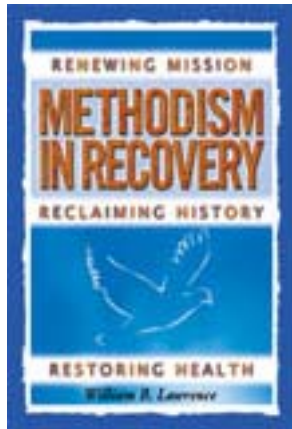


# CIRCUITRIDER *Reviews*



## **Methodism in Recovery: Renewing Mission, Reclaiming History, Restoring Health**

by William B. Lawrence

(Abingdon Press, 2009

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### **Methodism in Recovery by William B. Lawrence**

A number of new books on the renewal of the United Methodist Church have hit the shelves to coincide with General Conference. Leaders across the connection have offered a wide range of diagnoses on what ails the church at this moment in history and on what solutions portend hope. Former Bishop Wilke's *The Tie That Binds*, Bishop Larry Goodpastor's *There's Power in the Connection*, Charles Yrigoren, et al., *Methodism at Forty*, Bishop Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Craig Kennet Miller's *The Seven Myths of United Methodism*, and Tom Oden's *Turing Around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church* are but a few of the works now speaking to the renewal of United Methodism in particular and Methodism more broadly.

Add to this list another work: William Lawrence's *Methodism in Recovery: Renewing Mission, Reclaiming History, Restoring Health*. Dean of the Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Lawrence offers a sobering diagnosis of the United Methodist Church's current condition and prescribes a number of items essential to its recovery. The book is a thoughtful portrayal of Methodism's plight in North

America, with specific attention given to the United Methodist Church and the history of this particular limb of the Methodist body (viii). With scalpel in hand, Lawrence cuts through the varied levels of Methodist history, doctrine, and politics as he pinpoints the key ailments and hopeful prognoses he believes will bring about renewal and recovery (xiv).

Lawrence divides his book into eight Chapters, with Introduction and Preface. The primary metaphor tying the work together is the metaphor of recovery (p. 4ff). Lawrence makes preliminary distinctions between recovery, rescue, and renewal, noting how the task before the church is not to rescue the church (which is limited in scope) but recovery (which can be grim but is necessary). Recovery speaks to a range of meaning but its central aim is healing (p. 7). This is why, as Lawrence argues, recovery does not necessarily mean renewal (p 7-8). Instead, recovery must move toward a deeper level: it must move toward a level of purpose that is not afraid to face the past and claim the future and that understands how exposing the “sore spots and tender places” of the Methodist tradition can lead toward healing (p. 12). In short, Lawrence contends true recovery must “transcend any medicalization of the church and embrace the mystery of the faith” (p. 12). Lawrence’s work is a plea that Methodists will approach the task of recovery in this fashion as they move courageously into the future and as they embrace the three criteria of the church’s mission – Word, Sacrament, and Discipline (p. 13). Therefore, the mission of Methodism is not so much to rescue an institution as it is to serve the present age with passion (p. 15).

This is the overall argument throughout Lawrence’s book as he identifies a number of themes essential to Methodism’s recovery:

- Learning again how to define what “church” is
- Facing the need to offer confession
- Finding better ways to make decisions
- Seeing negative circumstances as positive opportunities
- Offering a distinct voice in the public arena
- Placing congregations in the context of connectional mission
- Connecting with all social classes, including the poor and the rich
- Changing the paradigm for debate from the political to doctrinal
- Changing the practices of discussion from the legislative to the theological
- Forming a financial system beyond apportionment limits

- Listening to one another more than talking to ourselves
- Opening our spirituality to the power of silence
- Restoring the role of oversight to the episcopacy
- Renewing the place of Christian conferencing
- Making the mysteries of faith more accessible
- Linking hope with vision (pp. 16-17).

Again, Lawrence is clear that the recovery of Methodism may not require the survival of The United Methodist Church *per se* but that the mystery of faith must remain front and center in all diagnoses and solutions.

*Methodism in Recovery* presents several noteworthy areas for discussion and conversation. First, Lawrence's diagnosis of what ails Methodism in general and United Methodism in particular is sobering. This is not a work that people will put down and jump for joy. Instead, it is a thought-provoking analysis of the church's current condition. There is a hardnosed realism that punctuates every page. It is not a book for the faint in heart.

Second, Lawrence provides an interesting analysis of the church's state from a wide variety of perspectives. Having served as a local pastor, a district superintendent, a seminary professor, and a seminary dean, Lawrence is able to give insights others throughout the connection may not have. This serves the argument of the book and the church well. Lawrence is passionate about the church he loves.

But upon closer analysis there are also key observations about the overall thrust of Lawrence's work. First, it is not clear what Lawrence advocates with respect to the relationship between conference and congregation. For example, he notes how there is a strong affinity in American culture toward congregationalism and how such affinity works against Methodism's connectional identity (p. 100). In fact, earlier he states how insidious congregationalization is (p. 71). Surely, the task is to avoid "a loose confederation of congregations" (p. 57). And yet, Lawrence makes a series of moves that suggests otherwise. When describing how a denomination may decide on matters regarding homosexuality, for example, citing the Conservative Jewish Movement as a model, he states how "a congregational system can live with the flexibility that legislation for a denomination cannot restrain a local church's right to decide its own policies and practices; the majority may decide but it cannot dictate; in fact, the majority may not be the true voice of the denomination" (p. 57). Suddenly, the conference is seen not as a means of grace but as a "hierarchical" system that "imposes"

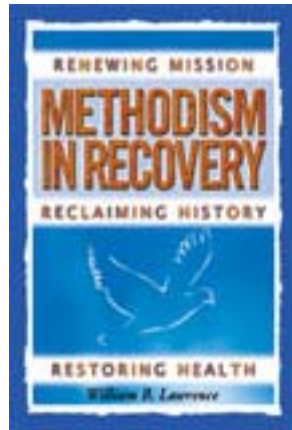
legislation (p. 57). It seems Lawrence does not want the church to move toward congregationalism, but he also does not want the conference (i.e., the General Conference) to dictate to the local church what it can or cannot do. Is this simply congregationalism through the backdoor? Lawrence appears to want it both ways.

Second, there is the logic expressed about division and the role of doctrine in the church. Here, Lawrence shares how “inconsistent it would be with the doctrinal history of Methodism to insist that, for the sake of theological purity, the denomination must divide”; “neither schism nor the avoidance of schism will lead to the recovery of Methodism” (p. 61). And yet, earlier Lawrence writes that “churches recover from schisms (Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy have thrived in separation for a thousand years” (p. 8). Interesting! Other churches can thrive amidst schism, but Methodism can not? To be sure, Methodism has certainly had its share of division over doctrine, notably the doctrine of sanctification. And, yes, there is the concern over “theological purity” (a pejorative term?). And yet, the question remains: Would schism mean that Methodism would no longer thrive? History suggests otherwise. Schism is certainly not what the church wants, but schism does not necessarily mean the church’s faithful witness will cease. In fact, could it not increase?

These observations are not meant to distract from Lawrence’s contribution to the conversation now taking place throughout United Methodism. The whole metaphor of recovery and health is apt. Lawrence realizes that there is more than a “numbers” game with respect to the influence Methodism has had and will continue to have. The way Methodists have influenced the wider church and world is well-known. Lawrence understands that Methodism is more than the United Methodist Church (though it is curious as to why he doesn’t speak of the EUB or holiness roots at this point). He understands that the Methodist heritage is cumulative, especially with respect to the role of women and African-Americans. Here, Lawrence shines the light on Methodism’s less than healthy and faithful past!

Along with these positive insights, it is important to stress that Lawrence’s work on Methodism is a valuable diagnosis to what is happening throughout the connection. The recovery of Methodism will not simply involve what he is prescribing (as important as it is), but also a renewed emphasis on the significance of the sacraments (the mystery of the faith) and the return to catechesis (the centrality of doctrine). In addition, it will also involve the heart of Methodism’s passion: the workings of the Holy Spirit and the transforming power of God’s grace. Without these Wesleyan

distinctives in the medicine chest (curiously omitted in this text) the recovery prescribed by Lawrence will remain short-term at best.



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