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‘It’s Okay to Say We’re Born Again’

[Daniel Silliman in San José, Costa Rica](#)

Global Methodists embrace evangelical identity but seek to emphasize distinctive doctrine of sanctification.



Global Methodists sang worship songs and Wesleyan hymns in Costa Rica at the first General Conference.

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Courtesy of the Global Methodist Church

Nowhere on its website or in its founding documents does the new Global Methodist Church call itself *evangelical*.

Perhaps the term is too controversial, too divisive and political.

Or perhaps the Methodists are just out of practice.

“You know, as Methodists, it’s okay to say we’re born again,” said Asbury Theological Seminary professor Luther Oconer, preaching to the more than 900 people gathered in San José, Costa Rica, last week for the denomination’s first General Conference.

“Tell the person next to you, ‘I’m born again.’”

Around 900 people turned and said, “I’m born again,” laughing at themselves as they did.

The convening General Conference looked and sounded evangelical, with charismatic tinges. There was talk about evangelism, missions, the Great Commission, discipleship, and revival. People spoke unselfconsciously about the presence of the Holy Spirit, words from the Lord, what God is doing among them right now, and their love for Jesus. They read aloud from Scripture, taking the words as personal promises. Delegates raised their hands, singing “Oceans” and other contemporary worship songs, and lifted their voices with camp-meeting fervor when the band struck up “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”

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Oconer, who is originally from the Philippines and described himself as a third-generation Global South minister, ended his sermon with an altar call. He asked people to come forward to give themselves and their new denomination to Christ, committing to the biblical vision of a New Testament church.

“Let us be a church of Pentecost first,” he said. “We must be a church of Pentecost first. We are a people born of the Spirit, first and foremost.”

People streamed forward, kneeling, praying, crying, singing. Steve Beard, editor in chief of *Good News*, described this as “old-time Methodism,” a religious movement unconcerned with the propriety of mid-century mainline Protestantism, a movement of

field preaching, circuit riders, conversion experiences, and testimonies about freedom from sin.

In the midst of resurgent evangelicalism, however, some Global Methodists are worried about preserving Wesleyan distinctives. They expressed concern that the denomination might slide into a kind of generic evangelicalism.

The religious landscape is increasingly dominated, after all, by nondenominational churches that reject the importance of distinctives. Even churches that have affiliations often downplay their differences. Many evangelical churches feel about the same, whether they're Southern Baptist or Evangelical Free, Independent Christian or Christian and Missionary Alliance. They sing the same songs, talk about the same Christian celebrities, listen to similar sermons, and practice mostly indistinguishable liturgies.

Roughly half the congregations that left the United Methodist Church have not joined the Global Methodists. Some are waiting to see what happens. They have said they might join, depending on the shape the new denomination takes, its authority structure, and the guarantees put in place to prevent the repetition of their bad experiences. But others are just done with denominations—liberal or conservative, mainline or evangelical. Hanging on to Methodist connections isn't that important to them.

Mark Tooley, president of The Institute on Religion and Democracy and a lifelong Methodist, [said](#) the new denomination is going “against the headwinds of current American religious preferences.” As they embrace an evangelical style, Global Methodists will be forced to answer the question, “Why should Christians be specifically Wesleyan?”

In Costa Rica—as delegates passed a constitution, established the process for nominating bishops, and dealt with the legislative business of founding a new denomination—they also worked informally to articulate a Wesleyan *charism*, the unique spiritual gift that the Global Methodists could offer to evangelicals and the whole church.

“I think what we have to offer as a movement is the ‘heart strangely warmed,’ which is hearts changed, sanctification,” said Emily Allen, an Asbury seminary student and a delegate to the General Conference. “There’s a line I love from the Methodist communion liturgy: freed for joyful obedience. That is such a joyful thing! We need to have our hearts transformed.”

Jeff Kelly, pastor of the largest Global Methodist church in Nebraska, said he sensed the Holy Spirit changing hearts during the legislative sessions in Costa Rica.

“I’m seeing an injection of grace—that Wesleyan gift of grace,” he said.

It made him think that the new denomination might put an emphasis on the doctrine of sanctification, Kelly said. That idea could be reclaimed as the key Wesleyan distinctive.

“I think John Wesley called it the Methodist *depositum*,” he said. “After you’re saved, you’re not done. God is still bringing change.”

Seedbed, a publisher specializing in Wesleyan literature, currently lists two books on sanctification among its best-selling titles.

The publisher also released a hymnal specifically for the convening General Conference. Editor Sterling Allen, a Global Methodist minister at a church in Houston, called it “a curated renewal of Charles Wesley’s most beloved hymns” that he hoped would serve as “a catalyst for repentance and renewal, a celebration of the joyous proclamation of the gospel, and an outpouring of the Spirit.” It includes 58 hymns on sanctifying grace, including “Spirit of Faith, Come Down,” “What is Our Calling’s Glorious Hope,” “Lord, Fill Me with a Humble Fear,” and “O Joyful Sound of Gospel Grace!”

Seedbed is also reprinting Methodist texts as pocket-sized tracts. One is John Wesley’s *On Perfection*. Another is *The Character of a Methodist*, where the founder of the movement writes that “Methodists are continually offering their whole selves to God ... holding back nothing but giving all to increase the glory of God in the world.”

On the final day of the General Convention, the Global Methodists voted to change their mission statement to put more of an emphasis on sanctification. The original mission statement, put in place by transitional leadership, said the church’s goal was “to make disciples of Jesus Christ who worship passionately, love extravagantly, and witness boldly.”

David Watson, New Testament professor at United Theological Seminary and lead editor at *Firebrand*, said it seemed too generic to him. That mission statement would work for any evangelical megachurch—but wasn’t specifically Wesleyan.

With input from Paul Lawlor, a pastor in Memphis, and Jason E. Vickers, a professor at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor, Watson proposed an alternative. The new mission statement said, “The Global Methodist Church exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ and spread scriptural holiness across the globe.”

It passed overwhelmingly.

“What I’ve tried to do is keep us theologically grounded so we don’t lapse into mere pragmatism but stay Methodist,” Watson said. “What’s at stake is our identity as Methodists. ... For us, the heart of it all is sanctification.”