

**DENOM-625: The United Methodist General Conference,
May 5–15, 2020
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Barry E. Bryant, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of United Methodist and Wesleyan Studies
Shaffer Hall, Room 733
Office Phone: (847) 866-3955
barry.bryant@garrett.edu**

Course Description

This course is a travel seminar being offered in conjunction with the 2020 United Methodist General Conference, May 5–15, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The purpose of the seminar is to critically and creatively analyze the events of General Conference in such a way that facilitates theological reflection with an imagination that leads to a reimagined international Methodism that is post-colonial and inclusive of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Prerequisite

Because it is important to understand United Methodist polity; the function of General Conference to the denomination; the role of bishops, clergy, and laity, the power they wield and the parts they play in General Conference; the ways that the Central Conferences relate to Jurisdictional Conferences, students must have completed or be concurrently enrolled in DENOM 604 United Methodist Studies: 20th Century to the Present.

Course Thesis

General Conference is the legislative body of The United Methodist Church and its decisions create and constitute the polity of the denomination. In addition to the other issues and items that will be discussed, the central matter to be acted upon are the recommendations and judicial council rulings coming from the special session of the General Conference, February 23–26, 2019, regarding the “Traditional Plan,” one of the plans proposed by the Commission on the Way Forward. Some have anticipated that this General Conference will bring the death of connectionalism as we know it, and they anticipate, as the result, 3,400 of the 7,500 congregations might leave The United Methodist Church by May 2021. (In any case, The UMC has not faced a crisis of this magnitude since the schism over slavery in 1844.) There are two problems that continue to challenge The United Methodist Church: how to contextualize theology within a connectional polity and how to maintain a connection to the United Methodists in parts of Africa, Central Europe, and the Pacific regions, without the relationship being neo-colonial in nature. Both of these have bearing on the “Traditional Plan” and the issue of LGBTQ inclusion.

The course will analyze General Conference as a dramatic narrative that consists namely of a direct narration (what is being seen or heard), indirect narration (the activity and action seen on and off the floor of General Conference), and the contrapuntal narration (narrative that is neither seen nor heard by either direct or indirect narration).

In practical terms, “contrapuntal reading” as I have called it means reading a text with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England...the point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded. (Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66–67).

As much as anything else the construct and control of the narrative is what creates the power struggles at General Conference. By applying narrative criticism, one can utilize rhetorical criticism in general and narrative criticism more specifically— an analytic tool also utilized by New Testament scholars. A continuation of narrative criticism and a contrapuntal reading of the drama will better enable a critical, creative, and nuanced theological reflection on General Conference.

Learning Outcomes

As a result of this seminar, students will be able to:

1. describe the major issues that are discussed and what is at stake in this particular General Conference;
2. apply the concept of “contrapuntal reading” to an analysis of General Conference; [assignment 4]
3. use the tools of rhetorical and narrative criticism to interpret General Conference as the construction of a narrative [assignment 3];
4. reflect theologically on General Conference using “the Holy Spirit as power” as a hermeneutic lens;
5. use journaling as an exercise in contrapuntal reading of an event or context and as a resource for theological reflection; and
6. describe their own social location as it relates to others attending General Conference; the ways in which they may be oppressed as well as an oppressor; and the ways in which they use power in leadership.

Required Texts and Resources

- Cooke, Bernard. *Power and the Spirit of God: Toward an Experience-Based Pneumatology*. Oxford: OUP, 2004. \$26.94. ISBN: 0195382641. This book is also available at ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=665432>. Select chapters will be posted on Moodle.
- Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc, 2018. \$54.84 paperback/\$36.70 Kindle. ISBN: 1478634898. Select chapters will be posted on Moodle.
- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. \$23.28. ISBN: 9780300056693. This is also available at ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=3420907>. This is the writer who influenced E. Said. Select chapters will be assigned.

- Warner, Lacey. *The Method of Our Mission*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014. \$22.51. ISBN: 9781426767173
- Walton, Heather. *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, SCM Press: London, 2014. \$34.38. ISBN: 0334051851. Also available at ProQuest Ebook Central, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=3306240>. Select chapters will be posted on Moodle.
- The following will also be found on Moodle. Other material may be added.
- Bryant, Barry. "Cutting Edges: 'Upheavals of Thought' and Remembering General Conference," *Aware Magazine*, April (2019): 4-5.
- Chowdhry, Geeta. "Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading- Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations." *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 36, no. 1 (2007):101-16.
- Flam, Helena. "Anger in Repressive Regimes: A Footnote to Domination and the Arts of Resistance by James Scott." *European Journal of Social Theory* 7, no. 2 (2004): 171-88.
- Graham, Elaine, Walton, Heather, and Ward, Frances. *Theological Reflection: Sources*. London: SCM Press, 2007. Chapter 2, "'Speaking in Parables': Constructive Narrative Theology" and Chapter 4, "'Writing the Body of Christ': Corporate Theological Reflection"
- Mortimer, Mildred P. "Edward Said and Assia Djebar- A Contrapuntal Reading." *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 3 (2005):53-67.
- Scott, James C. "The Uses of Disorder and 'Charisma,'" in, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*, Princeton University Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=1040747>
- What is "Contrapuntal"? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4O6lc_yml2U
- Wilson, George M. "Edward Said on Contrapuntal Reading." *Philosophy and Literature* 18, no. 2 (1994): 265-73.

United Methodist Resources on the Internet

- The United Methodist Church- www.umc.org
 The Council of Bishops- www.umc.org/who-we-are/council-of-bishops

United Methodist General Boards, Agencies, and Commissions

- General Board of Church and Society- www.umc-gbcs.org
 General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns- www.gccuic-umc.org
 General Commission on Religion and Race- www.gcorr.org
 General Council on Finance and Administration- www.gcfa.org
 General Board of Higher Education and Ministry- www.gbhem.org
 General Board of Discipleship- www.gbod.org
 General Commission on United Methodist Men- www.gcumm.org
 General Board of Global Ministries- www.umcmmission.org
 General Board of Pension and Health Benefits, now
 Wespath Benefits and Investments- www.wespath.org
 General Commission on the Status and Role of Women- www.gcsr.org
 General Commission on Archives and History- www.gcah.org

United Methodist Communications- www.umcom.org
General Board of Church and Society- www.umc-gbcs.org
General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns-
www.gccuic-umc.org
United Methodist Young People- www.umcyoungpeople.org
United Methodist Publishing House- www.umph.org

United Methodist Caucus Groups

UM Queer Clergy Caucus- www.umqcc.org
Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR)-
National Hmong Caucus of the United Methodist Church- www.hmongumc.org
Metodistas Asociados Representando la Causa de los Hispano-Americanos (MARCHA)-
www.marchaumc.org
National Federation of Asian American United Methodists- www.nfaaum.org
Native American International Caucus- <http://www.naicumc.com/>
Pacific Islander National Caucus of United Methodists-
www.umcdevelopmentcenter.org/ministry-opportunities/pacific-islander-national-caucus-of-united-methodists

Supplemental Reading

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016. Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016. The Kindle version is preferred. **ASIN:** B01NCNW6FM. \$12.99. It is also online for free.

Burkholder, Anne L., Thomas W. Elliott, and Thomas E. Frank. *Quick and easy guide to United Methodist polity*. Nashville, TN: Wesley's Foundery Books General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2018.

Kilde, Jeanne Halgreen. *When Church Became Theater: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

McLeary, Paul. *Structure, Governance and The United Methodist Church*. Xlibris Corporation, 2011.

Richey, Russell. *The Methodist Conference in America: A History*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996.

Richey, Russell, Thomas Frank. *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Assignments

1. Students are required to attend General Conference, May 5–15, Minneapolis, MN. There will be at least three meetings prior to GC to develop the critical tools necessary for their analysis of GC; a baptismal remembrance service; a daily debriefing during GC; and, one meeting following GC to process the GC. More information regarding this will be forthcoming once class enrolment has been established.
2. Students will be required to read the Walton text and the Bryant article and keep a journal tracking their thoughts leading up to, during, and after General Conference. The journal should start April 1 and conclude May 17. This will not be turned in so the “honor

system” will be at work here. However, in the end you will be expected to write a reflection paper on how your journaling served as an example of a contrapuntal reading. In other words, was your experience leading up to and during GC expressed or not expressed there? (600 words, +- 10%)

3. Using the Foss text as a guide, select and critique 2 artifacts from General Conference. What was the setting? Who was the narrator? What was the event? What were the mechanics of the narrative? What were the major themes of the narrative? What type of narrative was and what rhetorical devices were used? What part did they play in the overall theater of General Conference? How was the issue of power communicated? Foss, pp. 330–36 will be especially helpful with this. (1300 words total, +- 10%).
4. Using the idea of contrapuntal reading, write an analysis of a session of General Conference regarding what was being unsaid and its significance, particularly in regard to the Central Conferences. In light of your social location and relationship to members of the Central Conferences are there times when you may be oppressed? Are there times when you may be the oppressor? (800 words +- 10%)
5. Using the works of Cooke and Warner, engage in a robust theological reflection and analyze the General Conference regarding “the Holy Spirit as power.” How was the power of the Holy Spirit manifested during General Conference? How do you know it was the Holy Spirit? How is that experienced in the “mission” of Methodism? Where might the Holy Spirit be at work in and beyond General Conference, bishops, clergy, and laity; in Jurisdictional and Central Conferences? What does this say about the future of The United Methodist Church? (3000 words, +- 10%).

Disabilities Policies and Procedures

Garrett-Evangelical is committed to providing a quality theological education and will provide reasonable accommodations for documented conditions. Students requiring specific assistance such as classroom changes, alternative ways of note-taking, different classroom procedures, or alternative testing formats are urged to request the appropriate accommodations from the director of academic studies/registrar. The director of academic studies/registrar can advise students on other support services and resources, for example, diagnostic testing. Students must complete a request for accommodations using the form available from the director of academic studies/registrar or through MyGETS documenting their condition(s) through appropriate verification methods.

Grading Scale

A+ 97-100	4.0	C+ 77-79	2.33
A 93-96	4.0	C 73-76	2.0
A- 90-92	3.67	C- 70-72	1.67
B+ 87-89	3.33	D+ 67-69	1.33
B 83-86	3.0	D 63-66	1.0
B- 80-82	2.67	D- 60-62	.67