

Emory University
Candler School of Theology

PATCHWORK: BUILDING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY THROUGH THE INTRODUCTION OF A
NEW WORSHIP SERVICE AS A MEANS OF RENEWAL IN A HISTORIC UNITED METHODIST
CONGREGATION

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PREFACE: WORD

But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children, ¹³ born not from blood nor from human desire or passion, but born from God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. - John 1:12-14 (CEB)

The pastor stood outside on the sidewalk waving and exchanging signs of blessing at the passing traffic. He was greeted with solemn nods, enthusiastic waves, the raise of an index finger, or the half toot of a horn. He gave thanks for, claimed, and blessed all of them.

He saw an elderly neighbor across the street and, pulling up his vestments (a worn-out flaxen alb and a new white and gold stole) in an intentionally comical fashion, ran across the street to share a quick word and longer embrace.

Behind him a beautiful window illuminated from the inside rests firm in the heavy block wall above the massive wooden doors of the Scott-Zachry Chapel. The Chapel stands as an ensign of imminent solidness, yet it whispers a breath of antiquity into the still morning air.

As the people came to the chapel, they passed through heavy wooden doors folded out like arms longing for embrace. Each in turn was greeted with a kind word and a smile permanently affixed to a man who was handing out bulletins. This smile was a foretaste of all that was to come.

The people were all very different most were average height and plump, but some were tall, and at least one seemed a bit too skinny. The ages of those who streamed into the gathering were a cross section of the community. The oldest was a centenarian; the youngest was not yet a year old. Three generations of one family filled an entire pew, while another family was represented by a single youth. They were a rainbow of diversity in

color, class, creed, intellect, and interest, but all were welcomed with the same prodigal love. Some had been looking forward to this moment for weeks; others were still not sure what to expect.

Each of the senses was called to worship in this place with the smells of incense and the flavor of candy canes, the sounds of the newly restored organ, and the buzz of excited conversation, and the crisp freshness of new banners hanging overhead. Each stimuli triggered both deep memories and new experiences as novelty and nostalgia melded into one.

The chapel, which had been functionally abandoned until very recently, was now filled with new life. Multiple prayer stations were located throughout the sacred space. Candles, representing prayers, blazed on a table under a window. A 50-inch monitor in the chancel alternated between historical prayers and current announcements, ancient icons and Internet memes. The baptismal font was in front of the kneeling rail that framed the chancel. The altar, covered with a white handmade quilt, served as the focal point of the room.

As the volume of the organ increased, the people prepared for worship. What happened next can only be described as a liturgical turducken!¹

The words of welcome were reminiscent of a field call that began with Luke 2:10-11 and ended in with an antiphonic doxology. The prayers were extemporaneous compositions and ancient canticles offered in silence and in song. The lectionary Gospel

¹ “Turducken is a dish consisting of a deboned [chicken](#) stuffed into a deboned [duck](#), further stuffed into a deboned [turkey](#).” “Turducken,” *Wikipedia*, last modified March 5, 2017, accessed March 13, 2017, <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turducken>.

lesson assigned for that day was divided into three parts, allowing three different liturgists to lead the congregation into the interconnected movements in the service. The music for that morning included hymns, spirituals, folk tunes, carols, and a rock ballad. Worship in song was offered to the accompaniment of the organ, an acoustic guitar, and in the simple power of the unaccompanied human voice. A brief homily on the mystery of the incarnation endeavored to attend to the implications of one aspect of the Gospel lesson, pull all the eclectic elements together, and point to the Eucharist. The Eucharistic celebration combined ancient words with familiar tunes and all were invited to sing together as they were re-membered once more into the body of Christ.

At the conclusion of the service, the Christian community publicly renewed their commitment to God and neighbor, and four new members were welcomed into fellowship. One of the new members offered a benediction, and all went to serve God and neighbor in peace.

INTRODUCTION

Nobody pours new wine into old wineskins. If they did, the new wine would burst the wineskins, the wine would spill, and the wineskins would be ruined.³⁸ Instead, new wine must be put into new wineskins. - Luke 5:37-38 (CEB)

Snapshot: West Point, GA

The City of West Point, Georgia straddles the Chattahoochee River about eighty miles southeast of Atlanta on I-85. West Point spans two counties in Georgia, Harris and Troup, and borders Chambers County in Alabama. West Point is part of an area called “The Valley,” made-up of several interconnected historic textile mill communities. The textile industry dominated the economy and culture of “The Valley” for generations and attracted engineers, mechanics, and countless white and blue-collar workers. Diversity is much richer in West Point than one might expect; Anglos, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and international students are increasingly represented in a community of 3,728.²

West Point has been directly affected by changes in technology and global economic shifts over the past three decades. The textile industry began moving production out of the country beginning in the 1980’s and completely by the 2000’s. Thousands of jobs were lost, and the community decreased in population. When the exodus of industry and people combined with the market collapse and Great Recession of 2008, West Point and “The Valley” were economically devastated, culturally stripped, and further reduced in population.

Recently, West Point has enjoyed a period of prosperity and new birth. Almost ten years ago, West Point became the home of an assembly plant for Kia Motors and multiple

² “Population of West Point, GA,” United States Census Bureau, accessed January 10, 2017 <http://www.census.gov>.

supplier plants have followed. Point University, formerly Atlanta Christian College, has moved its primary campus to downtown West Point, and construction projects are daily changing the landscape, as old empty buildings are renovated, repurposed, and replaced. City parks and new businesses are springing up. People are coming to make West Point their home. Younger and more culturally diverse, the West Point that is emerging is drastically different from the West Point that was. Almost unnoticed to many in the community are the drastic effects all these changes have on the local churches and the new opportunities for service and evangelism that are awaiting for exploration.

Snapshot: West Point First United Methodist Church

West Point First United Methodist Church (WPFUMC) is a medium-sized congregation with 474 members and an average weekly worship attendance of 169. West Point Methodist Episcopal Church (South) was established in 1830, two years before the incorporation of the City of West Point. WPFUMC has been somewhat insulated from much of the economic hardship and decline suffered by other churches in the area over the last few years. However, it has become increasingly obvious that WPFUMC is not immune to the challenges of ministry in a changing world. Old funds are being depleted with no means of replenishment, and historic families are dying at a relentless pace. We are not retaining our young adult membership and we are not effectively connecting with the people moving into our area. In order to continue meeting the needs of our existing congregation and to serve our changing community, the church must find new ways to communicate the Gospel with authenticity, humility, and power. We need a contemporary expression of our ancient faith and a means to make new connections with our neighbors.

Statement of the Problem

Can the introduction of a new worship service create a Christian community and serve as a means of renewal in a historic United Methodist congregation? Of course this question invites a host of other questions. What makes a worship service new? What exactly is a Christian community? And, of course, what is renewal and how do we measure it? For the purposes of the present study, the following definitions may be offered:

A worship service is “new” when it claims new times, locations, and people to gather to worship God in a manner that is unique and specific to that context.

A “Christian community” is a group of people with a common vocation of following Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God.

“Renewal” is an elusive concept to define. In a local church setting, renewal is about positive changes in the life of a church or faith community that can be quantified and measured, but that is not all. Renewal, of course, is also an intangible feeling of growth, enthusiasm, and new life within a congregation, but this too is not all. Using some of the ideas of Jane Rogers Vann,³ renewal is also a deepening of worship and the congregation’s participation in and reflection on it. Renewal is about an enhancement of the congregation’s fulfillment of its mission. Renewal is about restoring and creating life-changing relationships with a larger segment of the population. These are large issues that can be addressed by taking up smaller pieces, one at a time. That is exactly what this project is proposed to do.

³ Jane Rogers Vann, *Gathered before God: Worship-Centered Church Renewal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 3.

Old Wineskins

I was appointed as Pastor-In-Charge of WPFUMC effective June 28, 2015. From the first mention of this possibility in May of 2015, I began working to make the most of the opportunities that occur with a change in pastoral leadership. Using Robert Kaylor's book, *Your Best Move: Effective Leadership Transition for the Local Pastor*.⁴ I began working with the District Superintendent and the Chairperson of the Staff Pastor Parish Relations Committee to build a transition team and plan a series of informal gatherings with interested members of the congregation. I would continue for the next six months to seek to have conversations with every individual, family, and small group in the church so that I could have a basic understanding of their stories. Based on these conversations, explorations in every corner of the facilities, and a careful study of the church records, I concluded that both the congregation and I were ready to explore ways to address the decline and lay the foundations for the future.

WPFUMC had a lot to offer to our community including excellent facilities, a wonderful traditional worship service, active small group ministries, long-term community outreach programs, top-notch staff, and genuinely friendly people. In spite of these strengths, there was a steady decline in worship attendance, giving, and in other metrics collected and reported to our governing body, the North Georgia Annual Conference. The church was not as successful in retaining young families and connecting with the people who were moving into the area as they had been in the past. The challenges in situations like this are both numerous and subtle. How can we introduce something new and vital without it becoming just another program or unintentionally damaging the existing

⁴ Robert Kaylor, *Your Best Move: Effective Leadership Transition for the Local Church* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2013).

worship service and programs? Through multiple conversations with people who did not attend our traditional service, I discovered an entire population that would benefit from the ministries of our church, but whom the church was not reaching. By carefully using fallow resources we could experiment with a new and different worship service that would be in support of the other service and programs of the church. We slowly and carefully began putting together a weekly service of Word and Table that would become PATCHWORK.

PATCHWORK

The idea for PATCHWORK came from a variety sources over the course of several years. It most concretely began with a thought experiment that came during a congregational study of Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*.⁵ What would it look like if a declining congregation was charged to plant a "new church" and was provided with an excellent facility, paid clergy, modest operating expenses, and a committed core membership? Sometime later, I was struck by the statement by Leonard Sweet in his book, *I Am a Follower*, which said, "I am increasingly calling for artisanal communities where success is measured not in statistics but in stories told in an authentic voice."⁶ What if a new church did not try to be attractive to everyone, but spoke deeply to an underserved group or niche within the community? The idea became a dream and I continually read everything I could about church renewal, liturgical renewal, and worship renewal. I experimented with a few pieces here and there in the congregations and

⁵ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

⁶ Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 82.

communities where I was appointed, and slowly built stronger ideas as the dream became a passion.

Finally, presented with the opportunity, it was important to be intentional in building a service that drew from the best lessons of the past, was sensitive to the current needs of a portion of our community, and anticipates the future. Because of our unique gifts and graces as a congregation and pastor, and based on the needs of our community, we created PATCHWORK as a worship service that is Wesleyan in theology, Ancient-Future in form, and fruitful in practice. The name serves as a reminder of the importance of textiles, creativity, and frugality in our history. Further, the name is a nod to the fact that the service is not dedicated to one style of worship. Instead, it is our desire to unite persons from different backgrounds into one people worshipping God together in spirit and truth. The word “patchwork” functions as both a noun and a verb referring to both the quilt made of different materials and the process of piecing it together.

The creation of PATCHWORK was not an accident but a process that included careful study, deep conversations, and much prayer. I wanted to make the most of this opportunity to create something new in our community.

WESLEYAN IN THEOLOGY

We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose - Romans 8:28 (CEB)

Our current situation in West Point is not too different from the conditions that gave birth to the Methodist Movement. Methodism was a renewal effort in response to the loss of Christian community and the alienation of whole populations from the Church. The

enduring success of John Wesley is due in part to his genius in building Christian communities.

Community as Renewal

In *The New Creation*, Theodore Runyon carefully explores the importance of the formation of Christian community saying,

Genuine human existence requires community. Thus, the church is called into being for a dual purpose that is finally one: for the sake of humanity, and to fulfill God's designs.⁷

Runyon quotes Wesley as saying, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness." Faith working by love "is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection."⁸ It is only in the context of community that the command to love God and neighbor can be fulfilled. Wesley, in his "conjunctive theology,"⁹ saw works of piety and works of mercy as inseparable, or as he phrased it, "Are you better instructed than to put asunder what God has joined? Than to separate works of piety from works of mercy?"

Wesley understood Christian community as a means of grace. Unlike other preachers of the time who may have attracted more attention and praise, Wesley did not rely on the strength of his preaching alone to effect renewal, but multiplied the fruits of his preaching by investing in the intentional creation of Christian communities as nurseries of faith. As a result, two thirds of the "conversions" reported among Methodists came after an

⁷ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹ William H. Willimon, *United Methodist Beliefs: A Brief Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 49.

average of 2.3 years of community nurture.¹⁰ Ever the empiricist, Wesley spent the years 1746-1748 focused on preaching alone, without the creation of supporting communities and reported, "Almost all the seed has fallen by the wayside; there is scarce any fruit remaining."¹¹

As nurseries of faith, the Methodist societies welcomed many who had become disaffected into a:

close-knit fellowship of mutual support and encouragement in a social and economic environment that was destroying the natural communities which from medieval times had provided the structure of human society.¹²

Whole persons were cared for as the community "watched over them in love," "marked their growth in grace," and "prayed for and with them."¹³ The lay leadership of the new communities "helped the sick and disabled," "encouraged the discouraged," and "reproved the wandering."¹⁴ Thus, evangelism and renewal in the Wesley tradition is not based on "the hard sell but the inherent attractiveness of a holistic concern for persons at the point of their need."¹⁵

Renewal in the Methodist tradition is inescapably found in the creation and organization of Christian community. As Wesley said, "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."¹⁶

¹⁰ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 115.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 118.

¹³ Ibid., 123.

¹⁴ Ibid., 124.

¹⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹⁶ Ibid., 122.

PATCHWORK expresses a commitment to building a new Christian community and to supporting, stimulating, and supplementing existing communities. We continually strive to reclaim, restore, and rededicate unused or underused space in our building to the service of God and neighbor. We are committed to reaching out to persons who are disconnected from Christian community due to the loss of relationships and community structures or negative experiences. We are passionate in deepening the faith of all persons in our community and to discovering, developing, and deploying the gifts of each person.

An Ecumenical Community

While faithfully working in the context of the Anglican Church, Wesley saw the role of the Methodist movement as going beyond the denominational divides to renew unity of piety and good works within the whole church. Wesley was convinced that God had raised up the people called Methodists with the design of using them:

to spread scriptural religion throughout the land, among people of every denomination, leaving everyone to hold his own opinions and to follow his own mode of worship...to leaven the whole nation with that 'faith that worketh by love.'¹⁷

Runyon defines ecumenism as:

the effort to overcome the barriers and conflicts between member churches in the Christian family, to manifest the Body of Christ, and to honor not just in rhetoric but in reality of the high priestly prayer of Jesus (John 17: 21).¹⁸

According to Runyon, the ecumenical movement is a "fact of life"¹⁹ for the church in the twentieth century and a distinguishing mark against a background of five centuries of division driven by: "doctrinal controversies, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and capitalism"²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸ Ibid., 207.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 208.

and the destructive impulse of “beating up the competition and building up the denominational market share.”²¹

Wesley did not intend to found a new denomination. It was in response to the overwhelming need for community, to provide sacraments to neglected or underserved populations, and the indifference or even antagonism of the existing structures, that the Methodists began to build or acquire chapels.

Wesley himself was of a “catholic spirit.” Runyon identifies at least 5 different Christian faith traditions that contributed to Wesley’s theology: Puritanism, Anglicanism, Moravian Lutheran Pietism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy.²² To this list, we should consider Calvinism as a shaping influence albeit in a more negative sense. Wesley saw division in the church as a failure of imagination and mutual affection that resulted in the loss of influence, compromised the common witness, and diminished usefulness leading to a loss of the “spirit of religion” in the “spirit of controversy.”²³ Part of the creative genius of Wesley’s conjunctive, practical, and “responsible”²⁴ theology was placing “the Lutheran doctrine of justification within the context of a doctrine of sanctification derived ultimately from Eastern patristic sources.”²⁵

As a result of this “catholic spirit,” Runyon reminds us that, “many of the persons joining Methodist societies were not Anglicans but Nonconformists, Separatists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers, and even Roman Catholics.”²⁶

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 104.

²⁴ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994).

²⁵ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 213.

²⁶ Ibid., 118.

Like our Episcopal siblings, it can be difficult to classify Methodists along the historical lines of division within the Christian family. Bishop Mack Stokes in his classic work, *Major United Methodist Beliefs*, makes the claim that The United Methodist Church is:

catholic, protestant, and evangelical. It is catholic (universal) because it shares in the biblical revelation and in the vast, rich, cumulative traditions of Christianity...protestant in that it takes the bible seriously...and evangelical in its emphasis on a living relationship with God through Christ.²⁷

Adding to this idea, Bishop William H. Willimon points to what this looks like in practice saying, "So in our worship we are both pietistic, free-church protestants and sacramental, liturgical catholics."²⁸ He continues:

So on Sundays, in our churches, you are likely to pray an Anglican prayer, sing a Baptist praise chorus, hear the choir sing a Lutheran chorale, get theology from the pulpit that sounds somewhat Presbyterian, and celebrate it all with the Lord's Supper and a Prayer of Thanksgiving that is mostly indebted to the Catholics.²⁹

Further, Russell Richey identifies ecumenism as one of the primary marks of Methodism saying,

United Methodism can be counted on for almost any unitive effort, any cooperative endeavor, any life and work enterprise. From the beginning of the ecumenical movement, Methodists assumed leadership, as they do today.³⁰

Borrowing from the best practices of the Christian family is a large part of our identity as Methodist and one of the ways that PATCHWORK seeks to welcome people of different faith traditions, confessing that we are strongest when we are working with and learning

²⁷ Mack B. Stokes, *Major United Methodist Beliefs Revised*, Revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 133–34.

²⁸ Willimon, *United Methodist Beliefs*, 48.

²⁹ Ibid., 49.

³⁰ Dennis M. Campbell, Russell E. Richey, and William B. Lawrence, *United Methodism and American Culture Volume 5: Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 91.

from one another. Willimon could have been describing PATCHWORK's ecumenism when he said,

We are inveterate borrowers, embracers, experimenters, and ancient-future spongers. We do this because we believe in getting help from our friends in our adoration, proclamation, and service.³¹

PATCHWORK is dedicated to the "catholic spirit" and committed to work toward renewal in WPFUMC and in all the communities of faith in our area. We work to encourage all our neighboring clergy and laypersons and seek to help them to be faithful and effective in their ministry contexts. On an average Sunday, the congregation at PATCHWORK will include people who identify as: United Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, or Nondenominational/Other. Each faith tradition has something valuable to add our common worship of God. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church says, "Christian unity is not an option; it is a gift to be received and expressed."³²

A Sacramental Community

One of the keys to PATCHWORK's functioning as a community-building ecumenical renewal agent is found in reclaiming the historical elements that have shaped Christian worship and identity. Don Saliers make this point clear saying,

Central to the Christian faith and life is the symbol of the gathered community. The assembly of persons, gathered in the name of God about the font, the book, and the table³³

While it is true that a shortage of ordained clergy on the American frontier made regular participation in the rich sacramental life of the church difficult, these real difficulties became institutionalized bad habits in many times and places and they continue

³¹ Willimon, *United Methodist Beliefs*, 49.

³² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 84.

³³ Don E. Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality*, 2nd ed. (Akron: OSL Publications, 2016), 80.

to persist even where there are an abundance of persons ordained or authorized to administer the sacraments. Further, these avoidances of regular communion are often defended using some of the very excuses challenged by Wesley in his sermon, *The Duty of Constant Communion*. For example, to the complaint that communion would become less meaningful with regular practice, Wesley, seeing communion as a direct command of Christ countered, saying, “Should we not obey every commandment of God as often as we can? Ought we not to accept his mercy every time it is offered?”³⁴

It is clear that Wesley encouraged frequent communing by precept and example. It can be argued that access to the sacraments proved to be the final blow to Wesley’s resistance to the Methodists in America becoming a separate denomination. In his book of liturgy, *Sunday Service*,³⁵ compiled for the American Methodist, he affirmed worship ‘little differing from that of the Church of England,’ and also advised those newly ordained ‘to administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord’s day.’ He evidently intended ‘constant communion’ to be the rule in the new world.”³⁶

Wesley had witnessed the power in field communion services and how those “persons who had been alienated from the church found their way back into it through a renewal of their appreciation of the liturgy.”³⁷ Runyon finds that John and Charles Wesley along with their mother Susanna understood communion,

as the quintessential proclamation of the gospel, presenting in visible, tangible, tastable form to the spiritual senses God’s comprehensive redemption of the creature and the world.³⁸

³⁴ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 135–36.

³⁵ John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, Reprint edition (Nashville: Quarterly Review, 1984).

³⁶ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 138–39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

Runyon continues saying because, “Wesley understood salvation as ‘the renewal of the image of God in humankind’,”³⁹

John Wesley saw the Eucharist as ‘a converting ordinance,’ one in which the work of the Spirit should not be impeded by quietistic attempts to exclude the unconverted from the sacred meal.⁴⁰

but rather

If the chief end of religion, the renewal of the person, is being served through this means of grace, what objection can validly be raised to its being made available to all those seeking salvation?⁴¹

The logic of Wesley is clear and practical, if we understand the Eucharist as communicating the real presence of Christ, it would be as Runyon states, “presumptuous to ignore or neglect them, if one seriously seeks after the new life that God offers.”⁴²

As an ecumenical Christian community seeking to be strengthened in the love and knowledge of God, PATCHWORK will continue in the preferred Christian practice of a weekly Eucharistic celebration in the form of a service of Word and Table.

ANCIENT-FUTURE IN FORM

“There’s nothing new under the sun.” - Ecclesiastes 1:9 (CEB)

“Look! I’m making all things new.” - Revelation 21:5 (CEB)

What Shape?

As I began to dig deeper into best practices in worship, the issues raised by PATCHWORK turned out to be more common than I suspected. Jan Rogers Vann’s *Gathered*

³⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

*Before God*⁴³ explores the experiences of congregations that had been refreshed through a renewal of worship. Addressing the crisis experienced by many mainline congregations, she suggests several causes⁴⁴ that resonate with the experiences of WPFUMC. These causes include: failure to offer a compelling vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ; failure to adequately communicate that vision to society or even to the next generation of church members; and building on the previous two; confusing middle-class morals with an ordered Christian Life. As a result Vann says, “without external reinforcements (churches) are unable to construct a congregational culture that has sufficient depth, conviction, and winsomeness to attract even their own children.”⁴⁵ She suggests that there is a strong complementary and supporting relationship between renewal in worship and renewal in congregations.⁴⁶ Church renewal she says, “attempts to describe the ways the worship of God is deepened among the faithful through participation in worship and reflection on that participation.”⁴⁷ Further she adds,

Church renewal for mainline congregations at the beginning of a new century may not be seen in program expansion or membership numbers but in the living out of a deeper kind of faithfulness, seen most clearly in the deepening and broadening of the worship of God.⁴⁸

After citing several examples highlighting worship centered congregational renewal, she states that: “people gather around Word and sacrament to celebrate God’s redeeming claim and purpose for their lives and then live out that purpose in their communities.”⁴⁹ And “the

⁴³ Jane Rogers Vann, *Gathered before God: Worship-Centered Church Renewal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

strength of these congregations was the depth of their spiritual commitment, which had its home in worship.”⁵⁰

Naming the problem again she states that, “many contemporary religious and social observers have noted the spiritual hunger that characterized our time.”⁵¹ and that “liturgical renewal for these congregations has borne fruit in spiritual renewal.”⁵²

If Vann is correct, that renewal is discovered through a rebirth in worship that “shapes the overall culture of the congregation,”⁵³ then how is the shape of worship determined?

Not “Traditional”

Our current opportunity to create something new required innovation and creativity; it would not be wise to offer a carbon copy or “light” version of our traditional service. First of all, it was generally assumed that most of the folks who wanted to attend that service already were. Secondly, it was decided the sanctuary would not be appropriate for the smaller crowds that typically come to a 9:00 am service and the traditional service would not scale –down to fit in the chapel. Thirdly, I wanted to provide a worship service that both stood alone and complimented the traditional service so someone could choose to attend both and not be burdened or bored. Fourthly, while the traditional worship service at WPFUMC is excellent, Tom Long has observed that, “when people talk about ‘traditional’ worship, they are really just pointing to some privileged moment in the past, some snapshot of the innovations of a previous generation.”⁵⁴ And yet, the wisdom of Wesley still echoed in our hearts saying, “I am for as few innovations as possible, I love the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵² Ibid., 22.

⁵³ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2001), 3.

old wine the best.”⁵⁵ The church is wise to honor tradition, but must be weary of traditionalism.

Not “Contemporary”

On the other hand a “contemporary” service did not match the gifts, graces, or interests of our congregation. The arguments against were numerous. The previous attempts had not been well supported by the church or community and any attempt to revive something similar would have to overcome tremendous inertia from the very beginning. There is already a congregation in our area offering excellent contemporary worship. What most people consider “contemporary” worship is too connected with a specific style. Don Saliers spoke to this poetically saying, “when the Church marries the spirit of the age, she will be left a widow in the next generation.”⁵⁶ It is possible that below the superficial differences, many “contemporary” services function as “traditional” services for another generation, holding as closely to different objects of nostalgia.

A “Third Way” Holy Play and All That Jazz

How could an historic church do something “new” and be authentic to who we were? It was at this point that we move to Long’s description of a “Third Way”⁵⁷ that sounded like “home” saying,

A classically shaped Christian worship service is formed by the biblical story...to go through the order of worship is symbolically to walk through the whole narrative of faith. The service is a metaphor constantly pointing to its referent.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ W. Stephen Gunter and John Wesley, *The Quotable Mr. Wesley* (Candler School of Theology, 1999), 43.

⁵⁶ E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill SJ, eds., *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God* (Collegeville: Pueblo Books, 1998), 33.

⁵⁷ Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

Here is the suggestion that worship is built on content rather than style. He goes on to confirm that “Third Way” congregations do exist and exhibit a set of common characteristics⁵⁹ that include mystery, hospitality, drama, eclectic excellence, adaptation, missional focus, stable order of worship, joy, and charisma. This called to mind a similar list suggested by Schnase in his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*,⁶⁰ and the treatment of elements of worship as musical movements in a single composition based on a reading of Kirk Byron Jones’ book, *The Jazz of Preaching*⁶¹ where he said, “the blending of carefulness and playfulness displayed by the musicians grabbed me and would not let me go,”⁶² and “improvisation is spontaneity infused by preparation.”⁶³ It was in the midst of this kaleidoscope of possibilities that Long mentioned Robert Webber, introducing the idea or at least the terminology of Ancient-Future worship.

Ancient – Future

“Therefore, every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest.”

- Matthew 13:52 (CEB)

Webber speaks in the introduction of the “longing to discover the roots of the faith in the biblical and classical tradition of the church”⁶⁴ and “the search for unity in the church.”⁶⁵ He then asks the very question that PATCHWORK aspires to answer, “How do

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

⁶¹ Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching: How to Preach with Great Freedom and Joy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

⁶² Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching*, 64.

⁶³ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁴ Robert E. Webber and John Wilvliet, *Ancient-Future Worship (Ancient-Future): Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative* (Baker Books, 2008), 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

you deliver the authentic faith and great wisdom of the past into the new cultural situation of the twenty-first century?"⁶⁶ Webber concludes the introduction with the words,

These three matters—roots, connection, and authenticity in a changing world—will help us to maintain continuity with historic Christianity as the church moves forward. I hope what I cull from the past and then translate and adapt into the present will be beneficial to your ministry in the new cultural situation of our time.⁶⁷

Webber defines Ancient-Future Worship as, “the common tradition of the church’s worship in Word, Table, and song, practiced faithfully and communicated clearly in every context of the world.”⁶⁸ Addressing some of the concerns about “contemporary” worship, he says,

I don’t think an ancient-future church or ancient-future worship is the next trend or that “cool” church over there. Ancient-future worship is not a gimmick or show or the latest adventure...the church may need to be inspired, perhaps contextualized, but never trashed to start again.⁶⁹

What comes next is the stroke of genius that makes Ancient –Future worship so attractive.

He says,

What stands at the very center of worship is Word and sacrament, through which God’s vision for the world is proclaimed and enacted. What contextualizes this worship more than anything else is its music.⁷⁰

Here is a practical application of the indigenous pilgrim principle⁷¹ that allows the apostolic faith to be shared using the treasures of the church and the gifts of the local congregation in a way that sounds like home and heaven at the same time.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 168.

⁷¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 1st edition (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Edinburgh: Orbis Books, 1996), 7, 53–54.

Returning to the theme of “play” briefly mentioned earlier, a multi-sensory eclectic Ancient–Future worship naturally creates an atmosphere of holy play giving permission to experience worship in different ways and to try new spiritual practices. Luke Timothy Johnson masterfully connects a structured service of Word and Table with the concept of holy play with the elements of worship themselves creating the space, opportunity, and rules for such play. He says,

To the degree that Christian liturgy maintains these formal elements of play, it enables participants to experience a form of transcendence. Worshipers so internalize the patterns of liturgical play that they can move in spirit beyond their individual bodies and into the larger body of the community, in a form of ‘going beyond’ that does not eliminate but enhances the significance of the individual as part of a meaningful whole.⁷²

Rather than confining the worshipping congregation, the Ancient-Future service of Word and Table frees us from decision fatigue and from our cultural addiction to novelty while at the same time providing a context in which joyous improvisation and enchanting syncopation are both unforced and encouraged. Having earned our “chops” and “established the theme,” the church is invited into “the groove” as the congregation childlike in the trance of holy play “surrenders to the rhythm” of the Spirit and uninhibitedly joins God in the “dance” of Creation – Incarnation – Re-creation.

When added to the context of “conjunctive” catholic, protestant, and evangelical Wesleyan theology, an Ancient-Future “style” is an excellent option. Many of the strengths of both “traditional” and “contemporary” worship are retained with few of the weaknesses in a style I call a “liturgical turducken.”

FRUITFUL IN FUNCTION

⁷² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), secs. 2239–2248. Kindle.

In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, and every rotten tree produces bad fruit. Therefore, you will know them by their fruit. - Matthew 7:17 & 20 (CEB)

Worship with a Purpose

Worship resides at the very heart of what it means to be the Church. Article V of the Confessions of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church states that the church is “the community of all true believers under the lordship of Christ;”⁷³ “one, holy, apostolic, and catholic;”⁷⁴ and “redemptive fellowship.”⁷⁵ The Church is where “the Word of God is preached,”⁷⁶ “and sacraments are duly administered.”⁷⁷ The purpose for the existence of the Church is for “the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.”⁷⁸ The Mission Statement of the United Methodist Church is, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁷⁹ The Mission Statement of West Point First United Methodist Church is, “to invite people to become disciples of Jesus Christ; to grow through God’s Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit in a caring congregation; and to serve God by sharing His love in our community and the world.”

PACTCHWORK is an intentional and ongoing effort to be a faithful expression of the Church and to fulfill the missions of the UMC and WPFUMC.

The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

⁷³ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 67–68. Article V- The Church

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 87.

In his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*,⁸⁰ Bishop Robert Schnase identifies five practices: Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Missions, and Extravagant Generosity⁸¹ as a common denominator among churches that are thriving even as other churches around them struggle with declining attendance, membership, and outreach. These practices are recommended as powerful faithful tools to regain our missional identity and focus.

Schnase sees a universal need for congregational change to move beyond self-preservation and become fruitful amid the changing ministry needs and opportunities of our time. The five practices are meant as a template for guiding these changes, but not a rigid blueprint to be strictly followed. The five fruitful practices should be expressed in ways that complement the personality and giftedness of the local congregation.

With this in mind, Schnase states that with practice and over time these five practices create a positive reinforcement loop of growth as each positive outcome builds toward the next and contributes to the overall renewal of the local church.

By repeating, deepening, expanding, and improving upon the five basic practices of congregational ministry, churches change and grow and learn. Pervaded by the purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation formation of the world, they discover new life, readily giving up the patterns that have limited ministry and eagerly taking up those that invite people into relationship with God.⁸²

In a brief, each of the five practices is interwoven with the others. If pursued with diligence and excellence they form a progression (but not always in the same order) as each one

⁸⁰ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

⁸¹ There are considerable overlaps between these five practices and the nine common worship characteristics identified by Tom Long (*Beyond the Worship Wars*) and the six qualities of Christian community addressed by Thomas Hawkins (*Cultivating Christian Community*).

⁸² Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, 125.

leads naturally to the next while it also reinforces the previous. Schnase walks us through this saying,

Congregations fulfill this purpose by performing the five practices in an exemplary fashion:

- Through **Radical Hospitality**, congregations reach out and offer the invitation and welcome of Christ;
- God shapes hearts and minds through **Passionate Worship**, creating a desire for closer relationship to Christ;
- through **Intentional Faith Development**, God's Spirit helps people grow in grace and in the love of God and neighbor;
- maturing in Christ causes people to respond to the needs of others as they discern God's call, which results in **Risk-Taking Mission and Service**;
- and as people continue to grow in grace, they place more of what they are and what they have under the lordship of Christ, practicing **Extravagant Generosity**.⁸³

Returning then to the original question⁸⁴: what would happen if instead of trying to restore these practices into an existing congregation we used them to create something new? What if they could be encoded into the very DNA of a new worship community from the very beginning?

Launching Pad, Touchstone, and Benchmark

PATCHWORK uses the “Five Practices” as: a launching pad, touchstone, and a benchmark. As a launching pad the “Five Practices” gave us a place to start with clear and sufficiently aspirational goals while also giving us the language to communicate and discuss those goals. With the abundance of supporting educational materials and studies available this power tool was also very accessible for our current and future needs. As a touchstone the “Five Practices” would be included in every worship bulletin, considered in weekly worship planning, featured in different times and in different ways as a part of seasonal

⁸³ Ibid., 123.

⁸⁴ Can the introduction of a new worship service create a Christian community and serve as a means of renewal in a historic United Methodist congregation?

themes (i.e. stewardship) and the focus of sermon series (i.e. Christian Hospitality). As a benchmark, the Five Practices would serve as a reference for measuring and evaluating our progress and defining new goals.

Each of the Five Practices is cultivated in PATCHWORK and yet PATCHWORK is itself a manifestation of those same practices from WPFUMC to the larger community.

Radical Hospitality in PATCHWORK

PATCHWORK practices Radical Hospitality in our genuine love for others, an outward focus, openness and adaptability, a willingness to change to accommodate the needs of others, and receive not just the stranger but also their talents.⁸⁵ PATCHWORK is an act of Radical Hospitality as we intentionally create new ways to cross barriers, build bridges, invite, welcome, and receive more people from more diverse backgrounds into the life and fellowship of WPFUMC and strive to create a culture of welcome.

Passionate Worship in PATCHWORK

PATCHWORK practices Passionate Worship as we continually provide opportunities for people to worship in different ways using the best of our Christian heritage and the best of our gifts and graces to draw closer to God and one another. PATCHWORK is an act of Passionate Worship as we invite all the members of our neighborhood to join us in worshipping God “in spirit and truth”⁸⁶ with all of our heart, being, and mind⁸⁷ as we strive to create a culture of holy play and liturgical renewal and innovation.

Intentional Faith Development in PATCHWORK

PATCHWORK practices Intentional Faith Development as we engage in the rhythm

⁸⁵ Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, 12.

⁸⁶ John 4:23 (CEB).

⁸⁷ Matthew 23:37(CEB).

of “action and reflection”⁸⁸ connecting worship to the nurture of small group ministries and Bible studies while bringing the experiences of the community into our times of worship. PATCHWORK is an act of Intentional Faith Development as we work together in the making of disciples and the building of Christian Community as we strive to create a culture of curiosity, wonder, and life long learning.

Risk-Taking Missions in PATCHWORK

PATCHWORK practices Risk-Taking Missions as we seek to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. All the offerings given in PATCHWORK are designated for local benevolences and members of the PATCHWORK community are actively involved many of the mission projects in our area (such as Meals On Wheels, Soup Kitchen, Tutoring for Life, and Habitat for Humanity). PATCHWORK is an act of Risk-Taking Mission in that it is an experimental worship service operating outside of the general budget and continuing to explore new areas of ministry and try different things while creating a culture of “high expectations, high permissions, and permission to fail.”⁸⁹

Extravagant Generosity in PATCHWORK

PATCHWORK practices Extravagant Generosity as we offer our resources and ourselves to God and neighbor. There is no weekly offering taken up during the worship service, but there are multiple generosity prayer stations benefiting local benevolences. Everyone who serves in PATCHWORK is a volunteer. All the improvements and repairs to the chapel have been done as act of love. PATCHWORK is an act of Extravagant Generosity given to our community and funded outside of WPFUMC’s budget. Through PATCHWORK

⁸⁸ Jane Rogers Vann, *Gathered before God: Worship-Centered Church Renewal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 8.

⁸⁹ Charles E. Gutenson, *Church Worth Getting Up For* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 60–61.

we have launched a young adult Sunday School Class, and hosted first time community events such as a neighborhood Trunk-R-Treat, a Pet Blessing service in the chapel, and Easter Sunrise Service while creating a culture of joyful openhandedness.

Through these Five Practices we are being renewed both in Patchwork and in the larger community of WPFUMC and West Point, GA. We have begun to think beyond our four walls and are realizing that the world is in our parish.

RESULTS

³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. ³⁸ Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest." – Matthew 9:37-38 (CEB)

Defining and Measuring Renewal

I began this journey with the question, "Can the introduction of a new worship service create a Christian community and serve as a means of renewal in a historical United Methodist congregation?" Over the course of 18 months, this question has led to other interesting and complex questions and a few provisional answers. Built into the difficulty of experimenting on oneself is the lack of a control group. There are also the ongoing struggles between pride and humility, aspirations and reality, attempted objectivity and subjective bias, and the sometimes-conflicting roles of clergy as pastors and administrators. With all of this in mind, I offer the following assessments. The short answer is yes, WPFUMC was able, through the introduction of PATCHWORK, to create a distinct Christian community that was effective in empowering a spirit of renewal in our local context.

The Numbers

Built into the conversation about church renewal is the role of statistics and metrics. What should we measure? How should we capture data? To what do we compare our results? It seems that we are at best in an awkward unspoken agreement that, “the numbers don’t count, except when they do.” Schnase expresses this idea pastorally saying,

While fruitfulness cannot be reduced to numbers, nevertheless numbers are important. Numbers represent people—each number stands for a person who is old or young, married or single, new to the faith or long-established, rich or poor, immigrant or citizen. Each is someone's son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother, friend and neighbor. Each is a person for whom Christ died.⁹⁰

Vital Signs

Each week the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church requires all local churches to collect and report on ten categories including: Attendance, Professions of Faith, Baptisms, Number of Small Groups, Small Group Participation, Volunteers in Mission Out Reach, Number of People Served through Outreach, Missional Giving, and Offering. WPFUMC reported an improvement in at least seven of these categories in 2016 compared to 2015 and exceeded the five year average in six categories. Not only was the decline stopped, the trend is now toward growth at almost a mirror image rate. We also celebrated as a congregation with a Missions Report that helped us tell our renewal story with real numbers representing dollars invested and persons served. For example in 2016 we served 2,117 meals in our Soup Kitchen ministry. By paying attention to the numbers we were able to better communicate and celebrate the ministries of the church. By combining numbers with narrative we have become better at seeing the growth in our community and identifying possible opportunities for the future.

⁹⁰ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 133.

The Intangibles

In addressing the complexity of the concrete experiences of congregational life, Vann says,

We perceive experiences as complex wholes, only partially organized and understood, where the interrelationships among discrete elements of an experience are as important as the elements themselves.⁹¹

It is possible to address the renewal within a congregation by focusing on “depth.”

- The vast majority of regular PATCHWORK attendees are actively involved in a small group ministry of WPFUMC including those who are members of other congregations.
- Most of our regular PATCHWORK attendees are actively involved in one of the missional programs of WPFUMC again this includes members of other congregations!
- Our last adult profession of faith and baptism was in a PATCHWORK service and the six most recent new members of WPFUMC were received through PATCHWORK.

We can also talk about renewal by looking at “breadth”.

- Our oldest PATCHWORK attendee has been 103 years-old and our youngest are infants.
- We are becoming more representative of our community with our PATCHWORK family including persons of Anglo American, African American, Asian American, and mixed heritages.
- PATCHWORK reflects the diversity of the Christian family including persons who identify as United Methodist, Baptist (CBF), Episcopalian/Anglican, Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian (PCUSA), Roman Catholic, Non-Denominational (CC), and Post-Christian seekers.

Staff Assessment

We can also talk about renewal through the experiences of the church staff.⁹² Schnase points to this saying,

⁹¹ Jane Rogers Vann, *Gathered before God: Worship-Centered Church Renewal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 43.

⁹² Staff Meeting held on January 31, 2017 at 4:00 pm.

More than anything else, the quality of spiritual preparation of the worship leaders improved. It was obvious that the pastors and staff were praying, reading, preparing, and offering their best.⁹³

In a recent conversation with church staff who voluntarily attend Patchwork as their place of worship used phrases such as:

- “totally different, but somehow familiar and comfortable”
- “sacred but not rigid”
- “rich in ritual without being formal”
- “removing barriers”
- “warm family atmosphere”
- “perfect service for those who don’t know if they would be welcome in church”
- “provoking life long learning and faith development”
- “giving of our whole-selves, true-selves to God and each other”
- “liberating service for the worshipper”

Using the “Five Practices” as a guide, it was agreed that:

- Radical Hospitality means not only welcoming someone, but doing it without holding your nose.
- Passionate Worship happens when you give yourself wholly over to the worship of God and totally forget yourself and the surrounding company.
- Intentional Faith Development comes about by deeply delving into the word and the Word.
- Risk-taking Missions don’t have to be overseas or even across town. They can happen in your own backyard.
- Extravagant Generosity happens when you give totally—your hard earned dollars, your stuff, yourself—without ever questioning why you were asked or how you would do it.

⁹³ Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, 41.

Plans for the Future

PATCHWORK is always a work in progress. We intend to continue to improve as both a worship service and as a laboratory for innovation in our church.

- We are already seeing fruits of liturgical renewal in the traditional services. We have celebrated communion weekly for the seasons of Advent and Lent and are currently including more of the lectionary readings in our service. You can't put new wine into old wine skins, but when the new wine has had a little time and space to mature you can!
- We will continue to use PATCHWORK as a training ground for people to explore their gifts and make mistakes.
- We will continue to use PATCHWORK as a supplement to the Traditional service for those who want to go a little deeper.
- We are considering the possibilities for more special services and daily or weekly prayer opportunities.
- I would like to continue to study Church Renewal and help other congregations discover their "PATCHWORK".
- I am currently in a period of discernment before taking vows for the Order of Saint Luke in no small part as a result of my PATCHWORK journey.

PATCHWORK continues to demonstrate that it is possible to build Christian community through the introduction of a new worship service as a means of renewal in a historical United Methodist congregation. Thanks be to God!

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