

# Holy Hanging Around, on Formation for Baptismal Living among United Methodists

By Mark W. Stamm

Anthony Ruff asked me to comment on my involvement with *Living Into the Covenant*, an as yet unpublished baptismal customary for The United Methodist Church. I gave a short presentation about it to the Christian Initiation Seminar at the 2010 meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy, and am one of several contributors to the project.<sup>1</sup>

But first, I want to offer a testimony. After all, I'm a Methodist and we do that sort of thing, "hearts strangely warmed"<sup>2</sup> and all that. When Father Ruff asked me to contribute to this blog, he didn't know that I was scheduled for heart valve replacement surgery in mid-December; but that's the case. I started down this road toward surgery almost 26 years ago, when my physical for ordination (!) revealed a pair of leaky heart valves. Since then, various cardiologists have told me that *some day* I would need surgery, and I've lived with that knowledge, sometimes with less thoughts about it, sometimes more. Since then, I have served as pastor of several churches, observed my tenth, twentieth, and thirtieth wedding anniversaries, completed a doctorate, worked at raising two children, written several books, and this year, even gave a scholarly presentation at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture. Very cool. Also this year, my doctors informed me that *some day* had arrived, so we put a surgery appointment on the calendar. Not so cool. I told my faculty colleagues, and also my students. I asked both for their prayers and that they let me go about my business in the meantime, which they did. Sort of.

On Tuesday, November 17, I showed up for my 8:30 am Word and Worship course (our basic pastoral liturgics course) expecting to deliver a lecture on Weddings, but my students informed me that they were commandeering the class in order to conduct a healing service on my behalf. They had recruited a pianist, and further, had even brought breakfast to share at the conclusion of prayers. What could I do? Sit down here, Brother Professor, while we pray for you. I was stunned ... and more than a little proud of them. They read Psalmody and other scriptures. Someone wrote a short berakah giving thanks for the healing work of Jesus ... Then they laid hands on me and prayed, and bless them, boldly prayed for "your servant Mark" ...

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<sup>1</sup> The full list includes E. Byron Anderson, Daniel T. Benedict, Taylor W. Burton Edwards, Heather Josselyn-Cranson, Don Saliers, and myself.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, *Journal*, May 24, 1738. *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 18, Journals and Diaries I (1735-1738, Edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 250.

no deferential and distant prayers for “Dr. Stamm.” Indeed, I had taught them that they were not to use titles or surnames when serving communion or doing other sacramental acts, that there was no more dignified title than one’s baptismal name. I had also taught them that bold intercession was part of their baptismal vocation, and that leading people in those intercessions was both privilege and responsibility. But I had never taught them precisely how to lead a prayer service for their professor. What they did took some courage, but I’m grateful they did it. They also made good use of a simple sign act, preparing two cards, one to open that day and another to open after my surgery. I walk by card number two every day, wondering what they will have to say to me in a few weeks.

How did they learn to do what they did? I suppose I taught them some of it, like the piece about using baptismal names. In a lecture on occasional services I had taught them that pastoral need sometimes requires us to shape liturgies that address needs not covered in the official service books, drawing on what they already know to do something new.<sup>3</sup> I taught them that concept, but having the idea and using it well are two different things. But, I’m convinced that they learned much of what they did by hanging around the Gospel and the community of faith, both at our school and other places. We’re an academic theological community, which means we’re also a community of prayer. Not all of our students are United Methodists, but there is a discernible Methodist ethos to Perkins, and a good number of our non-Methodist students are warm-hearted types who tolerate Methodists and even like associating with them. They learned to pray for me by hanging around other people who pray, and by praying themselves.

At its best, the Wesleyan vision for forming disciples is based on what one might call “holy hanging out.” The process is messy as is my phrase for it, but I don’t want it to sound too tidy. “Christian conference” and “practicing the means of grace” are more elegant Wesleyan phrases, and may point to something easier for pastors and professors to control. Nevertheless, much of the process of making disciples comes down to hanging around with Jesus and his friends, doing what those friends usually do—singing hymns and songs, listening to scripture, breaking bread together, interceding for the world, laying hands on the sick. Such living leads to baptism and also flows from it. Sometimes the process works better than at others, but Wesleyan discipleship—that is, Wesleyan baptismal living--continues to emerge.

Make no mistake. Working toward a deeper sacramental spirituality is not for the faint of heart, especially within Methodism. Remember the reference to messy. The founder of our movement, 18<sup>th</sup> century Church of England priest John Wesley, provided especially sharp teaching on eucharistic practice. He called the church to practice “constant communion” and advised the elders in the fledgling American

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<sup>3</sup> Much of my thinking on this concept was shaped by my Boston University doctoral mentor, Horace T. Allen, Jr.

church to observe the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day.<sup>4</sup> Along with his brother Charles, he published *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, a volume of texts which explores five foundational eucharistic themes: Lord's Supper (1) as memorial (2) as means of grace (3) as foretaste of heaven (4) as sacrifice, and (5) as sacrifice of our persons.<sup>5</sup> United Methodists have built on this foundation and on the wider ecumenical heritage to make a fairly good start on eucharistic renewal. For instance, an increasing number of congregations offer weekly communion for at least one of their Lord's Day services.

We have had a more difficult time talking about baptism, and as with the credit, so goes the blame—many of our problems are rooted in statements made by Wesley himself, who once wrote that ‘baptism is not the new birth.’<sup>6</sup> In the narrative of his spiritual awakening at Aldersgate Street, London, he said, that he had “sinned away” the grace of his baptism long before that event.<sup>7</sup> I wish he hadn't said that, but he did. Expecting Wesley to speak helpfully on every topic is a problem in belonging to a church so deeply rooted in the teaching of one person (a one-saint church?). On the topic of baptism, Methodists will do much better listening to Laurence Hull Stookey.

Other challenges to American Methodist renewal of baptismal practice are rooted in nineteenth century controversies with Baptists and the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), who insisted that believers only should be baptized and that by immersion. These arguments led Methodists to an often-rigid defense of baptism by sprinkling, and to an association of immersion fonts with their opponents. This history of controversy remains painfully current in some places and makes it difficult for Methodists to discuss the building of immersion fonts. Further, belief that conversion could happen instantaneously morphed into the belief that instantaneous conversion was the norm and finally (in some places) to the idea that one could join the church by simply coming forward to shake the pastor's hand and, if needed, receive baptism. All of these things make it difficult to move toward enhanced practice of baptism and its attendant formational practices. Who needs bigger fonts or a process like the RCIA?

A significant number of Methodist liturgists believe we need both, and so we prepare texts like *Living Into the Covenant*. It was begun in June 2007 under the auspices of

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, “The Duty of Constant Communion,” *The Words of John Wesley*, Volume 3, Sermons III 71-114, Edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 427-39.

As to the advice, see Wesley's letter of September 10, 1784 to Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury in *John Wesley's Prayer Book, The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* with introduction, notes, and commentary by James F. White (Cleveland, Ohio: OSL Publications, 1991),

<sup>5</sup> *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745) are found in *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* by J. Ernest Rattenbury (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, “The New Birth,” *The Words of John Wesley*, Volume 2, Sermons II 34-70, Edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 196.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, *Journal*, May 24, 1738, 242-43.

the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church. As noted, it represents the joint effort of several scholars. To this point, however, the aforementioned Christian Initiation Seminar includes some of the few who have actually seen it. Although it has not been released, we hope it will appear sometime in the near future.<sup>8</sup>

*Living Into the Covenant* comments upon our United Methodist Services of the Baptismal Covenant--our ritual texts for baptism, confirmation, and reaffirmation of faith<sup>9</sup>--seeking a deeper engagement with them. What would better baptismal practice look like, both at the font and in the way of life that emerges from it? *Living Into the Covenant* reflects a serious discussion of such issues, including consensus on fuller use of water and immersion fonts. It also expresses consensus about the need for more intentional formation of baptismal candidates, but not on the particular shape of the process. The Services of the Baptismal Covenant had left that question unanswered, if not unasked. Daniel Benedict offers a catechumenal model along the lines of the RCIA, something he has done consistently for more than a decade.<sup>10</sup> If practiced, such a model could be revolutionary. In theory, the RCIA is excellent. As depicted in the film *This is the Night*, it is little less than stunning, yet not every parish practices it on the level that one sees there. Indeed, some evidence suggests that more than a few parishes have tamed it into a classroom model for joining the Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup> Protestant admirers of the RCIA, Methodists included, may need to get over our romanticism about it.

Methodists have an equally proven formational model in the Wesleyan class meeting pattern and the “General Rules.” This pattern is rarely practiced today, but like the ancient catechumenate, it remains available to us. It began in 1739 when some who had been awakened by Wesley’s preaching came to him asking advice on “how to flee from the wrath to come.” He charged them to meet together weekly under the guidance of a class leader who would organize their reflections around three foci known as “The General Rules.” Persons were to give evidence of their desire for conversion by (1) “Doing no harm,” (2) “By doing good,” and (3) “by attending upon all the ordinances of God”—public worship, prayer, scripture study, fasting, and Holy

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<sup>8</sup> The Board of Discipleship did release a similar text on Eucharistic practice, *Living into the Mystery, A United Methodist Guide for Celebrating Holy Communion* (2007, available in electronic form).

<sup>9</sup> The Services of the Baptismal Covenant are printed in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 81-114. The first version of these texts was published in 1976, under the title *A Service of Baptism, Confirmation, and Renewal, The United Methodist Church, An Alternate Text 1976. Introduction, Text, Commentary, and Instructions* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1976)

<sup>10</sup> See Benedict’s book, *Come to the Waters, Baptism and Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples*. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> For this narrative, see the book by David Yamane and Sarah MacMillen with Kelly Culver, *Real Stories of Christian Initiation, Lessons for and from the RCIA* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, A Pueblo Book, 2006)

Communion.<sup>12</sup> Wesley's treatise on the General Rules does not mention baptism, perhaps because most (if not all) of those who came to him were already baptized. It's probably just as well, given some of his other statements about baptism. Nevertheless, the depth dynamic of the Rules is initiatory, calling people toward conversion and ever deeper into it. It's also rather modest. The Rules call for nothing more than what one hears in the classic baptismal ordo—to renounce sin and resist evil, to join Christ in his mission, and (to borrow a phrase from *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*) to something like “full, conscious and active participation”<sup>13</sup> in the church's liturgical life.<sup>14</sup> They call persons to hang around while the church does what it does.

Both the RCIA and the General Rules insist that one is converted to Christ and shaped in the Christian faith by living and working in close contact with communities who love Jesus and seek his way. I don't think United Methodists need to create their own version of the RCIA. Given its current piety, I doubt the church would tolerate long delays before baptism and first communion. Yet Methodists do need to take baptismal living seriously, and doing so might look something like the class meeting and the General Rules. It might take some other shape, perhaps something born of the new monasticism. I don't think the particular form matters all that much, as long as faithful Christian living is embodied. Indeed, when folks hang around such community long enough, the faith usually takes root in them and they become a blessing to others, just as my students did for me.

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<sup>12</sup> John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Newcastle upon Tyne (1743).” *The Words of John Wesley*, Volume 9, The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 67-73.

<sup>13</sup> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> I have discussed some of these dynamics in my book *Sacraments and Discipleship, Understanding Baptism and Christian Initiation in a United Methodist Context* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001), particularly in pages 27-45.