

First United Methodist Church Richardson, 2020 Learning Community

Methodist Identity in the 21st Century

Br. Scot
(Rev. Scot Bontrager, OSL, PhD)



Welcome / Introductions

Living in the 21st Century:

Video Conferencing instead of gathering in a classroom.

You may share/reuse these slides
except those otherwise marked.

Br. Scot's assumptions

Learning happens in relational conversation, not argumentation

- Learning requires change, which requires an openness to change, which requires a safe space for change to happen
- No one changes their minds in an argument, we only ever get more entrenched
- Arguments are a challenge to our **identity** even if we know we are not right, we double-down on our position to save our sense of self
- **We learn/change when we know it is safe to change, when people we love (and who love us) have already changed**

We process information differently

- Some of us are introverts/internal processors, we think silently and don't speak until we've had time to think
- Some of us are extroverts and don't know what we think until we say it out loud
- Some of us write, draw, knit, compose music, or do crossword puzzles to think

I do not have an answer to the question, I want the conversation

- Initially I'd planned this as a seminar, but a lot of people registered, so it will be more lecture/breakout style
- I have an idea for what I would like Methodists to be going forward, but I am not in charge
- I am open to change

First things...

What is “identity?”

One of the hardest questions in philosophy.

A = A. But what is A? What is = ? What is “is” for that matter....

We don't need to solve that question. But we can draw on the current work in philosophy to get some clarity on our larger question.



Get the boring, dry stuff out of the way

Numeric identity

- Whatever it is that makes this thing *this thing* and not another thing
- In a pile of rocks, we can *identify* a particular rock from all the others
- If we have 300 black cubes of carbon, exactly the same in every physical way, they are not “identical” (as we would say in normal English) since they each take up a different space and are in fact different things; they are numerically distinct
- A very sticky question is numeric identity through time and change. If anything at all changes in a thing, is it identical with its former self?
 - The Ship of Theseus: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_of_Theseus
 - ‘You cannot twice step into the same stream’ — Heraclitus <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heraclitus>

If the people called Methodist change, are they still Methodist?
How much change is too much to still be Methodist?

Get the boring, dry stuff out of the way

Personal identity

- ‘We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not.’ — Heraclitus
- Am I the same person I was when I was 5? 7? 11? 19? 21?
- “Give me the child until seven and I will give you the man” - St. Ignatius (variously attributed)
[I remember a Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy quote about “Show me the boy at 5 and I will show you the man at 50” but I can’t find a reference to it].
- Some things about me have not changed. Many things have.
- What does it mean to be born again (born from above / born anew). If it isn’t ME who is born anew, why bother?
- Who is saved? Which “me” has eternal life? I’d rather my 21 year-old body but not my 21-year-old mental/spiritual state.
- **What can I not give up and still be ME?**

Get the boring, dry stuff out of the way

Expressing personal identity

- Tastes / preferences
- Behaviors
- Memories
- Relationships (“You are the average of the 5 people [with whom] you spend the most time.” - Jim Rohn ¹)
- Displays (bumper stickers on cars, logos on shirts e.g. sports teams. “I signal my solidarity with the middle class by wearing brands that other middle-class people wear...”)

1. c.f. <https://medium.com/the-mission/youre-not-the-average-of-the-five-people-you-surround-yourself-with-f21b817f6e69>

Get the boring, dry stuff out of the way

Personal identity questions

- What do I believe / think
- What do I do
- What do I consume
- What do I produce
- With whom do I associate
- How do I present myself
- What can I not give up and still be ME
- What is my story

Stories

- ❖ “Identity is narratively encoded” - Dr. Bontrager
- ❖ We are the stories we tell about ourselves (to ourselves and to others)
- ❖ We become ourselves by forming and telling our stories
- ❖ One of the most important things we can do is let people tell their stories and validate that they’ve been heard (the core of my theory of pastoral care, and my theory of being a loving human)

Br. Scot's theory of identity formation¹

- ❖ An act performed once
- ❖ A routine performed several times
- ❖ A skill
- ❖ A habit
- ❖ A discipline
- ❖ A virtue (power)
- ❖ Character (brand)
- ❖ Identity

Get the boring, dry stuff out of the way

Corporate identity

- Groups of individuals have identity just like individuals
- Is General Electric the same as it was in 1892? If I bought stock in GE in 1892 and forgot about it until now, is that stock still valid?
- Groups seek to form the individual members into people who share identity with the group... (4H group from when I was a pre-teen, UMYF...)
- Corporate culture: shared practices, values, vision.
- Sports teams traditions (Cowboys fans vs. Eagles fans)

Get the boring, dry stuff out of the way

Expressing corporate identity

- Mission / Purpose Statement
- Advertising / Brand
- Constitution (founding documents of identity)
- Practices (hiring, environmental, “drive friendly / Don’t mess with Texas”)
- Communications (web, social media, investor letters, SEC filings, Episcopal letters, resolutions)
- Brand story / History

Get the boring, dry stuff out of the way

Corporate identity questions

- What do we believe / think
- What do we do
- What do we consume
- What do we produce
- With whom do we associate
- How do we present ourselves
- What can we not give up without becoming something different
- What is our story

Questions/comments before breakout session 1

Breakout session 1: 15 minutes

Designate one person to “check in” when we come back together

Suggested topics:

- **Introduce yourself**
(notice your own markers of identity and role of story)
- Concept of identity
- What is central to your own identity
- What is my story?
- What was new / interesting in this material?
- What did Br. Scot forget, get wrong, or present unclearly?

Breakout session 1: Check-in

What was the most important thing that came up in your group?
(tell me a story about your time together)

Now that we have
a shared language and framework...

Our topic at hand: United Methodist Identity

- What do we believe / think
- What do we do
- What do we consume
- What do we produce
- With whom do we associate
- How do we present ourselves
- What can we not give up without becoming something different
- What is our story

What do we believe/think

- Continuity with broad Christian Tradition
 - Catholic and Orthodox
 - Creedal
 - Episcopal
- Distinctive emphasis / themes
 - Freedom of action
 - Perfection / sanctification / holiness
 - “the method”

What do we do?

- Worship
- Social Holiness
- Prayer
- “Searching the Scriptures”
- Eucharist
- Healing
- Living in Community
- Holy (distinctive) living
- Build Schools
- Build Hospitals
- Build Orphanages
- Establish Scholarships
- Social Services
- Social Justice
- Racial Justice
- Economic Justice

What do we consume/refuse?

Consume

- Grace
- Fellowship
- Accountability
- Learning / Education

Refuse

- “Spiritous Liquors”
- Wearing gold
- Gambling
- Songs or books which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God
- Softness & self-indulgence

What do we produce?

- Disciples... for the transformation of the world
- Saints, people perfected in love - Br. Scot
- Worship
- Community
- Hospitals
- Colleges
- A transformed world

With whom do we associate?

- All Christians
- All people
- The world
- God
- The marginalized / ignored / forgotten

How do we present ourselves

- "The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."
- Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.
- Wesleyan, Missional, Connected

What can we not give up?

- Freedom (“Free will”¹)
- The Method
- Social Justice / Social Holiness
- Episcopacy
- Itinerancy
- Creedal Christianity
- Scripture
- Singing
- Potlucks
- Sacramentality
- Study
- Love of Neighbor
- Adaptability
- Practicality

1. “Free will” is almost never the correct term for our freedom to make morally significant decisions. Our wills might be free, but we are still unable to make meaningful choices. We might be able to make meaningful choices but not able to will them. Just say “freedom” instead of “free will” and you won’t run afoul of Br. Scot’s rage. For a long discussion on this, see: Bontrager, “Augustine’s Concept of Volition and its Significance for the Doctrine of Original Sin,” 2019.

Our story

- Wesley
- Asbury / Coke
- 18th century enlightenment foundations
- 19th century revivalism / spread
- 20th century middle-class white America

Our story... but wait, there is more!

- Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Mennonite group) (1800)
- Evangelical Association (1803)
- United Evangelical Church (1894)
- Evangelical Church (1922)
- Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) (1946)
- 1968 EUB / MEC merger (@SMU Pony Up!) to form UMC

Breakout Session 2:

Thoughts on the UMC's Identity

Breakout session 2: Check-in

What was the most important thing that came up in your group?
(tell me a story about your time together)

Suggestions for preparation for next week

- ❖ Look around <https://www.UMC.org> , especially “What we believe,” “Who we are,” and “How we serve.” (Notice the order they are placed in...) What do we say about ourselves?
- ❖ Read the Wesley Sermons Br. Scot will share in an email.
- ❖ Read the selection from Henry H. Knight III’s *Eight Life-Enriching Practices of United Methodists*. (pdf will be provided)
- ❖ Think about what being a Methodist means to you. How does that fit with our public presentation? What differs? What is the same? Jot down some notes.