methodism (identity), the resurgence of 'negative cultural traditions' (moral concerns), and the question of mission (ecclesiology). He provided a brief historical sketch of Methodism in Kenya and the transition from a time in which the 'architecture' of Methodism reflected the Wesleyan origins to a current situation of amnesia and nominal Methodism. His primary concern is that Methodists, by and large, have lost a clear sense of identity. He claims that a nominal Methodist is one by birth, having no sense of a distinctive Methodist pathway to God (personal and social holiness). Moreover, nominal Methodism developed, in his view, as a consequence of leaders the church who are unaware of their theological heritage.

A resurgence of what Kithinji describes as 'negative traditional cultures' also debilitate the church. He catalogued a number of concerns in this regard from growing tribalism to polygamy. He emphasized the need to Methodists to reclaim Wesley's project to recover 'primitive Christianity' and to align his teachings with the way of Jesus. In this sense, he advocated an understanding of Methodism as the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England—a religion 'no other than love, the love of God and of all humankind'.

The missional challenge he identified has to do with ecclesial identity. Many problems, in Kithinji's view, stemmed from an early focus on buildings rather than people. In an interesting turn of phrase, he raised a concern about the way in which the parish became the world of the Methodists, rather than the world becoming their parish. He viewed Wesley's conception of an itinerant ministry which engages all God's people in God's mission as an important resource in this situation. The gift of early Methodism was its ability to go beyond boundaries, to live locally but to act and think globally.

The panel presentations, dialogue stimulated by questions from Jane Leach, and interchange of participants propelled everyone, with much grist for the mill, into small group conversations. The conversation was lively, wide-ranging, and generative. Many expressed an interest in the creation of frameworks, tool kits, and processes that help Methodist people reflect on vocational and ministerial identity, re-imagined through collaboration between laity and clergy. Participants emphasized the importance of translating vision into action. The issues of mutual accountability, as a gift of the tradition, and supervision loomed large.

Questions were also raised. How do we prepare leaders in the church to adapt to uncertainty and unpredictability. What role might Wesley House play in facilitating direction and instruction related to adaptive leadership for a time such as this? Given the consequences of lock downs and ongoing pandemic concerns, what does it mean to

'belong'? What is the nature of community? What does a post-pandemic church look like and how do we prepare leaders for these new visions and configurations of ministry and service in the world? Are we thoughtfully interpreting the times with an eye on relevance and context, or are we simply locked into efforts to translate how things have been done into a present mode?

A lot of conversation revolved around the relationship between pastoral leadership and leadership in other spheres of life, such as corporate management and secular administration. In light of this, concerns were raised about listening to what God is saying and inviting congregations into modes of spiritual discernment. Many perceived a need for leaders in the church to 'slow down' and to be more intentional about faithfulness in ministry and service. The language of 'the ruthless elimination of hurry' emerged around these conversations and 'covenant communities' were elevated as a critical aspect of the Wesleyan legacy that can be retrieved in the service of pastoral supervision and accountability.

Two ideas and concerns surfaced as most critical in conversation:

1. The issue of Christian character and the spiritual formation of the leader was clearly considered to be the most critical issue across our various cultures and contexts.
2. The issue of navigating diversity in the church was captured in the phrase 'the reality of contextual connectionalism'.

A general consensus emerged with regard to the importance of skills in 'intercultural competency' alongside the need to understand competing biblical hermeneutics that shape values. A panoply of terms and phrases gave expression to the reflections of the participants, among them: humility, anti-racism, crisis of leadership, 'presumption of grace', quest for communities of meaning that make a difference, authentic discipleship, unity beyond uniformity, creation of space to celebrate difference.

The work continues beyond the 'Leading the Church' event within the 'Leading Like a Methodist' symposium as staff at Wesley House and other interested conversation partners think about how to implement—to put in practice—the insights and ideas spun out of this significant conference.