

Wesleyan-Holiness Study Project  
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Many years ago while attending a theological conference on Holiness at Asbury, I recall hearing a statement made around the lunch table that, “the Holiness movement has lost its ability to renew itself and the Church and has become merely a repository of historical information.” I bristled but did not speak, since I was still a student and overwhelmed at the capacity of the scholars around me. I did not agree, nor do I today.

Upon beginning a term as president of the NAE, I told a press conference that evangelicals are being called to reintegrate social holiness and personal holiness; our task is the transformation of hearts and of culture; we are not so much to define the perimeter as to define the center from which our identity proceeds; the block walls of division must give way to picket fences in a new day of missional growth toward impacting culture. A few years later I stated to the executive committee that evangelicals were becoming more Wesleyan, they just didn’t realize it.

Perhaps these comments sound defiant or even arrogant. They are not intended to be. They may not be precise, surgical statements, but at closer inspection of the moves of God across the Church they remain accurate. In recent years we have seen broad discussions seeking truth beyond the “solas.” The old tactic of isolation and takeover in cultural politics by precept has been declared ineffective. The defense of the rational side of the gospel has given way to a rise in the relational, personal dimensions of truth exemplified in a new generation of pastors and upstart churches for whom doctrinal purity is second to the relational nature of faith in Christian community. Does this mean there is equivocation at the point of the Christocentrism of the faith? Certainly not in those churches.

The concepts of integrating social and personal transformation are no longer merely the extreme rhetoric of warring councils and denominations. The old battle lines have become blurred and groups who historically would never have conceded to one or the other are talking similar language and calling for authentic engagement. Throughout denominations and new networks of churches alike there is interest in centered set theology that is generous. Allowances for grace unlimited in context are growing; and a call for the convertive piety described by Don Dayton is coming from unexpected pulpits. In truth, the Church is agreeing that “we believe in right practice along with right belief.” in the words of Donald Thorsen. These are in great measure indicative of the influence of the Holiness message and call to the Church today.

Before us is a new door requiring a compelling, guiding vision that is theologically rooted and outwardly directed on transformation that is not sectarian, not isolationist, not enclavish, not dogmatic, but integrative, transformational, apostolic, and missional. That can come from the Holiness call. It requires new terms, new constructs, new voices, new alliances, but old, very old principles. It cannot involve fighting artificial enemies along shadow lines that puff up our institutional existence at another’s expense. This is a discussion and a call regarding the identity and mission of the Church for the next generation and beyond. This is a time for those with the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition to generously give their heritage, and confidently rise to clear articulation in perfect harmony with the call of God upon the Church for the coming decades.

The future of the Church will be much more defined by missional and theological streams of thought rather than institutional and structural lines. Organizations will morph into networks. Contracts will become partnerships. Negotiated statements will become

relationships. In this dynamic and messy environment the clear voice of God's call to Holiness can serve in unprecedented ways for unity and direction.

To that end, the Wesleyan Holiness Study Project (WHSP) was begun in Spring of 2004 after nearly two years of work bringing the initial groups together in commitment to the project. In a providential convergence of my own vision with the conviction and expertise of David Bundy, and the interest of Donald Dayton, the concept of the project was hatched. The initial meeting of the WHSP on May 10-11, 2004 in southern California was represented by 28 scholars/leaders from various denominations in the Holiness tradition. Academic exploration by the group is to the end of serving the mission of the Church. Hence the commitment of denominations has secured the partnership of those churches with academicians in achieving the outcomes.

Commitments have been made by:

- Board of General Superintendents – Church of the Nazarene
- Board of Bishops – Free Methodist Church
- Council of Bishops – Church of God in Christ
- National Commander – Salvation Army
- President – International Church of the Foursquare Gospel
- Executive Director – Church of God Ministries
- Board of General Superintendents – Wesleyan Church
- Bishop – Shield of Faith
- Moderator – Brethren in Christ
- General Superintendent – International Pentecostal Holiness Church

While others that represent a broader diversity of the Holiness tradition are in process of engaging, these are the groups who are engaged and have captured the vision.

The WHSP is not intended to be an institutionally centered project. The desire is to work across denominational lines with theological compatibility in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition. It is intended to provide ecclesiastical support for a common issue, not simply relegate the matter to an academic effort. It is the denominations mentioned, and others, that have most represented the influence of the Wesleyan/Holiness movement. Those denominations can once again assert their interest in and focus on a re-articulation of the Holiness impact on the Church. The fastest growing segments of the Church worldwide have roots in this tradition and my hope is that these denominations will come together with the recognition of our collective stewardship of this unique message that has so affected the Church and will increasingly impact the future of the Church.

Many other groups are looking for clear understanding of the Holiness message. This includes mainline protestant, as well as upstart groups like Vineyard and Calvary Chapel. We have a leadership responsibility to provide better articulation of this message, its influence on the history of the Church and more importantly its impact on shaping the future of the Church's global mission.

In the commitment of the various ecclesial leaders is the synergy not only of compatibility in a common heritage, but unity in a future mission. Further, by engaging the churches in forming the WHSP, the dynamic force is centered in the Church, not the Academy. Each denomination has committed funds as well as scholar/leaders for the duration of the anticipated three year project.

Outcomes of the Project will be varied. Specifically, the plan is for publications that will capture the consensual wisdom of the groups. Academic publications may be useful for teaching and reference, while popular publications can serve to raise the consciousness of laity and communicate clearly to the wider Church. Beyond these specific outcomes, confidence in the relevancy of the message of Holiness as well as strength in its unifying force that transcends institutional lines will result. Most importantly, we pray that a renewal in the passion of our pastors and people in preaching and living a thoughtful life of Holiness will be the greatest outcome to the glory of God.