

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Conference as Christian conversation

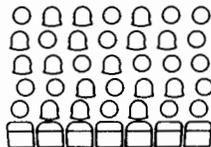


Conference was a distinctive way in which early Methodists conducted relationships. When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, referred to conference, he meant Christian conversation surrounded by prayer. Conference meant a serious Christian encounter deliberately aimed at discovering God's will and increasing the participants' spiritual maturity.

For Wesley, a conference could include as few as two people. Usually, however, when he and his contemporaries spoke of conference, they meant the annual or quarterly meetings that were an important part of the Methodist movement.

Conference has changed

Today's United Methodist Church no longer has Quarterly Conferences, and Annual Confer-



ences have changed a lot. They have become shorter and larger, for example, because of how the world has changed and Methodism has grown. They have added women and lay members in response to new insights about who should have a voice in the church. Change has brought benefits, but it has also brought the loss of some of early American Methodism's most valuable features.



Community was essential

Community seems to have been the number-one characteristic of early Methodist gatherings. "Community," reports Russell E. Richey, Associate Dean of Duke University School, in his book *Early American Methodism* (Abingdon, 1991), "expressed itself most intensely in the love feast ..., an inward sharing of one another." In love feasts, Richey explains, "Individuals gave themselves by

Some helpful books about Wesley and Methodism



These books have helped me refresh on Wesley and on past and present Methodism.

- *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader*, by Rueben P. Job (Abingdon, 1997). This book is designed for spiritual reading. Each chapter features several short excerpts from Wesley's writings, with related scriptures, hymn texts, and a few paragraphs by Job, a United Methodist Bishop. It would be excellent for regular devotional reading, for an individual or a group. It's a good starting place for anyone not familiar with Wesley.
- *Unity Liberty and Charity: Building Bridges Under Icy Waters*, Donald E. Messer and William J. Abraham, editors (Abingdon, 1996). This easy-to-read paperback book is a collection of articles about current UMC issues. Its authors' views range from very liberal to very conservative. Brief study guides follow each section. United Methodist groups could find it quite useful for study and discussion.
- *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, by Richard P. Heitzenrater (Abingdon, 1995). This book describes Wesley's religious background and early Methodism.



- *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, by W. Stephen Gunter, Scott J. Jones, Ted A. Campbell, Rebekah L. Miles, and Randy L. Maddox (Abingdon, 1997). Five seminary professors write about Wesley's view of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as standards for belief. Although these authors occasionally use some academic theological language, for the most part their articles are in an easy-to-read style.

- *Early American Methodism* (Indiana University Press, 1991) and *The Methodist Conference in America* (Kingswood/Abingdon, 1996), both by Russell E. Richey. These two books by a Duke Divinity School dean may be too textbook-like for some readers, but they give a useful picture of what early Methodists had in mind, and of how and why Methodism has departed from some features that previously were very important to its effectiveness.



- *Connectionalism* (1997), and *The People(s) Called Methodist* (1998), Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and Wm. B. Lawrence, eds. (Abingdon) Some articles in these books are tediously statistical, but many are very readable. All would give UMs useful information.

offering what was most privately, personally their own—their own story. In love feasts, Methodists related their religious experience. In verbal surrender, they bonded themselves to one another, to the Methodist society, and, in their view, to Christ.”



Love feasts usually were part of the two-day Methodist meetings that happened four times a year. These quarterly meetings were for the Methodists in a “circuit”—the congregations among whom a traveling preacher circulated. The meeting’s first day usually featured circuit business and preaching. Memorial services, marriages, and baptisms might be included. The second day started with a love feast, and as the day progressed events became more public, with many residents of the local area taking part.

The real test was the Holy Spirit

Early Methodist conferences transacted some business but were mainly festivals for religious renewal. Revival happened regularly at them, which said to participants and observers that the event was of God. “For early Methodists,” Richey says, “the true test of Christian fellowship was the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.”



The intensity of these Methodist gatherings expressed itself physically, in emotional embraces and other displays of affection. They were vocal—even noisy. Preaching, singing, testifying, praying, shouting, crying, and arguing, Richey explains, were hallmarks of Methodist gatherings.

As a result, not just regular attenders but also newcomers and outsiders got a powerful message about how the Holy Spirit bonded people together in a way that overcame worldly differences of blood relationships, marriage, race, and class. The community shown in these gatherings was a powerful message to the church and the world.



Sharing could increase community

In today’s Annual Conferences, many long-time attenders still express intimacy, spirituality, and affection outwardly with each other. Just as in today’s worship services, however, newcomers tend to feel uncomfortable with such expressions. So do

other attenders whose personalities or backgrounds make them uncomfortable with physical contact and emotional expression in public.



We might recover some benefits of hearing personal religious experience during our conferences, however, without trying to copy love feasts. We could devise ways for all members to share some personal stories and concerns in small groups, or we could let the whole conference hear a few members’ descriptions of religious experience that has been valuable to them.



Hearing what members have experienced through UMC spiritual-growth programs such as Disciple Bible Study, the Walk to Emmaus, and the Academy for Spiritual Formation, for example, could be helpful.

So could having worship services of different styles. Some could be formal, quiet, and awe-inspiring, with beauty and depth, while others were informal, exuberant, and physically expressive.

Preaching could promote revival

We might promote revival and spiritual renewal at Annual Conferences by including more and stronger preaching. Conference attenders need to hear our best speakers, not just clergy who have become prominent in the system. Conference preachers need to choose topics that will inspire greater commitment and spiritual maturity in both clergy and laity.



Also, conference preaching needs to challenge and inspire the entire group of clergy and laity who make up the Annual Conference. We could reach more people by expanding preaching occasions beyond ordination and memorial services, directing it to a wider audience than just clergy being ordained and families of those being memorialized.

Fraternity contributed to community

The early Methodist conference was above all a body of preachers. Most of them were male and unmarried. Fraternity among them was crucial. They felt it deeply, even though their



meetings included conflict. Much of their intense affection for each other came from sharing a hard, itinerant, lonely life. Conferences were the preachers' main times to come together and tell about their spiritual journeys and their labors. The commitment to Christ and to one another that they expressed at these gatherings was contagious. It helped create the feeling of community that gave early Methodism its power.



Life as an ordained minister is less harsh now than in early Methodism, but clergy still feel a strong need to share common concerns with each other. Perhaps because the ties that clergy and laity once felt to each other have weakened, however, fellowship among clergy no longer promotes conference-wide community.

Adding lay members brought changes



UMC conferences now include as many lay members as clergy. That's a much-needed change from the preachers-only method, but it means that conference members don't all

have as much in common as they did in early Methodism. Few lay Annual Conference members know each other or know many of the clergy members, and conference sessions often lack the sharing of experiences and concerns that could counteract this.

We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.
—Romans 12:5

We haven't changed Annual Conferences in ways that would let lay members feel that they really belong to Annual Conference. In fact, calling them "members" is unrealistic. Unlike the clergy, who all are conference members for life, lay attenders are really delegates. They are only a few who represent the total membership, and many serve only for a short time.

As a result, memorial, ordination, and clergy-retirement services at Annual Conference sessions have little interest for many lay attenders. The conference once was church and family for clergy.

However, that role of conference doesn't apply to laity and it is much less prominent for today's clergy than for early Methodist preachers. These services, therefore, can



fill a lot of conference-session time without helping to strengthen the church.



We give other messages, too, that say that the Annual Conference is still mainly a body of preachers. Consider, for example, the conference Journal—the annual reference book that reports conference programs, statistics, rules, members, and such. To find the mailing address or phone number of a local church, in my Annual Conference's Journal, you must first figure out what district the church is in. Then you must look in the district listings to find who the church's current pastor is. Then you must look in the list of clergy. And the address given there is often only a post office box; many churches' physical location isn't listed in the Journal at all.



church's current pastor is. Then you must look in the list of clergy. And the address given there is often only a post office box; many churches' physical location isn't listed in the Journal at all.

In one sense such a practice is a mere inconvenience, and only for a few people. In another sense, however, it's much more than that. It says that Annual Conferences are made up mainly of clergy and a few lay insiders, not of the whole UMC. It's no wonder that so few church members know or care what their Annual Conference does. Yet we still call Annual Conference the UMC's basic unit.

We need to address the real issues

Business and parliamentary procedures at Annual Conference sessions seem to have taken precedence over spiritual growth, inspiration, challenge, and open discussion of crucial issues that face the church.



The order that was designed to promote community, fraternity, and the church's God-given mission has largely turned into rigid rules, parliamentary procedure, elaborate hierarchy, and top-heavy bureaucratic structures that too often limit mission



and stifle community and spiritual growth instead of promoting them. Our system often keeps us from addressing the issues that members consider most urgent.

Wesley's main agenda originally was [1] what to teach; [2] how to teach; and [3] what to do, which he defined as "how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice." Should that be our Annual Conference agenda too? If not, what? Could we give more members a direct voice in the church's decisions about crucial issues, instead of allowing

real discussion only in committee meetings? That wouldn't be easy to accomplish, but I believe we need to look for ways to do it.



Can conferences be means of grace again?

Some of the changes in Annual Conference that I'm suggesting might not work. Some might not promote the renewal that we want and need. I'm not claiming to know how to enliven UMC Annual Conference sessions. I believe we urgently need to talk openly and experiment, however, until we find ways to make them more helpful and interesting.

Otherwise they will keep attracting only a group of insiders who aren't fully representative of our membership, and they won't help us be the church God calls us to be in today's world.

Wesley saw conference as a "means of grace," a way of receiving God's gifts and promoting spiritual growth. I believe we need to work actively and openly toward making our conferences "means of grace" again. We need them to become real Christian conversations that increase their members' spiritual maturity.



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Conference— Christian conversation

How do we decide what to include?



In considering what to include in Annual Conference sessions, I believe our main concern needs to be "What will help the church to be faithful and to accomplish its mission?" We need to stop including what won't help. We need to add what will. When we only meet once a year, and only for a short time, we can't afford to spend meeting time on anything that isn't clearly serving the church's God-given purpose of making



ing effective, committed Christian disciples. We need to remember John Wesley's way of stating Methodism's purpose—spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land. Whatever is no longer helping to do that, we need to change.

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