

Multiplying Love 2024 Lenten Study

A Vision for the Refreshed United Methodist Church

With Rev. Dr. Woojae Im, Southern Prairie District superintendent
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Scripture Text: Jeremiah 29:11-13

Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Kay Thompson writes in an article that the words of the refrain, “draw the circle wide,” bring to mind that in a circle, all points are the same distance from the center. When in the circle, all are visible to one another. “No one stands alone. We’ll stand side by side.” The refrain also reminds us that a circle is drawn when the outside points revolve around the center point—rather than vice-versa.

I love the song, “Draw the Circle Wide.” I love it because it’s a song of inclusion. We all are the same distance from the center of the universe: God. We all see one another as sacred and of worth. We all stand side by side. Draw it wide, draw it wide so that all are included and will have a space in a circle.

Paul Chilcote criticizes Jeff and Mike’s vision of Global Methodist Church as sharply diverging from “a genuinely Wesleyan vision” in the following three areas: congregational in polity (not connectional), creedal in orientation (not oriented around “practical theology” in the service of “faith working by love”, and essentially exclusivist (not inclusive in vision, despite its “global” title). Chilcote offers five compelling reasons to stay in and celebrate all that God has done and is doing in The United Methodist Church. These are points of renewal for The UMC. He finds each point supported by writing, sermon, or hymn written by the Wesley brothers.

1. **Wide embrace:** The UMC has a wide and loving embrace. In the sermon, “Catholic Spirit” John Wesley says, “They [Methodists] love one another as friends, as companions in the Lord, as members of Christ and children of God, as joint partakers now of the present kingdom of God, and fellow heirs of God’s eternal kingdom. They assist them to the uttermost of their power in all things, spiritual and temporal. They are ready “to spend and be spent for them.”

2. **Christlike practice:** The UMC aspires to be Christlike in practice. We are merciful, compassionate, and forgiving. Charles's lyrical reflection on the Beatitude express this characteristic well: "Happy soul, whose active love emulates the blest above. In thy every action seen, sparkling from the soul within."
3. **Scriptural Dynamism:** The Bible is the bedrock upon which the faith of a United Methodist identity is build. But its view of the Bible is not simplistic. Antithetical to literalistic and legalistic views of scripture, the United Methodist view offers a rich, robust, indeed a scriptural foundation for life in the triune God. John Wesley said, "I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights...I then search after and consider parallel passages of scripture, 'comparing spiritual things with spiritual.' I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable."
4. **Spiritual Growth:** The UMC is deeply concerned about growth in grace. It elevates the importance of practices of piety, such as prayer, but also advocates acts of mercy—compassion and justice for all. John Wesley calls for continuing growth of discipleship. He says, "Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship...We introduce Christian fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work."
5. **Missional Character:** The United Methodist is mission-oriented, mission-driven, and mission-centered. Charles Wesley sings about mission as the joyful offer of boundless love: "Enlarge, enflame, and fill my heart with boundless charity divine. So shall I all my strength exert, and love them with a zeal like thine. And lead them to thine open side, the sheep, for whom their shepherd died."

Chilcote concludes with this: Inclusive love must be the foundation of renewed Methodism. He quotes John Wesley once again: "Let love not visit you as a transient guest, but be the constant ruling disposition of your soul. Be not constrained or limited in your affection, but let it embrace every child of God."

Inclusion to an immigrant like me is the hallmark of The UMC. Back in 2005, I began to serve my first cross-racial, cross-cultural appointment in the small town of Milaca, Minnesota. At that time, I had lived in the U.S. only three years. On the first Sunday, I asked the congregation to get me a new English name. I found that many people were little cautious about pronouncing my Korean name in order not to insult me. The SPRC chair promoted this fun project, "naming Woojae," for three weeks, and on the fourth Sunday, the result was announced. Whatever name most submitted was supposed to be my name. My wife and I tried to guess what name would take the

most votes. Maybe Tom, Smith, or Jeff. Who knows? The result was amazing. The name that got majority of the votes was "Woojae Im." The message of the congregation was clear: We accept you as you are; you don't need an English name. I was blown away by radical acceptance and inclusion of the congregation. It's the greatest welcome gift I have ever had. 19 years passed, but to me it was still fresh in my memory as if it had taken place yesterday. One incident of inclusion made me a lifelong United Methodist. I saw myself in the circle of radical hospitality, love, acceptance, and full inclusion.

Grace and love are the core of the Gospel culminated on the Cross on Good Friday. The cross tore down the veil in the sanctuary. The cross broke down all sorts of barriers. Through Jesus' cross, all people can access to love and grace of God. Inclusion is the embodiment of grace and love of God. Draw your circle wide. Multiply your love. That's the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the message of Good Friday. Jesus died for all. All means all.