

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP TO ENVIRONMENTAL HOLINESS

The Evolution of Methodist Environmental Witness, with a Focus on Climate Change

Darryl W. Stephens

ABSTRACT

The descriptive moment in ethical reflection is helpfully informed by a careful consideration of what religious bodies have said about moral issues such as climate change. As a case study, this article identifies and interprets primary documents of The United Methodist Church (UMC) and its predecessor institutions, providing a detailed examination of the historical development of this denomination's environmental witness statements. Methodism's long-standing engagement with environmental ethics, out of which a concern for anthropogenic climate change incrementally emerged, includes significant institutional policies and practices. The history of Methodist environmental witness evidences a creative, faithful response by a religious denomination learning to grapple with the overwhelming problem of climate change. Describing and interpreting this history enables religious ethicists to engage Methodist environmental witness as they develop constructive models for addressing this problem.

KEYWORDS: *climate change, environmental ethics, Methodism, holiness, stewardship, social ethics, ecclesial witness, population ethics*

Methodism evidences a long-standing engagement with environmental ethics out of which a concern for anthropogenic climate change incrementally emerged. The United Methodist Church (UMC) is a US-based, international Christian denomination formed in 1968 in a merger of the Methodist Church (MC) and the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC). In the 1930s, the earliest statements on the environment by these denominational bodies and their predecessors focused on rural farms. Methodist denominational statements showed an evolution of thought and engagement with environmental issues, beginning with stewardship, conservation, and population control. This witness was voiced through the Social Creed and various resolutions. After the 1968 merger, the UMC crafted a new statement of Social Principles, expressing a clear commitment to "The Natural World" as a part of its ongoing social witness and adopted

Darryl W. Stephens teaches at Lancaster Theological Seminary and is the author of *Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness* (University of Tennessee Press, 2016). Darryl Stephens, dwestephens@alumni.rice.edu.

resolutions addressing various aspects of the environment at each quadrennial General Conference through the present. Climate stewardship is part of an overall environmental effort within Methodism, recognizing the intrinsic worth of creation and working toward environmental wholeness and harmony as an integral part of discipleship.

This article describes the evolution of Methodist environmental witness, excavating a multifaceted history and pointing to a few ways in which it has translated into concrete practices, particularly in response to climate degradation. The United Methodist witness privileges biblical understandings of justice and sustainability even as it relies heavily on scientific findings, particularly as expressed through the United Nations (UN), and the best of ecumenical insights as expressed through the World Council of Churches (WCC). Just, sustainable, “abundant living” encompasses concern for the poor, individual worth and equality, human rights and basic goods, and the opportunity for full human flourishing. Through numerous resolutions adopted every four years, the UMC recognizes environmental stewardship as part of a complex of interconnected social, political, and economic issues, rooted in God’s vision of *shalom* for all of creation. The UMC has consistently urged individual, national, and international cooperation and action. The UMC’s concern for climate stewardship evolved in parallel with international and ecumenical awareness of anthropogenic climate change and is currently expressed through the terms “creation care” and “environmental holiness.”

This article takes inspiration from Willis Jenkins’s “contextually pluralist methodology” for Christian environmental ethics (2009, 301). Reflecting on the influential legacy of Lynn White’s 1967 thesis, Jenkins expressed concern that scholarly preoccupation with White’s claims—that Christian views of the cosmos have directly contributed to the contemporary ecological crisis and that a change in religious viewpoint is requisite to any successful attempt to address this crisis—had led to an unhelpful focus on “the cosmological roots of environmental problems” to the neglect of social practices and experiences that might contribute positively to changes in individual and corporate behavior (2009, 286). In other words, Jenkins asserted that scholars had been too busy arguing about religious beliefs about nature and had spent too little time studying actual religious communities. This article does not attempt to adjudicate this scholarly debate.¹ Rather, this article examines the evolving environmental witness of one religious community, the UMC, providing a detailed examination of the historical development of its witness regarding climate change. This descriptive and interpretative task is but one movement in Jenkins’s “prophetic pragmatism” (2013, 9).² Climate change is an “overwhelming problem” (to use

¹ For an instructive discussion on this scholarly debate, see Pedersen 2015.

² Jenkins’s treatment of “environmental strategies as adaptive discursive practices” involves three movements: identify/interpret; cultivate; and critique/disturb (2009, 304).

Jenkins's terminology) that has prompted creative innovation among United Methodists as they have struggled to interpret and frame what is going on in the world around them and to respond to that reality through faithful, concrete actions (Jenkins 2013, 8–9). This article provides a description of the longitudinal development of Methodist environmental witness through 2017, enabling religious ethicists to engage Methodist environmental witness as they develop constructive models for addressing climate change.

1. United Methodist Social Witness—An Overview

United Methodist denomination-wide witness on the topic of environmental stewardship, including climate change, is expressed through documents of General Conference and the Council of Bishops and the implementation of these statements by United Methodist general agencies. General Conference is a delegated assembly of laity and clergy that meets every four years to determine the law and policies of the denomination. It is the only entity that may speak on behalf of the UMC, and its witness is found in *The Book of Discipline* (especially Part V: The Social Principles) and *The Book of Resolutions*, each of which is updated and revised every four years. While the UMC has membership in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines, the UMC's history of social witness statements is arguably a product of its US. constituency (Stephens 2016, 107). The Council of Bishops, consisting of all active bishops in the UMC, also has significant teaching authority for United Methodists. On an occasional basis, the Council of Bishops disseminates pastoral letters and foundation documents on various topics pertinent to the church and its ministry.

Each of the three genres of witness—Social Principles, resolutions, and Council of Bishops' documents—has a slightly different authority within the UMC and church law. While documents by the Council of Bishops have no force within church law, they hold authority as teaching and pastoral resources—especially when initiated, sanctioned, and promoted by General Conference. The Social Principles, comprised of an expansive array of concise, topical statements, is the most prominent body of social teachings in the UMC. The Social Principles traces its origins to the Methodist Social Creed of 1908 and is the oldest continually updated tradition of Protestant social witness (Stephens 2016, 15–17). General Conference resolutions are lengthier statements on specific topics, often elaborating upon or anticipating topics addressed within the Social Principles, and expire after eight years unless amended or renewed. General Conference resolutions provide substantive and binding instructions for this church's general agencies, which carry out the mandates of General Conference between sessions. Only General Conference can mandate church law for the denomination, although not every piece of approved legislation has legal force within the church. The Social Principles is specifically “not to be considered church law”; however, it does have a significant role in the legal discourse of the

denomination, serving to undergird moral expectations for members and clergy at every level of church leadership (Stephens 2016, 40–41). Through these various entities and genres, the UMC produces its aggregate environmental witness, proclamations that are best interpreted within the context of an ongoing series of social witness statements.

This article examines in great detail the history of environmental witness by Methodist General Conferences. To speak of General Conference as one entity with a single voice is both true and misleading. Although General Conference is one entity, it exists intermittently and differs in constituency every time it meets. General Conference meets for about ten days every four years (or more often, if a special session is called, as in 1970 and 2019). Every General Conference has different personnel, being comprised of up to 1000 delegates elected from all parts of this denomination. Any member, group, congregation, agency, or entity within the UMC may write petitions. Furthermore, most of the legislation approved by General Conference is never discussed by the entire plenary. The work of perfecting legislation occurs in committees and subcommittees of General Conference. Sometimes the delegates assigned to this task are aware of previous and concurrent legislation on the same and related topics; sometimes they are not. There is no institutional imperative (or even motivation, oftentimes) to be conversant with a “tradition” of Methodist social witness (see Stephens 2016, 68–69, 77–78, 100–1). Thus, the consistency of environmental witness in the history of the UMC and its predecessors is all the more remarkable.

2. Rural Life, Conservation, Stewardship, and Population Control (1939–1970)

Methodist advocacy for environmental stewardship and conservation can be traced to a concern for farms and rural life in the 1930s. The concern for rural farmers in the Methodist Church, formed in 1939, was inherited from predecessor denominations. For example, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) had for years advocated for “preservation of the distinctive values of rural life” through its Social Creed (MECS 1938, para. 593.11). After the 1939 merger, the Methodist Church continued to advocate “for the safeguarding of the farmer and his family, and for the preservation of all the values of rural life” (MC 1939, para. 1695.9). Mixed with this conservative and, perhaps, nostalgic view of rural life was an emphasis on individual worth influenced by Boston personalism and other humanist strains of thought. In 1939, the Methodist Social Creed asserted the primary importance of persons, expressing a theology that valued every individual as a child of God. The Methodist Church declared, “We test all institutions and practices by their effect upon personality” (MC 1939, para. 1695.3).³ Thus,

³ The language was changed from “personality” to “persons” in 1956. For a comparison of Methodist and humanist witness, see Stephens 2016, 71–72.

“personality” served as a focal point of social ethics as Methodists began to articulate an environmental witness. Methodist environmental witness from this point through the 1960s focused on stewardship and conservation of natural resources with a particular concern about the impact of increased human population around the globe.

In 1948, the Methodist Church expanded its ongoing concern for farmers to include a program in rural areas “pertaining to people in their relationship to God, to soil and all natural resources” (MC 1948, para. 2020.10). In 1956, referencing Psalm 24:1, the Methodist Church added to the theological basis of its Social Creed: “We believe that ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.’ Our own capacities and all we possess are gifts of the Creator, and should be held and used in stewardship to him” (MC 1956, para. 2020.II). This marked the first time in the Social Creed that Methodism framed its view of the earth in terms of God’s creation and not merely as a resource to be used, a point that would be emphasized in later Methodist and ecumenical pronouncements.

Methodists initially expressed concern about human overpopulation as a matter of personal responsibility, revealing an admixture of eugenic and anti-Catholic perspectives. The Methodist General Conference first amended its ongoing resolution on “The Christian Family” to advocate for “planned parenthood” (MC 1956, para. 2021.3c) and similarly amended the Social Creed four years later (MC 1960, para. 2020.III.A). This coded support of birth control immediately followed a warning to “Protestant youth” about the perils of “mixed marriages” between persons of different religious backgrounds (implicitly Roman Catholic). Furthermore, for decades, the Methodist Church had supported eugenics, declaring “Not all good people make good husbands, or wives, or parents” (MC 1940, para. 1713.5) and that some persons are “unfitted . . . for the responsible state of matrimony” (MC 1952, para. 2021.4). Thus, Methodism taught that not every individual was suitable for producing desirable offspring, a stance grounded in race-based eugenic “science” for which the UMC would officially repent in 2008 (UMC 2008b see also Stephens 2016, 132). Mid-century Methodists soon recast their concern from fittingness to fecundity as they contemplated population growth in light of environmental stewardship.

In 1960, stewardship and conservation became the primary framing concepts for Methodist environmental witness, including human overpopulation. Addressing the context of “town and country life” as an “economic” consideration, the Methodist Church amended the Social Creed to pertain to “people in their relationship to God, to *the stewardship of the soil and the conservation of all natural resources*” (MC 1960, para. 2020.III.B.8; italics indicate text added in 1960). In 1963 the Evangelical United Brethren Church (soon to merge with the Methodist Church) expanded its statement of Moral Standards (a parallel development of the Social Creed tradition) to include a section on responsible parenthood, citing the problem of an

“increasing world population” (EUBC 1963, para. 925). The following year, the Methodist General Conference voiced its support for family planning by citing concern for “the population explosion” (MC 1964, para. 1821.3c). The 1964 Social Creed explained:

Families in all parts of the world should have available to them necessary information and medical assistance for birth control through public and private programs. The issue must be seen in reference to the pressing population problem now before the whole world. (MC 1964, para. 1820.III.A)⁴

World population growth had captured the imaginations of Evangelical United Brethren and Methodists as a primary threat to the environment and humanity’s future on this earth.

When these two churches merged in 1968, they continued to advocate in ways consistent with previous denominational statements (UMC 1968a). In a 1968 statement, “Conservation of Natural Resources,” the newly formed UMC spoke against greed and selfishness in relation to abuse and exploitation of the environment (UMC 1968b). It was not much of a stretch to infer from this witness that having too many children, for example, might be considered an expression of greed and selfishness detrimental to the environment. Resolutions on population consistently reinforced this message. A 1970 resolution, “Population Crisis,” identified a worldwide “population explosion,” due to advances in medicine and technology that “threatens to alter the environment that sustains all life” and called for family planning services, voluntary sterilization, legal abortion, and governmental action (UMC 1970c).⁵ Legislated just two years after Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, the differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic teachings could not have been more starkly expressed. Since 1968, the UMC has continually maintained a resolution on population, drawing an explicit connection between population growth and climate change, and has repeated its support of contraception in UMC 2012.⁶

⁴The Methodist Church in 1964 advocated for planned and responsible parenthood in the Social Creed and two separate resolutions (MC 1964, paras. 1820.III.A, 1821.3.c, and 1822.12).

⁵By 1976, in relation to family planning, the UMC also expressed concern for and opposed “any coercive use of such policies and services” (UMC 1976a, 52). In 1980, General Conference adopted a resolution “Against Sterilization Abuse.”

⁶Addressing world population again in 2012, General Conference cited the UN and other international bodies that “have affirmed the interrelationship of population growth and climate change” (UMC 2012, 442). Referencing Genesis 1:28, the 2012 General Conference also addressed “stewardship of human reproduction,” including use of contraception, in a resolution, “World’s Population and the Church’s Response.” To dispel any ambiguity, the resolution asserted: “In clear distinction from faiths that reject use of such methods, The United Methodist Church believes effective, safe contraception is indeed responsible stewardship” (2012, 441). Over the years, the UMC has gradually expressed greater awareness of the environmental impact of population growth in light of the disproportionate use of resources by particular populations.

3. Addressing an Interrelated and Complex Set of Problems (1970–1979)

In the 1970s, the US environmental movement gained traction in both government and church institutions. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* had awakened an entire generation in 1962 to the dangers of DDT, and the US military's tactics of chemical warfare in Vietnam had heightened awareness of environmental destruction and societal responsibility. In 1970, the federal government enacted the National Environmental Policy Act and established both the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency. The first "Earth Day," held on April 22, 1970, occurred during a meeting of the General Conference of the UMC, prompting adoption of a motion, as lofty as it was earnest, "to initiate action to resolve our ecological crisis" (UMC 1970b, 274). The same General Conference adopted a statement, "Environmental Stewardship," focused on "responsible ecological management of all our natural resources" and insisted, "the human rights of the community take precedence over individual property rights" (UMC 1970a, 16; see also UMC 1976b, 75). Seeing the need for governmental oversight and prioritizing the common good, United Methodism was beginning to address environmental stewardship more systematically. Grappling with the complexity of social, political, and economic issues as they impacted the environment, the UMC and its leaders showed dynamic and creative involvement in the environmental movement.

The creation of the Pax World Fund by Luther Tyson and Jack Corbett in 1971 illustrates competing internal pressures. At the time, Tyson and Corbett were both on staff of the UMC's General Board of Church and Society in the division of economic life. Tyson and Corbett became frustrated with "the Board of Pensions investing in companies that made bombs" (Hanson 2017). During a face-to-face meeting to discuss developing a plan to invest according to the UMC's social teachings, Tyson encountered resistance, and after he left the room, the Board of Pensions members reportedly broke into laughter (Hanson 2017). Apparently, the idea of justice-motivated divestment seemed ridiculous in light of the Board of Pensions' fiduciary duty to investors. Tyson and Corbett then proceeded, independently of the UMC's general agencies, to launch the first socially responsible mutual fund in the US (Pax World Management LLC 2017). Balancing fiscal and social responsibilities through its investments would remain a perennial challenge in the UMC.⁷

⁷ According to a later resolution, "In the mid 1970s the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) began issuing official social-responsibility investment guidelines for general church investments" (UMC 1992b, 427–28). *The Book of Discipline* first included a paragraph on "Policies Relative to Socially Responsible Investments" by church agencies and institutions in 1988. General Conference issued "Guidelines for Initiating or Joining an Economic Boycott" in 1988. *The Book of Resolutions* has included a statement on "Investment Ethics" continuously since 1992 (UMC 1992b). Wespath launched the Equity Social Values Plus Fund (ESVPF) in December 2014 (2016a). The topic of economic advocacy in relation to Methodist environmental witness warrants additional research.

In 1972, the UMC General Conference adopted a new statement of Social Principles to replace the Social Creed and Moral Standards of its two predecessor denominations. The Social Principles, revisable every four years, became the primary expression of social witness, including environmental witness, for the UMC (Stephens 2016, 27–29). Organized around six main headings, the Social Principles document began with a section on “The Natural World,” declaring:

All creation is the Lord’s, and we are stewards of it. Air, water, soil, minerals, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God’s creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. Therefore, we repent of our devastation of the physical and nonhuman world. (UMC 1972b, para. 71)

This passage, reinforcing a Methodist viewpoint dating from 1956, viewed the natural world as not merely a resource for consumption but primarily a stewardship from God. Conservation was also a repeated theme in the subsection “Water, Air, Soil, Minerals, Plants” (UMC 1972b, para. 71.A). A separate subsection, “Population,” advocated for “international and national agencies . . . to produce a stable population and a balanced ecology” (UMC 1972b, para. 73.H). Additionally, a subsection under the “Economic Community” decried “the desecration of the environment in either production or consumption” (UMC 1972b, para. 74.D). These short declarations in the Social Principles represented significant environmental awareness and action throughout the UMC.

Tersely addressed in the Social Principles, this array of economic, political, and social realities impacting the environment took root in the structures of the denomination and further resolutions. The General Board of Church and Society staffed a Population Project of its Division of World Peace from 1969–1980, and in 1973, staff members of the General Board of Church and Society started a working group on energy and ecology, chaired by Jack Corbett, within the Washington Interreligious Staff Council (Hanson 2017). While not principally focused on the environment, the Council of Bishops contributed to the UMC’s growing environmental witness through a resolution, “Bishops’ Call for Peace and the Self-Development of Peoples,” which remained in effect for over twenty years. This call named seven “enemies of peace,” including population growth, which “in affluent societies . . . intensifies the ecological crisis” (UMC 1972a, 11). Thus, population, the environment, and peace were recognized as intertwined issues. Furthermore, the UMC’s 1972 study document on “Environmental Stewardship” suggested “that to limit voluntarily the number of offspring will help to promote a healthy environment” (UMC 1972c, 108). Stewardship meant restraint. This document also claimed it a misinterpretation to read “the Genesis command to exercise dominion over the earth” as a warrant to “exploit nature” (UMC 1972c, 106). Addressing the misinterpretation of

this passage in Genesis was a consistent and recurring concern in the UMC's environmental witness.⁸

Increasingly attuned to interrelated, global dynamics, Methodist environmental witness addressed environmental degradation on many fronts. The UMC's "Population Resolution" in 1976 identified the problem of human overpopulation as part of a much larger picture requiring the church's response:

Christians have no alternative to involvement in seeking solutions for the massive and complex set of problems which face the world today. All these issues are closely interrelated: hunger, poverty, denial of human rights, economic exploitation and overconsumption by the rich, technologies that are inadequate or inappropriate, depletion of resources, and rapid population growth. (UMC 1976d, 170)

While still depicting the earth primarily as a resource for human consumption, Methodists understood that human flourishing, population growth, war, and poverty were not separate considerations from "the sustaining environment" in which we live (UMC 1976d, 170). The UMC's 1976 statement on environmental stewardship (first presented as a study document [UMC 1972c]) spoke of a worldwide "ecological crisis" in which "pressures from rapidly burgeoning population and technological advances are contributing to environmental pollution and depletion of resources on an accelerating scale" (UMC 1976b, 74). In this statement, the UMC interrogated "institutional structures" inhibiting people "from living in harmony with their natural environment" (UMC 1976b, 75). This statement also identified negative effects of technology, distinguishing between "technological advances" and "genuine human progress" as it prioritized human rights over property rights, advocated for lifestyle changes in consumption, urged the reshaping of unjust institutional structures, opposed the military's use of resources and destruction of the environment, promoted "social justice for the poor and powerless," and supported international efforts by the United Nations (UMC 1976b, 74–76).

Methodist support for the UN was both principled and strategic. For example, in 1976, the UMC approved a resolution, "Law of the Sea," promoting the work of a UN conference to develop a treaty recognizing international waters as the "common heritage of humankind" as a means for valuing and conserving God's creation. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, the General Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries (now United Methodist Women) jointly funded the Law of the Sea Project in the UMC (Hanson 2017). The

⁸ Corrective interpretations of "dominion" in Genesis 1:28 included: "stewardship" (UMC 1980b, 89); "trusteeship" and "stewardship" (UMC 1984b, 333); "stewardship" and "ecological responsibility" (UMC 1992a, 65); and "stewardship responsibility" (UMC 2012, 441).

UN had developed this concept in 1970, but it had yet to be ratified as an international treaty. How would competing national interests avoid exploitation of the seas? “The best hope for global cooperation is in the United Nations,” declared the UMC (1976c, 127).

The UMC considered international cooperation essential for addressing an interrelated, complex set of problems. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when the United States experienced its second oil crisis in six years, it was clearer than ever to the UMC that global politics, particularly as it related to energy consumption, significantly impacted the environment and that any effort to address environmental stewardship must also address peace and justice.

4. Stewardship and *Shalom* (1980–1988)

In the 1980s, the UMC further developed its theology of environmental stewardship in light of its growing awareness of interrelated problems. Reorganizing, the General Board of Church and Society ended the Population Project and established the Department of Environmental Justice and Planetary Survival in 1980. This department’s first director, Luther Tyson, hired Jaydee Hanson as his assistant in 1981, and the name was shortened to the Department of Environmental Justice in 1984.⁹ Hanson shared this remembrance:

During the period 1980–1992, we worked to see that every annual conference (in the U.S.) had environmental justice committees. We managed to get 45 of the then 70+ annual conferences to have environmental justice committees. One of the conferences—the Troy Conference (Albany, New York area and Vermont)—had an environmental justice advocate named Bill McKibben, who is now famous as the head of 350.org. (2017)

Environmental justice was taking root throughout the UMC. George Ogle, Director of the Department of Economic Justice, also worked on issues related to the environment at this time, and from 1980–2003, this General Board supported “local ethnic toxic waste activists” through Ethnic Local Church Ministry grants (Hanson 2017). Thus, there was a growing awareness that environmental degradation followed patterns of racial inequality. General Conference resolutions during the 1980s reflected a growing commitment to the environment by integrating the ecumenical principles of a just, sustainable, and participatory society with discipleship, which,

⁹ Hanson served the General Board of Church and Society in several capacities of increasing responsibility during his tenure: Program Coordinator for Environmental Justice and Planetary Survival, 1981–1986; Program Director for Environmental Justice, 1986–1992; Assistant General Secretary for the Ministry of God’s Creation, 1992–1998; and Assistant General Secretary for Public Witness and Advocacy, 1998–2003 (Hanson 2017).

for Methodists, includes participation in God's vision of *shalom* for all of creation.

The UMC first expressed concern about what is now called "global climate change" in 1980.¹⁰ Through its "Energy Policy Statement," General Conference recognized the "large scale pollution" due to US reliance on burning coal, which "could seriously alter the environment by increasing the CO₂ content of the atmospheric envelope" (UMC 1980b, 91–92).¹¹ Thus, the UMC connected human energy use to detrimental climate change at a time when scientific findings were just beginning to point in this direction (NASA 2008). In this statement, the UMC advocated for responsible stewardship of creation in order to "more closely approximate the vision of the reign of God" (UMC 1980b, 88). In good Wesleyan fashion, the UMC understood eschatology—as is the case with salvation—to allow for human cooperation through the life of faith. The statement also named the human status as "simultaneously co-creatures with all creation, and . . . co-creators with God" (1980b, 89). Another 1980 resolution, "Agricultural and Rural Life Issues," linked salvation and environmental stewardship directly, referring to "stewardship of earth's resources" as a necessary expression of faith guided by "our personal and social salvation in Jesus Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit" (UMC 1980a, 18).

Building upon a previous study document (UMC 1976b, 86–91) the 1980 "Energy Policy Statement" offered two principles of energy policy—justice and sustainability (UMC 1980b, 90). The UMC was doubtlessly inspired by the vision of a "just, participatory, and sustainable society" developed through the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the 1970s but with slightly different emphases. The UMC cited Amos 5:24, Luke 4:18, and Isaiah 61:1–2 to describe "Biblical righteousness," grounding the UMC's priority of "meeting basic human needs" within the scriptural witness (1980b, 90). In the UMC statement, the term "justice" expressed concern for the poor and gave "priority to meeting basic human needs, such as air, water, food, clothing, and shelter" (1980b, 90). The WCC named "the opportunity to become human in freedom and responsibility" and focused on a just society in which relations, based on a common humanity, benefit all within a community (1979, 199). The UMC explained sustainability as the impact of depletion of natural resources and pollution of the environment on current and future generations. For example, human-induced increase in atmospheric CO₂ was considered a violation of the principle of sustainability because it threatened the viability of our descendants (UMC 1980b, 90–91). The WCC defined sustainability as "the appropriate relationship

¹⁰ The concern was addressed in other language at the time; the UMC did not use the phrase "global climate change" until 2004 (2004a, 86).

¹¹ This resolution is an elaboration and development of a statement on energy commended for study in 1976 (UMC 1976b, 86–91).

of human beings with their environment,” expressed in terms of life-giving practices characterized by just relationships between humans and “the whole ecosystem” (1979, 200; 203). The principles of justice and sustainability remained prominent in subsequent UMC statements, though Methodism was slower to connect its advocacy for the self-development of peoples, namely a participatory society, with its environmental witness.

After helping to found the Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches in 1983,¹² the UMC further developed the idea of environmental stewardship through multiple resolutions on interrelated topics. The 1984 resolution, “Environmental Stewardship,” offered “a theology of stewardship and the environment,” drawing an etymological connection through the Greek word *oikos* to join stewardship (*oikonomia*), economics, and ecology (UMC 1984b, 332–33). *Shalom*, “the complete and harmonious interrelatedness of all creation” as we “care for the whole,” was considered integral to stewardship: “how we bring all of the resources at our disposal into efficient use in our participation in the saving activity of God” (UMC 1984b, 334).¹³ Here, the UMC used the word participation in reference to co-operation in God’s activity in the world, a much different idea of “participatory” than that invoked by the WCC’s program (WCC 1979, 199). For the UMC, to participate was to exercise stewardship. “Stewardship, then, is to become involved wherever wholeness is lacking and to work in harmony with God’s saving activity to reconcile, to reunite, to heal, to make whole” (UMC 1984b, 334).¹⁴ Therefore, the UMC insisted, “the creation can be healed” through “new hope rooted in Christ” and “obedient living” (UMC 1984b, 334).

Cooperant, divine-human participation in a renewed creation thus characterized Methodist environmental witness. This healing work necessitated “responsible use of natural resources,” seeking “international and bilateral efforts” to address the interrelated impact of agriculture, technology, military, and other activities on the environment (UMC 1984b, 336–39). The “Environmental Stewardship” resolution also expressed advocacy for international efforts to address specific, long-term concerns about air quality, including “the depletion of the ozone layer, the heating

¹² The Eco-justice Working Group was essentially a merger of the Churches Acid Rain Taskforce and the Joint Strategies and Action Committee’s working group on responsible lifestyles (Hanson 2017). It operated under the National Council of Churches USA until 2013, when it became an independent entity, Creation Justice Ministries (2017).

¹³ Though it did not reference this resolution, the Council of Bishops invoked a similar understanding of *shalom* to introduce their 1986 foundation document on “the nuclear crisis and a just peace” (1986, 24–26).

¹⁴ With its focus on healing of creation, the UMC’s witness bore an uncanny resemblance to the Jewish concept *tikkun olam*, meaning “repair of the world,” though official denominational statements never made this connection. For a Methodist use of *tikkun olam* (though not in conversation with UMC environmental witness), see Moore 1998, 4.

of the atmosphere, and acid rain” (UMC 1984b, 337). Thus, the problem of anthropogenic climate change remained a pressing concern of the UMC as it promoted a vision for the healing and wholeness of all of creation.

In another 1984 resolution, “Common Heritage,” the UMC connected the issues of warfare, economic justice, and environmental stewardship. The UMC supported the international community’s efforts to expand the concept of “common heritage” to apply much more broadly, including not only international seas but also air, “genetic variability” (namely, biodiversity), Antarctica, the moon, and beyond (UMC 1984a, 311). The theological rationale for the UMC’s support of common heritage stood on the authority of God, the interdependence of creation, and humanity’s responsibility to God for the stewardship of creation (UMC 1984a, 311). The operating premise, “a just and equitable system of management” of the world’s resources, revealing a consumer mindset, albeit tempered by attention to the common good and sustainability (1984a, 310). The UMC declared the following principles: natural resources belong to all humanity; all people—including future generations—have the right to sufficient resources for their health and well-being, and God’s gift of creation should be used for “the good of all . . . not for warfare or economic oppression of others” (1984a, 312).

In this way, the UMC voiced concern for the common good, sustainability, economic justice, and the right to basic goods. The 1984 General Conference provided a connection between these principles and the exercise of stewardship in a separate resolution, “Foundation Statement for Christian Stewardship,” based on the sovereignty of God and participation in “Christ’s mission in the world” (UMC 1984c, 345). Stewardship, it stated, is a response to God’s love expressed in and through responsible care of “special trusts from God,” such as “this world with its tremendous resources,” for the “well-being of all people, giving them opportunity to develop their full potential” (UMC 1984c, 346–47). In yet another resolution, “Human Hunger,” General Conference named “rapid population growth” and “inadequate food supply” as “symptoms of structural poverty” and recognized that, combined with poverty, these factors could contribute to degradation of the environment (UMC 1984d, 370, 380). This hunger resolution also raised the “values of justice and shared power” in an effort to address these structural concerns (UMC 1984d, 370). Here, the UMC’s witness resonated with the WCC’s concept of a participatory society.

The UMC’s environmental witness burgeoned in 1988 with nine new resolutions approved by General Conference, including statements regarding environmental racism, nuclear safety, indoor air pollution, and other topics. Building on a string of previous resolutions and initiatives on rural life, the General Board of Society worked closely with the United Methodist Rural Fellowship on environmental issues, jointly holding hearings across the US in 1987 and drafting a new policy statement emphasizing sustainability (Hanson 2017). This extensive resolution, “US Agriculture and

Rural Communities in Crisis,” harkened back to historical Methodist concern for rural life as it addressed a wide array of ethical issues involving people and the land they inhabit (UMC 1988, 70). Methodism connected “the farm crisis”—including issues of bankruptcy, the loss of family farms, racial and ethnic minorities in farming, and migrant workers—and “the crisis of rural community,” which included small town services, unemployment, and poverty, to “the ecological crisis in rural areas”—including mining, the need for soil conservation, use of pesticides and herbicides, and loss of genetic diversity (UMC 1988, 70–84). In response, the church called for numerous actions by its membership, local communities, and state and federal governments (UMC 1988, 87–94). This resolution, which intentionally focused on the church’s pastoral role, concluded by challenging the church “to look at agriculture in a global context” and to adopt a more prophetic role in addressing interrelated problems based on principles of a just, participatory, and sustainable society (UMC 1988, 95–97). The UMC’s consistent and growing witness on global climate change embraced this prophetic challenge through calls to conversion and discipleship.

5. Conversion and Discipleship (1988–2008)

Within eight years of the UMC’s first mention of anthropogenic climate change, both the UN and the WCC had launched major initiatives. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created jointly by the World Meteorological Organization and the UN Environment Program in 1988 and delivered its first assessment report in 1990 (IPCC n.d.). Concurrently, the WCC cosponsored an event on global warming in Washington, D.C., in October 1988, marking the launch of its Climate Change Program in the midst of the “Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation” process begun in Vancouver in 1983 (WCC 2008, 3–4). This event spurred US churches to work on climate change. The UMC sent delegations to all of the UN meetings leading up to the Rio Earth Summit (Hanson 2017). United Methodists participated in joint meetings with the Canadian Council of Churches on Climate Change, held meetings at the UN, and organized a major meeting with the European Council of Churches in Thun, Switzerland in January 1989 (Hanson 2017). The WCC continued its work through a “World Convocation on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” held in Seoul, Korea in March 1990 which the next UMC General Conference affirmed (WCC 1990; WCC 2008; UMC 1992c). In large part due to the findings of the IPCC, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was negotiated at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, June 1992, attended by a joint delegation of United Methodists from the Council of Bishops, the General Board of Church and Society, and United Methodist Women. These events and international agreements

bolstered the UMC's resolve on climate change, leading to repeated calls to conversion and discipleship.

The UMC's 1992 resolution, "Environmental Justice for a Sustainable Future," addressed "global warming" in the context of sustainable development, drawing on a definition of sustainability from the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development (UMC 1992a, 62–64). This resolution recognized social, economic, and environmental aspects, naming human population growth, consumption of fossil fuels, and global warming as significant factors "destroying the global ecological balance" (UMC 1992a, 62–64). This resolution offered a concise affirmation of interrelatedness: "We believe that at the center of the vision of *shalom* is the integration of environmental, economic, and social justice" (UMC 1992a, 63). Thus, "justice for all of creation" and "conversion to a sustainable society" characterized "ecological responsibility as a key element of discipleship" (UMC 1992a, 64–65). This resolution called the Council of Bishops, general agencies, and local congregations of the UMC to specific actions, for example: requiring each general agency to evaluate its environmental practices and report back to General Conference, developing curricula and programs on ecological responsibility, adding "global environmental issues" to the training of all general church missionaries, and collecting statistics on "use of energy, water, paper, and recycling" in local churches and general agencies (UMC 1992a, 65–66). Not least, this resolution called for the General Board of Pensions to develop investment guidelines based on "care for creation" (UMC 1992a, 66).

The UMC continued to voice a theology of sustainability in 1996. The resolution, "God's Vision of Abundant Living," presented "a theology of 'enough'" to counter rampant consumerism and exploitation of the environment (UMC 1996d, 454). The UMC again expressed an eschatological vision characterized by God's healing of creation (compare 1996d, 454 with 1984b, 334). This resolution offered a vision of sustainability in which "abundant living" means "providing not only for the needs of this generation, but also for generations to come" (UMC 1996d, 456). General Conference presented this description of a "just lifestyle" as a way of addressing "the global crisis" due to "our impact on creation" (UMC 1996d, 456). In this light, it is remarkable that the UMC did not draw any connection between this resolution focused on "consumerism that exploits natural resources" and its ongoing concern about human overpopulation. Nevertheless, the resolution demanded response: "We have a choice: We can be sustainers, or exploiters, of creation" (UMC 1996d, 456). It also called for "individual conversion to a simplified lifestyle" (UMC 1996d, 458). The emphasis on conversion, mentioned three times, echoed a previous resolution on environmental justice and sustainability (UMC 1992a, 65). The emphasis on lifestyle changes was reinforced through a concurrent change in the Social Principles (UMC 1996a, para. 64). Through this 1996 resolution, General Conference linked the idea of abundant living to "the Spirit of

sacrificial discipleship” and the common good; it also called on local congregations, general agencies, and the Council of Bishops to promote this vision through Bible studies, assessments, modeling, Schools of Christian Mission, and other educational efforts (UMC 1996d, 456–58). The UMC also urged study of the global economy and the environment (1996c). Through another 1996 resolution, “The Church and God’s Creation,” the UMC endorsed the work of the National Inter-Religious Coalition for the Environment and the WCC’s consultation on climate change, voiced support for the UN’s annual Environmental Sabbath, and designated “one Sunday each year as a Festival of God’s Creation” (UMC 1996b, 79–80).¹⁵ This resolution also urged stewardship through simplified lifestyles, reduced consumption, and recycling efforts (UMC 1996b, 80).

As the UMC’s multifaceted witness on the environment continued to proliferate in the new millennium, it formulated statements more directly addressing the issue of climate change. In 2000, General Conference amended its “Energy Policy Statement,” using the terms “climate change” and “global warming” explicitly (UMC 2000a, 73–74). Another resolution in 2000 endorsed the “precautionary principle” in international environmental law, acting on a preponderance of the evidence rather than waiting for “scientific certainty” before regulating environmental threats, such as “global climate instability” (UMC 2000b). In 2004, General Conference expressed support for the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, continued voicing its concern about global warming, and first employed the term “global climate change” (UMC 2004a and 2004b). Reportedly, the 2008 General Conference established a denominational Creation Care/Climate Change Task Force (United Methodist Women 2012, 135). The 2008 “Resolution on Global Warming,” citing basic facts and definitions from US government agencies and the IPCC’s 2007 report, called for study and action among the UMC’s membership but offered no theological interpretation (UMC 2008c).

The UMC adopted its most succinct statement on climate change in 2008, a subsection of the Social Principles titled “Global Climate Stewardship.” This subsection of the Social Principles, cited here in full, provided little more in terms of theology:

We acknowledge the global impact of humanity’s disregard for God’s creation. Rampant industrialization and the corresponding increase in the use of fossil fuels have led to a buildup of pollutants in the earth’s atmosphere. These “greenhouse gas” emissions threaten to alter dramatically the earth’s climate for generations to come with severe environmental, economic, and social implications. The adverse impacts of global climate change disproportionately affect individuals and nations least responsible for the emissions. We therefore support efforts of all governments to require mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and call on individuals, congregations,

¹⁵ In 2004, the UMC designated the Sunday closest to Earth Day for this observance.

businesses, industries, and communities to reduce their emissions. (UMC 2008a, para. 160.D)

This concise statement expressed concern about the combined environmental, economic, and social impact of global climate change and its disproportionate effect on poorer persons and nations as well as future generations. It called for response at all levels of society: individual, congregational, corporate, communal, and governmental. These themes—sustainability, justice, responsibility, and interconnectedness—are consistent with prior Methodist resolutions. Despite its title, this subsection of the Social Principles did not discuss stewardship, nor did it pick up on themes of participation, conversion, discipleship, or God’s vision of healing for creation previously articulated in Methodist environmental witness.

6. Environmental Holiness (2009–present)

On November 3, 2009 the Council of Bishops issued *God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action*, consisting of a foundation document and pastoral letter (Council of Bishops 2009a and 2009b). The 2004 General Conference had mandated the Council of Bishops to develop this document for the UMC intended to update and replace the Council’s 1986 study, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace* (which did not address the environment as such). The newer document also shared significant topical and theological commonalities with UMC 1972a and drew on two motifs from the 1980 resolution “Energy Policy Statement”: “image of God” and “hope in Christ” (UMC 1980b, 89–90). A website offered a six-session study guide and resources for promoting the document in local contexts. Addressed to “the Church and people of good will,” this foundation document provided theological insight into how United Methodist leaders understand human responsibility for God’s creation, encapsulated in the newly coined term “environmental holiness.”¹⁶

As the subtitle suggested, this document was both a call to hope and a call to action. The self-described intent was “to engage, inspire and rouse” its audience “to a deeper spiritual consciousness as stewards and caretakers of creation” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 2). Rather than provide specific policy proposals, the Council of Bishops encouraged their readers “to discern and implement their own response, given their particular context” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 2). The foundation document addressed “three interrelated threats” to God’s creation: “pandemic poverty and disease,” “environmental degradation and climate change,” and “a world awash with

¹⁶ While the Council of Bishops employed a writer to develop and craft the foundation document, pastoral letter, and study guide, the final product was claimed on behalf of the Council and was not attributed to the writer. Therefore, I refer to the Council of Bishops as the author.

weapons and violence” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 1). In the accompanying pastoral letter, the bishops pledged to weigh every evaluation and decision according to the question, “Does this contribute to God’s renewal of creation?” (Council of Bishops 2009b, 5). The pastoral letter included nine specific pledges, including ecumenical, interreligious, and international cooperation, public policy advocacy, and measuring the carbon footprint of denominational offices. The foundation document also concluded with several commitments. Inviting the reader to see and participate in God’s vision already happening around us, the document offered confession, admitting complicity in the state of the world and a failure to act faithfully. Stories of United Methodists from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States illustrated the urgency and the hope.¹⁷

This foundation document adopted a Wesleyan theological perspective and presumed an attitude of ecumenical, interreligious, and international cooperation. The bishops encouraged “all people of faith and good will” to “order our lives toward God’s holy vision,” “practice social and environmental holiness,” “learn from one another and practice prayerful self-examination,” and to live out a “responsible hope,” characterized by “a synergy of grace and human responsibility” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 20–22). Thus, a cooperant divine-human interaction characterizes Christian hope in which Methodists exercise environmental responsibility through holy living in light of their understanding of God’s vision for creation. Consistent with previous Methodist environmental witness, “the vision of Shalom” was understood to apply to the entire cosmos. Citing John Wesley, Isaiah, Romans, and Colossians, the bishops claimed the “promise of salvation” by “the Great Physician” to pertain “to the whole of creation” and understood salvation “holistically, as complete holiness and happiness” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 11).

Perhaps due to its breadth, this document addressed climate change and the environment only briefly. The one substantive paragraph on the topic of climate change stressed the disproportionate impact that climate change has on impoverished communities around the world, heightening disparities in disease and nutrition; here, the bishops drew upon the WCC’s 2008 “Minute on Global Warming and Climate Change” and the 2007 report of the IPCC (Council of Bishops 2009a, 12). The document also recognized the disproportionate impact on women and children during “natural disasters exacerbated by climate change” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 15).

¹⁷ Primary sources of wisdom included the Bible, John Wesley’s writings, and the lived experiences of United Methodists around the world. The document cited stories of crisis and hope in specific communities and ministry contexts based on listening sessions conducted by the bishops. The document also specifically cited documents of the UN and WCC, including, for example, the WCC’s drafting of the “Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 4).

In addition to global warming, the bishops named consumerism and population growth as distinct but related problems negatively impacting the environment. Citing the Social Principles, the bishops acknowledged that the US and some other countries held disproportionately large shares of economic, military, and political power and that a small portion of the global population consumed an inordinate amount of the world's resources, including fresh water (Council of Bishops 2009a, 15). Nevertheless, the bishops expressed hope. "Read[ing] the signs of the times," the bishops joined with others who "see clearly that God is doing a new thing, and that God is inviting the human family to participate in transformation" (Council of Bishops 2009a, 3–4).¹⁸

Theologically, the bishops emphasized the themes of creation, grace, hope, image of God, and human responsibility. The bishops represented the three-fold image of God in humanity through the images of open eyes, hearts, and hands, images meant to emphasize human participation. "God is already at work in the world. We must only *open our eyes* to see God's vision, *open our hearts* to receive God's grace, and *open our hands* to do the work God calls us to do" (Council of Bishops 2009a, 9). This encapsulation communicated distinctive Wesleyan emphases. Preventively, God's grace awaits response. Religious experience and personal transformation prompt good (responsible) works as a spiritual practice. Human agency is foregrounded. The "natural image of God" includes reason, will, and freedom—rightly perceived, understood, and acted upon (Council of Bishops 2009a, 9). With open eyes, we rightly "see God's vision for the whole of creation" and "see the relationships between" the trio of threats to creation (Council of Bishops 2009a, 10, 12). The "moral image of God" enables humans to receive and reflect God's grace in the world in a continuing process of "spiritual respiration" (Council of Bishops 2009a, 10). With open hearts, we confess our complicity in the degradation of creation, offer prayer, and respond to God's grace by seeking "partnership with and participation in the divine Spirit" (Council of Bishops 2009a, 17). The "political image of God" enables human responsibility to care for creation: "With open hands, we do the work to which God calls us" (Council of Bishops 2009a, 17). These actions include attentiveness to creation, offering compassionate respect to

¹⁸ The emphasis on cooperative participation in God's ongoing work, mentioned five times in this document, was consistent with prior General Conference resolutions on the environment, as cited above, though the bishops' document made no reference to this history of Methodist environmental witness, which was almost entirely overlooked: the Social Principles section "The Natural World" was cited only once, and not one of this document's fifty-two endnotes referred to a United Methodist resolution on the environment. As a participant in one of the scholarly consultations leading to the development of this document, I share the blame. At the time, I was also unaware of the depth of history of Methodist environmental witness, as documented in the present article.

God and neighbor, changing our own behavior, and challenging those who do harm (Council of Bishops 2009a, 17–18).

Together, these images propelled a “call to hope and action” intended to send Methodists out into the world to participate in God’s work of transforming social structures and changing lives—a practice the bishops coined “environmental holiness” (Council of Bishops 2009a, 20–21). The phrase was used rhetorically, as if its similarity to the much-used phrase in Methodism, “social holiness,” was sufficient to imbue it with meaning.¹⁹

7. Creation Care and Climate Change (2016–present)

The General Board of Church and Society prepared two major petitions addressing environmental stewardship and climate change for the 2016 General Conference. In these documents, the Board supplemented the language of stewardship with the language of care as it further developed a theology of environmental witness for the UMC. Both of these petitions were adopted by the 2016 General Conference.

The resolution, “Caring for Creation: A Call to Stewardship and Justice,” provided a concise, updated vision of environmental stewardship, replacing five previous resolutions (UMC 2016b). This statement reprised themes developed since the establishment of the UMC in 1968, providing an important context for understanding this church’s more specific witness on climate stewardship. Organized into four sections—call, tradition and witness, vision, and commitment—the document began with covenantal language framing “our call to stewardship and justice” in relation to creation, quoting Psalms 24 and 148 as well as Genesis 1:28 and 9:9 (UMC 2016b, 67). Stewardship meant being a caretaker, and the phrase “creation care” supplanted the older term “environmental stewardship” (UMC 2016b, 68). God’s “vision of shalom” was characterized as “wholeness and harmony” for all of creation, with which God is in covenant and which Christ came to redeem, and to which humanity is completely interrelated (UMC 2016b, 68). Following this description of prelapsarian and eschatological harmony was an acknowledgement of human sinfulness in the present.

Conversion to “a new way of being” characterized this church’s response to sin. Ecological crises, extreme poverty, and inequality of opportunity were portrayed as the consequences of human failure to care for creation, illustrated by unchecked consumption and unsustainable development. In

¹⁹ The term “stewardship” did not appear in this foundation document, although “steward(s)” appeared four times; the phrase “creation care” occurred once. Thus, given its novelty and prominence, the phrase “environmental holiness” replaced the term “environmental stewardship” in the bishops’ parlance. For an extensive discussion of John Wesley’s use of the phrase “social holiness,” see Thompson 2011.

response, “called to a ministry of reconciliation between God, humankind, and creation, we ask God’s forgiveness and commit ourselves to a new way of being that integrates environmental, economic, and social justice” (UMC 2016b, 68). Here, the interrelatedness of environmental and social concerns characterized “a new lifestyle rooted in stewardship and justice” as “we . . . are called to participate in God’s healing of creation” (UMC 2016b, 68). Thus, the principles of sustainability, justice, and participation were all invoked in the context of creation care. The resolution also drew upon two of John Wesley’s sermons to show how his “eschatological vision for the deliverance of all creation” led to early Methodist environmental action (UMC 2016b, 68–69).

The vision section addressed four main topics: air, water, land, and natural resources. Water and air were each considered a basic human right. The document addressed climate change, sustainability, preservation, conservation, common heritage, the inherent value of the earth, the needs of human development, governmental policies and standards, warfare and economic oppression, technology, and “God’s plan of wholeness for all creation” (UMC 2016b, 71). The document concluded with a series of commitments, citing the UMC’s complicity and responsibility including: modeling “social and environmental holiness” (referencing the 2009 Council of Bishops’ foundation document, discussed below), “emphasiz[ing] ecological responsibility as a key element of discipleship,” participating in the United Nation’s Commission on Sustainable Development, developing investment guidelines, and creating educational initiatives on climate justice (UMC 2016b, 71–72).

The 2016 General Conference also approved the resolution, “Climate Change and the Church’s Response,” updating and replacing UMC 2008c. Building on a history of sustained witness on the issue, this resolution presented “climate justice” as encompassing environmental, economic, and spiritual concerns, echoing the interconnectedness expressed in the Social Principles and previous resolutions on environmental issues (UMC 2016c, 81–82). A concise statement, this resolution began with creation, confessed human sinfulness in contributing to its destruction, recognized Christ’s redeeming work for all of creation, and affirmed that “God’s vision for the world is of peace and wholeness” (UMC 2016c, 81). Biblically, this resolution spanned the image of God in the Genesis 1:27 creation account to the eschatological vision of Revelation 21:1–8. Offering the “injustice of climate change” as an example of human sin “for which the strong economies of this world carry the vast responsibility, this resolution focused on principles of justice and sustainability as it advocated for “climate stewardship” as an aspect of “care for creation” (UMC 2016c, 81–82). Acting on this responsibility requires conversion. Thus, the 2016 General Conference stated, “Recognizing our complicity and responsibility [for climate disruption], we seek to chart a new path rooted in economic and ecological justice . . . we

cannot hope to transform the world until we change our way of being in it” (UMC 2016c, 82). As in previous resolutions, General Conference considered the call “to live and serve for the good of creation” integral to discipleship (UMC 2016c, 81–82).

Pointedly, the UMC expressed little tolerance for viewpoints that deny humanity’s impact on climate change or the need to act. Speaking about “economies that have benefited from fossil-fuel development,” this resolution boldly proclaimed a counter-witness to so-called climate skeptics:

Leaders in some developed nations continue to debate, from places of comfort and privilege, the “reality” of a changing climate in order to perpetuate their polluting ways. As the church we witness firsthand the consequences of climate disruption in our communities and in the lives of those Christ calls us to be with in ministry. (UMC 2016c, 81–82)

Here the UMC called to account people who choose to ignore that “human-induced climate change” is a real and present danger to the environment (UMC 2016c, 81). Thus, this resolution called the church and its members to many actions: explore lifestyle changes, support impacted communities, embrace climate stewardship throughout the institutional structures of the UMC, act locally, and advocate for national policies and international agreements (UMC 2016c, 82). In its call to action, the resolution also urged United Methodists to study the Council of Bishops’ 2009 pastoral letter and foundation document.

8. Implications for United Methodism

The turn to “environmental holiness” characterizes much about the history of Methodist environmental witness: innovative, intuitive, responsive, expansive, fragmented, and pregnant with possible meaning. While the Council of Bishops did not explain the meaning of the concept, the phrase “environmental holiness” innovated on a long tradition of faith-led engagement with the world’s problems. From John Wesley to the Social Gospel to the “overwhelming problem” of climate change in the Anthropocene, Methodists have developed creative ways to express the life of faith in service to God and neighbor as they have strived to join in God’s work of redeeming creation. Thus, the expanded awareness of the context of holiness to the whole of creation is as intuitive as it is under-developed. Even as United Methodism has much work to do to create a coherent and developed theological witness, drawing together its history and breadth of statements on the environment, the cumulative effect of this history of engagement has been significant.

Methodist environmental witness has informed the consciences of generations of United Methodists, spurring them to responsible climate stewardship in their own lives and communities. Here, I name only a few

examples of recent initiatives within the UMC: continual advocacy by the UMC's General Board of Church and Society, which employs a Director of Economic and Environmental Justice and which sent a team to the 2015 UN climate change conference in Paris; education and advocacy by United Methodist Women, which has an Office of Economic and Environmental Justice and produced a mission study on climate justice (United Methodist Women n.d.; 2016); support for "Caretakers of God's Creation," a missionary project organizing grass-roots efforts by United Methodists (Caretakers of God's Creation n.d.); and commissioning "Earthkeepers" to pursue environmental projects in their communities through the General Board of Global Ministries (Andreolli and Thompson 2016). A recent round of the ongoing United Methodist–Roman Catholic Dialogue focused on the Eucharist and ecology (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops n.d.). Additionally, United Methodists in Europe, Asia, and Africa have created and participated in multiple environmental initiatives.²⁰ United Methodists were also very active during the COP21 climate change talks held in Paris in 2015 (Scott 2015).

The combined influence of the history of Methodist witness is far-reaching within the UMC, holding tremendous sway over church investments, for example, even as it is contested in the details of implementation and practice. Church law invokes the Social Principles to guide "sustainable and responsible investments" by any and all United Methodist general boards, agencies, and institutions, specifically calling for investments that "preserve the natural world, including mitigating the effects of climate change" (UMC 2016a, para. 717). In 2016, General Conference amended its investment guidelines to emphasize environmental stewardship, particularly through investments that "mitigate and/or adapt to climate change" (UMC 2016d, 456).

The impact of these statements is seen most clearly in the denominational agency, Wespath Benefits and Investments (formerly the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits). Wespath takes an active role in advocating for climate stewardship by leveraging its investment holdings and endorsing public policy statements to influence corporate policies and behaviors (Wespath n.d.). "Wespath's Strategic Approach to Climate Change" involves a threefold framework—avoid, engage, and invest—in order to support "climate-resilient markets" (Wespath 2016b; compare threefold framework to UMC 1992b). In 2015, this United Methodist agency was ranked tenth worldwide and third in the US among the world's 500 largest investors in terms of managing climate risk (Wespath 2016a). Yet, there remains disagreement within the UMC over divestment from fossil fuels.

²⁰ For example, United Methodists in the Philippines organized the "Climate Justice Now!" movement in 2015 (Mangiduyos 2015). The United Methodist Church in Liberia set up a Climate Change Task Force in December 2015 (Swen 2015). United Methodists in Europe have also provided leadership in ecumenical efforts to address the environment, for example Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen in Österreich (2003) and European Methodist Council (n.d.).

Wespath “believes that fossil fuel divestment is not effective in continuing our work of promoting financial and environmental stewardship” (2016a). General Conference rejected petitions for divestment in 2016, but United Methodists continue to debate whether Wespath’s strategic investments in fossil fuels are an adequate witness in light of General Conference’s resolutions on the environment and climate change (Hanson 2017).

Divestment is but one arena in which Methodists continue to contest and engage each other, spurring a more faithful response to creation care and climate stewardship. As revealed in official church statements since the 1930s, Methodist environmental witness encompasses concern for rural farms; conservation of resources—particularly water and air; procreation and human population; consumption patterns—especially energy usage; pollution, including greenhouse gases; environmental racism; global trade and investment; forestry; political collaboration, self-development of peoples, and the common good; poverty and meeting basic human needs, such as food, healthcare, and shelter. From a Methodist perspective, environmental stewardship requires recognition of complex, structural problems requiring attention to economic, political, and social dynamics in addition to the inherent value of God’s created world. Furthermore, Methodists believe that to live faithfully in relation to the natural world, of which humans are a part, they must develop attunement to the virtues of justice, sustainability, and participation. To practice environmental holiness, Methodism requires conversion to a life of discipleship that understands a common calling to participate in God’s redemption, reconciliation, and healing of all creation in order to realize *shalom*.

9. Implications for Religious Ethics

The history of Methodist environmental witness provides an important resource for responding to global climate change in a highly polarized and politicized social context, addressing many aspects of the issue we face today. For example, Methodism’s long-standing recognition of science as a valid and important source for moral inquiry naturally leads to taking seriously the current global scientific consensus about anthropogenic climate change. To reject scientific findings would necessitate rewriting much of Methodist witness and its history. Methodism’s ambivalence about technology provides both caution and hope for technological solutions to moral problems. To embrace technology unquestioningly would be counter to what Methodists have learned over many generations. Concern for the poor and oppressed, including attention to racial and colonialist practices of consumption and pollution, sheds light on those persons, peoples, and nations that cannot afford to avoid the calamitous results of a warming atmosphere. To ignore the poor would be a rejection of central features of Methodist identity. Furthermore, attention to both structural

and individual causes and actions requires a form of holiness that encompasses the WCC and UN as well as the individual's choices on a daily basis. Holding the systemic and personal aspects in tension is an essential characteristic of Methodist social witness.

United Methodist environmental witness serves as but one example of a creative, faithful response by a faith community learning to grapple with new ethical challenges. Methodism is not unique in its witness on climate change and provides no privileged perspective or insight. Yet this history of engagement exhibits a willingness to engage the problems of the world, as “overwhelming” as they may be, in order to offer direction in confusing times. Methodism offers but one, fine-grained example of what Jenkins referred to as an “incompetent” moral community²¹ responsively addressing the real effects of climate change, thereby “sustaining possibilities of acting justly and responsibly” as Christians and world citizens (2013, 20). The ongoing, improvised efforts of Methodists to address environmental stewardship over many decades attests to a practice of engagement characterizing Methodist forms of discipleship. As a denomination increasingly global in its membership, the UMC has further opportunity for theological learning, perhaps able to develop what Jenkins called a “tactical response to climate change [that] can drive theological learning and sustain the possibility of Christianity as a meaningful practice of life” (2013, 55–56).

Methodism's history of legislation and practice reveals this community's collective and dynamic theological discourse as it works through problems for which it has no ready answer. Though Jenkins claimed “the least interesting part of a community's response is often what its authorized spokespersons say their beliefs mean for a problem,” this article has sought to encourage religious ethicists to take interest in the statements of denominational bodies (Jenkins 2013, 105). The primary, “authorized” voice of the UMC is General Conference, a democratic body of elected representatives functioning within a tradition of social witness. Because Methodism's practices and pronouncements interact in surprising and irregular ways, the function of official denominational statements is multivalent—as summary of belief, goad to action, and arena for contestation—as this religious community works out its theology *in via*. Methodism's practice of denominational, environmental witness proves not only “interesting,” but also instructive for religious ethicists.²²

²¹ Jenkins uses the word “incompetent” in a non-disparaging way. He finds hope precisely in the fact that communities are willing to improvise concrete responses to unprecedented moral problems despite having no prior competence to do so. Thus, the descriptor “incompetent” is meant to be read in the context of Jenkins's larger argument that “religious ethics should begin from incompetence and uncertainty” (2013, 18).

²² For a discussion of the legislative activities of General Conference as an ecclesial practice, see Stephens 2016, 58–69.

Deeper engagement with the UMC, other denominations, and diverse, identifiable faith communities can provide religious ethicists with theological insights, concrete practices, and ethical tools for guiding us into the future. For religious ethicists seeking to address the overwhelming problem of climate change, sustained, environmental witness such as that shown within Methodism are necessary partners in any good future we might care to imagine.

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