

**THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH UNION
FIFTY YEARS LATER: THE ABIDING PROBLEMS OF A
MODERNIST VISION OF UNION**

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On the cold and snowy evening of Thursday, December 8, 2005, Southwest Airlines Flight 1248 slid off its runway while landing at Chicago Midway Airport, crashed through a barrier wall at the airport's perimeter, and skidded into automobile traffic on Central Avenue, killing a six-year-old child. I knew about the plane crash immediately, because I was intensely following Chicago radio broadcasts while driving home from the Chicago suburb of Naperville to my home in Evanston in the same snowstorm.

I had been in Naperville that evening in the Modernist building that had been part of the campus of the Evangelical Theological Seminary to teach my "United Methodist History, Doctrine, and Polity" course. I was there because Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary had decided that it needed to return to that site to further its mission "to know God in Christ and, through preparing spiritual leaders, to help others know God in Christ."¹ On many of my hour-long drives from Evanston to Naperville and back, I pondered the merger that had produced Garrett-Evangelical, a byproduct of the 1968 merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC) and the Methodist Church that produced The United Methodist Church (UMC). The Garrett-Evangelical merger was a thorough-going merger that involved selling off the property of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville and merging both institutions onto the Evanston campus of Garrett Theological Seminary.² Even at the time, Evangelical Theological Seminary leaders worried that they would lose up to a hundred students annually who would choose not to brave the Chicago traffic to get to Evanston. But the dominant idea of a merger in that time was of a thorough-going corporate integration that left little room for legacy buildings or institutions.

And that, I will suggest, is a problematic legacy for the UMC. The union of 1968 that resulted in the UMC was a union grounded in a then-prevalent model of union involving just such a thorough amalgamation—a Modernist vision of unification in which legacies were seen as hindrances to corporate efficiency and tended to be swept aside in favor of contemporary issues and streamlined corporate structures.

¹ Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary mission statement throughout the period when I served as president there, 2001–2005.

² The legal corporation representing Garrett at that point was still "Garrett Biblical Institute," but leaders of the school had branded it as "Garrett Theological Seminary" from the 1950s.

Modernist Visions of Unity

The merger of the EUBC and the Methodist Church and the simultaneous merger of the segregated Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Church into the newly-unified structures of the UMC occurred at a very particular historical moment. The assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, and of Senator Robert Kennedy on June 5 were bookends to the Uniting Conference.

Perhaps more important for the on-going life of the UMC than these historic tragedies was the fact that the Uniting Conference took place in the waning years, indeed the waning months, of the Modernist movement that had come to espouse a highly centralist vision of unity in which regional and cultural particularities had to give way to unified modern structures. I am not speaking here of “modernity” more broadly: Protestantism and Methodism had been part of modernity from their very origins. Debatable though it may be, I am convinced that we are still living in a phase of modernity.

But *Modernism* represented a very specific European and North-American cultural movement from the late-nineteenth century through the 1960s that understated or rejected traditional forms of culture and encouraged innovation in a number of areas including art, architecture, and music.³ Architecture offers a particularly clear example of the evolution of the Modernist vision of unity. Earlier expressions of architectural Modernism had attempted to incorporate elements of traditional culture united by a Modernist motif. As an example, consider the Art Deco architecture of the Texas Centennial Exhibition of 1936, with buildings designed by Dallas-based architect George Dahl to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Republic of Texas. Dahl’s designs for this Exposition incorporated British, French, Spanish, and Native-American design elements united by an overarching Modernist motif.

But in the period after World War II, Modernist architecture turned towards styles that celebrated the modern by deliberately avoiding traditional design elements. In contrast to George Dahl’s Art-Deco buildings for the Texas Centennial Exposition, consider the late-Modernist architecture of his own design, twenty years later, for the Dallas Memorial Auditorium, that was opened in 1957. This building reflects the Modernist architectures that prevailed after the Second World War, the so-called International Style influenced by the German Bauhaus movement. Consistent with that architectural movement in the mid-twentieth century, the only design elements of the Dallas Memorial Auditorium are geometrical, and not traditional. And that is important because the Dallas Memorial Auditorium was the very building in which the EUBC-Methodist Church union of 1968 took place. The building that EUB and Methodist delegates entered on April 23, 1968, and from which they emerged as United Methodists, signified the overcoming of the past in a new, Modernist vision of unity.

³ Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1994), 3–9.

If the architectural setting was only a coincidence, the *structures* put in place by the newly organized UMC reflected the forms of unity that had been evolving parallel to the evolution of Modernist architectures through the early twentieth century. Modernist visions of unity seem to have been spurred by the threats posed by the rise of the Soviet Union in 1922 and the rise of German National Socialism in 1933 and beyond. The League of Nations was formed in 1920 after the Russian Revolution and just ahead of the union of Soviet states. The weaknesses in the League of Nations—especially its weakness against the rise of Nazism and the globalizing Axis alliance of the 1930s—would lead in the immediate post-War period to the formation of the United Nations, whose first general assembly was held in Methodist Central Hall, London, on October 4, 1946. The outlook of the immediate post-War period was that the world deserved a much stronger alliance than the League of Nations. Not surprisingly, the architectural expression of this new global unity was the United Nations headquarters complex in New York City, designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer and opened in 1952, a masterpiece of the International Style.

But it was not only political states that were concerned with new forms of unity in the post-war period. Another trend of the period was towards a more unified organization of businesses throughout the world and especially through business mergers and acquisitions. Although acquisitions and mergers in the United States had slowed down considerably in the wake of the Sherman Antitrust Law (1890) and the breakup of Standard Oil (1911), they grew in prominence in the period after World War II. A 1978 report of the Federal Trade Commission in the USA lists large-scale corporate acquisitions by years from 1948 through 1978, focusing on the areas of mining and manufacturing, listing the numbers of mergers each year and the combined assets of all of the acquiring corporations. The table begins with four acquisitions in 1948 with a total of \$63 million in assets and steadily grows until it peaked in 1968, with 174 corporate acquisitions with a total of \$12.5 billion in combined assets in that year. The numbers of acquisitions and mergers and the amounts of their combined assets then declined until 1975.⁴ Within this very specific historical context, it is hard to avoid the impression that the EUBC-Methodist Church union of 1968 amounted to something more like an ecclesiastical acquisition than a merger or union.

But of course, the driving force behind the EUBC-Methodist Church union was the Modernist vision of the ecumenical movement that had been evolving parallel to Modernism in art and architecture and political unions and in the evolution of modern businesses. From my own experience in ecumenical work, I know that long-time ecumenical advocates had stressed repeatedly that the ecumenical movement had never intended the creation of a superchurch in which all particularities would be dissolved. But they

⁴ USA Federal Trade Commission, "Statistical Report on Mergers and Acquisitions, 1978" (Bureau of Economics, August 1980), Table 14, "Large Acquisitions in Manufacturing and Mining, 1948–1978," 110.

tended to say this with a defensive edge that signified that they were very aware of the criticism.

Ecumenical unities evolved at least partially in response to some of the same crises that influenced political unities. The Life and Work movement, in particular, had grown as a Christian response to the specter of totalitarianism posed by the Soviet state, with its distinctive challenge to traditional religion of all forms, and of National socialism. The ecumenical unities of the mid-twentieth century were envisioned and advocated as democratic and representative forms of unity as opposed to top-down and undemocratic authoritarianism and totalitarianism.⁵

The ecumenical movement spurred an intricate web of denominational unions in the early twentieth century, unions in which the Evangelical Association (the Evangelical Church), the United Brethren in Christ were engaged. Methodist engagement in the movement led directly to the Methodist union of 1939, and Evangelical and United Brethren involvement led to their merger seven years later in 1946. Two years later (1948), the World Council of Churches was organized in Amsterdam with strong participation of Methodist denominations throughout the world. By the time Methodist and EUBC bishops began to meet together in the 1950s, the path to denominational mergers and ecumenical involvement was well-known to senior leaders of both denominations. In fact, the very first of those meetings of EUBC and Methodist Church bishops occurred during a meeting of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA in St Louis in 1957.

We must not underestimate the power of the ecumenical vision that motivated the union of 1968. Bishop Reuben H. Mueller of the EUBC addressed the Methodist Church general conference of 1964 meeting in Pittsburgh, offering the following impassioned defense of the proposed merger:

I believe in this Methodist-Evangelical United Brethren union so much that I am willing to say that even if we have to die in our present being, structure, program, and procedures for the sake of Jesus Christ and His Church, let us die. This is a paradoxical pathway to a new life. If church union is to take place, there will have to be some dying in order that the new may be born If necessary, I am willing that my Church should die as a separate entity in order that it might live on [in] a more significant, a larger, and a more spiritual way for the glory of Jesus Christ.⁶

As Mueller saw it, and as Methodist and EUBC leaders all tended to see it at that time, the union of 1968 was a divinely-given gift that required death of some things in order for new life. The tragedy is not, of course, that sacrificial vision of Christian unity; the problem, as I see, was the particular,

⁵ Ted A. Campbell and Gary Bruce MacDonald, "Laying the Foundations, 1910–1948," in Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017; currently available only online), esp. the section on "Life and Work, and Faith and Order, in the 1920s."

⁶ Reuben H. Mueller, fraternal address to the Methodist Church general conference in Pittsburgh, April 26 through May 8, 1964; quoted in Paul Washburn, *An Unfinished Church: A Brief History of the Union of The Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 77–78.

Modernist form of unity that seemed at the time the only option for implementing such an ecumenical vision.

The Modernist Union of The United Methodist Church

The EUB-Methodist Church union of 1968 took place in the particular historical context of late Modernism and as a result of previously negotiated unions on the part of both denominations. Not only had Evangelicals and United Brethren negotiated the 1946 union of the EUBC, but they had each negotiated solutions to divisions within their own church traditions. Both had negotiated with the [German] Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North America before leaving those negotiations to pursue more serious talks with each other.⁷ Similarly, the Methodist Episcopal Church had negotiated with the Episcopal Church in the 1920s at the same time as pursuing federation and then union with the ME South and Methodist Protestant denominations in 1939. The Methodist Church had again negotiated with the Episcopal Church in the 1940s and 50s and agreed to drop those negotiations in favor of entering into union talks with the EUBC. All of this is to say that by the 1950s, both churches had developed cadres of seasoned negotiators, the technicians of Modernist unions, well attuned to the likely problems they would face.

The union of 1968 implemented an equitable model of inclusion of EUBC as well as Methodist representatives and structures through the early years of the union by the addition of a special Restrictive Rule in the constitution of the newly formed church according to which representation from the former EUBC denomination would be guaranteed to be at least one-seventh of any representative group at all levels above that of annual conferences. The “seventh” rule guaranteed that the EUBC as the minority partner in the union held a larger proportional share of representation in comparison to that of Methodists, though the measure was set to expire in twelve years.⁸

The union of 1968 involved a thorough amalgamation of structures derived almost entirely from the Methodist Church with the exception of the General Council on Ministries designed to coordinate ministries across the newly organized denomination, the one EUBC structure superadded to existing Methodist structures. The newly-formed denomination had a streamlined, modern organizational structure with parity at all levels (general conference, jurisdictional or central conferences, annual conferences, and local charges), though it did embrace at least two notable disparities:

1. the disparity inherited from the Methodist Church between jurisdictional conferences in the USA and central conferences elsewhere that

⁷ On resolutions of divisions within the EA and UB churches, see Washburn, 54–56. On negotiations between EA and UB and other churches, see Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 406.

⁸ *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1968* (Nashville: Methodist [sic] Publishing House, 1968), article II:III:VII, ¶ 21, (pp. 21–22); see also Washburn, 75–76.

were empowered to alter the *Discipline* in specific ways suitable to their contexts; and

2. a new disparity between bishops who were subject to reelection in some central conferences, following the EUBC pattern, and bishops with life tenure, following the Methodist pattern in all jurisdictional conferences.⁹

But apart from these anomalies, the constitution and the *Disciplines* from 1968 presupposed a unified global structure at every level from the general conference down to local charges.

Perhaps the most ludicrous example of this came in 1972 when the UMC general conference of that year mandated a new structure for local congregations involving a byzantine structure with separate administrative boards and councils on ministries in every congregation and a total of at least 36 officers that every congregation was required to name.¹⁰ This cannot be blamed on the EUBC or the longer history of the Methodist Church. I think it was part of the Modernist mood of that age, that wanted to prescribe idealized standardized structures addressing a variety of important concerns, but apparently without consciousness of the realities of United Methodist congregations, especially smaller ones.

The union of 1968 also mandated the merger of other denominational structures: the EUBC publishing house was shut down, and its operations merged with that of the Methodist Publishing House in Nashville. Denominational boards and agencies were merged, all into the existing Methodist as opposed to EUBC structures. Theological schools were mandated to merger including Garrett and Evangelical in the Chicago and the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and United Theological Seminary, though the latter merger, much discussed and debated through the 1990s, never came to pass. As I have suggested in the opening vignette, the Garrett-Evangelical merger that was effected in 1974 was a thorough merger that mandated selling the Naperville property of the Evangelical Theological Seminary and moving all operations to Evanston where its students and faculty were merged into the Garrett students and faculty.

Abiding Problems of a Modernist Vision of Unity for The UM Church

The Modernist form of the union of 1968 bequeathed a series of problems to the UMC that continue to beleaguer us in our quest for a “Way Forward” on divisive issues today. It bequeathed to us a top-down, globally-imposed set of structures that had very little room for ethnic or linguistic or theological diversities, much less diversities of sexual-minority groups. Indeed, the

⁹ Institutionalized in *UMC Discipline* 1968, article III:VI, ¶ 55 (p. 31). Paul Washburn wrote that “Both churches had life episcopacy in practice except in a very few instances” (*An Unfinished Church*, 76). But the EUB Church had mandated re-election of bishops every four years, so what Bishop Washburn seems to have meant by this was that in almost every case, bishops were in fact re-elected quadrennially.

¹⁰ *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), ¶ 144–162, (pp. 113–137).

Modernist global structure of the UMC had no sanctioned spaces for most of these forms of diversity and the lack of sanctioned spaces resulted in an almost immediate explosion of unsanctioned caucus groups representing these various forms of diversity in the denomination.

To take an example, where the Catholic Church developed and sanctioned the Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities and Fellowships (1990) to relate the Charismatic movement to the church, United Methodist Charismatics found themselves with no structural way to relate themselves to the denomination except through the informal and unsanctioned United Methodist Renewal Services Fellowship.¹¹ But much more seriously, the Modernist vision of union allowed no formally sanctioned structure to carry on the living heritage of the EUBC—or the Methodist Protestant Church, for that matter—except by way of historical preservation. Moreover, the Modernist legacy was simultaneously complicated for United Methodists by the legacy of the segregated Central Jurisdiction, a legacy that gave us a strong distaste for overlapping jurisdictions, seen as almost inevitable bearers of inequity to be avoided at all costs. We thus inherited a legacy of jurisdictions and central conferences that could not be overlapping for fear of the inequities inherent in the Central Jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, a series of cultural changes have challenged the very notion of the Modernist form of union. Double-professional clergy families severely challenged the prevailing idea of appointments and what had been called “itinerant” ministry. Larger congregations have expanded their roles in naming clergy including senior pastors and have now formed multiple 501(c)(3) corporations off the radar of denominational reporting. The culture that sociologist Ronald D. Putnam described in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) signaled a large-scale movement away from the forms of voluntary communities (like civic organizations as well as local church congregations) that had characterized the “Greatest Generation” of Americans who had lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War. Not surprisingly in that cultural context, denominational boards and agencies have shrunk budgets and staffs to a quarter or a third of the size they were when the UMC was founded, leaving congregations wondering what is left of the general-level of the denomination that is worth fighting over.

Post-Modernist Structural Possibilities

Bishop Paul Washburn described the UMC that emerged from the union of 1968 as *An Unfinished Church*. Is it too late to un-make the Ring of Power that represents the Modernist form of the UMC? In what Mountain of Doom could we cast it? My fear is that General Conference delegates who bear the Ring of Power love it and obey it. But only they can instigate its un-making.

¹¹ The 1976 Portland general conference had officially approved, “Guidelines: The United Methodist Church and the Charismatic Movement,” but the denomination has not formally sanctioned any organization advocating Charismatic renewal within the UMC.

And what forms might unity take after its un-making, beyond the iniquitous specter of ever-more-atomistic Protestant division into thoroughly separated denominations? Could we conceive of post-Modernist forms of unity in the church that avoid the Modernist tendency to globalizing unity steamrolling out all traces of theological or social-ethical diversity?¹² One of the ironies of the 1968 Modernist union of the Methodist Church and the EUBC is that it came at the very tail-end of the Modernist period, just before post-Modernist forms of culture began to emerge. Philip Johnson's AT&T Building (now 550 Madison Avenue) in New York in 1982 was a symbol of emerging post-modern architecture that made a dramatic turn back to the incorporation of traditional elements in architecture like the broken pediment at the top of that building. But the turn from Modernism to post-Modernism had begun in the 1970s with the shift to regional literature and literature celebrating particular ethnicities, like Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (published in 1976 and with a very popular television adaptation in 1977). The title, *Roots*, aptly summed up one of the consistent themes of post-Modernist cultures: the return to distinct historical and cultural roots after the blandness of late Modernism.

Not only did the post-Modernist period see the development of these strands of art and architecture and literature and music celebrating the distinctness of cultural traditions, but it has also seen some fascinating experiments in new forms of unity that held out the promise of overcoming some points of conflict that had seemed historically impossible to negotiate. In 1998 Northern Ireland came to be governed by a unique power-sharing agreement that involved the collaboration of two sovereign political states: the United Kingdom, through the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Republic of Ireland through the North-South Ministerial Council. The agreement has proven remarkably effective and, despite the challenges posed by Brexit, no one seems to want to return to the times of "the troubles" in the past.

Would that Protestants or at least United Methodists could take a cue. But to date, Protestant church divisions in the United States (at least) have not envisioned any such post-Modernist forms of unity and have continued the consistent trajectory of Protestantism to use thorough, complete denominational division as the only means to settle significant disagreements. But visible, human-created divisions of the Body of Christ remain an offense before God and call for repentance and a renewed commitment to forms of visible unity. My concern is not at all with forms of visible Christ unity; my concern is very specific with the Modernist form of union that we inherited in the UMC, and that continues to haunt us as we seek a Way Forward in the midst of current divisions.

¹² The expression "postmodern" has been found to be ambiguous because it does not specify whether it means post (after) modernity in general or in a much more restricted sense post (after) the very particular cultural movement identified as Modernism. I use "post-Modernist" and "post-Modernism" here to make it clear that it is the latter meaning that I have in mind.

It is especially fascinating that the UMC has moved to make local church organization much more flexible since the top-heavy and elaborate structure prescribed in 1972. Why have we not been able to implement that kind of flexibility at higher levels in the denomination?

So I ask, looking to the future and a “way forward”: What if we were to find the “connectional conference” proposal from the Commission on a “Way Forward” to be a fruitful and providential post-Modernist structural possibility? Moreover, it seems to me that something like the geographically overlapping “connectional conferences” offer one way to envision forms of union beyond the late-Modernist model we have tried to live with and that offers so little space for very seriously diverging ways of being Christian today.

I am not so happy with the “connectional conference” proposal as it stands now, in which we would end up with three mini-denominations: a) the “traditionalist” churches united around their opposition to sanctioning gay marriages or gay ordinations, b) the “progressive” churches united around their affirmation of gay unions and gay ordinations, and c) the remaining congregations who value the present unity of their congregations over any exclusive approach to sexuality issues.

Suppose instead of or in addition to those dull options oriented entirely around sexuality issues, we could have connectional conferences like this:

1. How about a connectional conference of congregations that voluntarily choose to further the historic identity of EUB churches and traditions of European Pietism and that would perhaps develop special ecumenical relationships with the Moravian Church and other Pietistic communities? Would many of our European UMC congregations choose to ally themselves with this connectional conference? And what would be their contemporary sense of distinct mission beyond simply preserving the heritage of the Evangelical and United Brethren churches?
2. How about a connectional conference of congregation that explicitly and voluntarily choose to align themselves with the ethos of historic African-American Methodist churches, and perhaps develop special ecumenical relationships with the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches; not in this case (I hasten to add) a forced segregation as the Central Jurisdiction was, but with a voluntary decision to follow this way of being United Methodist Christians and open to all congregations and individuals, regardless of race, who want to foster the traditions of African-American Methodism?
3. How about a connectional conference of congregations that would enthusiastically embrace the Holiness-Evangelical traditions of American Methodism? (I do not really want Evangelical without Holiness!) Congregations that would readily embrace the heritage of the Wesleys and John William Fletcher and Phoebe Palmer and who might build alliances with Wesleyan-Holiness churches? Who might even serve as

a gateway for other Evangelical groups wanting to connect more deeply to historic forms of Christian faith?

4. How about a connectional conference of congregations that explicitly and voluntarily identify themselves with the progressive, postmillennial ethos that came to fruition in the Social Gospel movement and the Methodist Federation for Social Action, that was expressed in the Social Creed, and fueled Methodist involvement in the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement, and the movement for full inclusion of sexual minorities, perhaps with special ecumenical relationships with other denominations and groups that foster these missional purposes?
5. How about a connectional conference of congregations that would foster a more historic liturgical and sacramental form of Methodism, with a renewed version of the General Rules and with special ecumenical relationships with church bodies (like the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) that nurture these forms of historic liturgical and sacramental Christian life?
6. Moreover, how about some connectional conferences that might continue some of our existing central conferences, like those in Africa or the Philippines, where there already exists a distinctive church culture and whose current central conferences could continue their work unabated as connectional conference?

And what if we could envision a procedure for developing new, creative connectional conferences in the future, designed to carry on the traditions of the UMC in new situations and new contexts?

Would connectional conferences like these engender a little more enthusiasm than the current proposals for a way forward? And if this sounds like fantasizing, I would plead some more creative ways to move forward from our present impasse. The Modernist vision of church union was a profoundly problematic phase in the evolution of Wesleyan and pietistic ways of being Christian. It does not have to be the only possibility. Our heritage demands better of us. Our Savior has the power to make impossible things possible, and Christ continues to pray, “. . . that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21, NRSV).