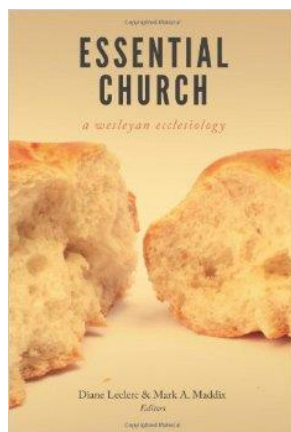


**Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix, (eds), *The Essential Church: A Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2014), 254 pp.**

This is the third book in a series of Wesleyan-focused resources edited by Diane Leclerc and Mark Maddix. The first two are *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm* (2011) and *Pastoral Practices: A Wesleyan Paradigm* (2013). This latest volume, *The Essential Church: A Wesleyan Ecclesiology*, seeks to address a perceived lack of adequate ecclesiology in the Church of the Nazarene. This narrowed focus is perhaps both the strength and the weakness of this book; in seeking to describe an ecclesiology for one denomination, it may have lost its appeal for others of the Wesleyan tradition.



The book begins with a short introduction by the editors followed by nineteen short chapters on different topics by different authors, each providing springboards rather than comprehensive investigations. Footnoting and 'Suggestions for Further Reading' provide a framework for extension reading. Although the authors are Nazarene scholars, most have pastoral experience, which helps ground their approach in the local congregation. This is reflected in the 'Questions for Discussion' at the end of each chapter. The book is skilfully organized into three sections and articles within the sections are coherently connected together. Throughout, the emphasis is on community and relationships rather than just individual growth and development.

The first section, 'The Church at its Core,' explores the nature and purpose of the church in relationship to the triune God. Severson asserts that without a strong ecclesiology we become individualistic. Spaulding and Spaulding emphasise the relational purpose of the church, reflecting the relational aspects of the triune God. Like God, the church should not be self-serving and self-maintaining, but outwardly focused. Rather than looking at individual growth, Mann asserts that we need to focus on God working in us as the body of Christ. According to Leclerc the Holy Spirit primarily relates to the church as a whole creating, convicting of sin, regenerating, sanctifying, and revealing God. Crutcher looks at tradition in the church as expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed – *oneholy, catholic and apostolic* church. These aspects demarcate the authentic church that is united in its focus as the body of Christ. Brower Latz's chapter on relating to postmodern society emphasises the importance of the Church becoming a Christ-formed community.

Section two is titled 'The Church's Essential Functions.' Barker asserts that by inviting the untameable Holy Spirit to be present in worship we individually and corporately become and reflect our identity in Christ. Peterson's chapter on sacraments affirms the centrality of Baptism and Eucharist in John Wesley's theology and laments their lack of importance in Nazarene church life. Fitzgerald compares Dulles' herald model of the church with John Wesley's ecclesiology and the ecclesiology of the Church of the Nazarene. He asserts that the ecclesiology of the Church of the Nazarene places higher value on preaching than Wesley and in so doing devalues sacramental aspects. Two chapters consider the value of Wesley's small groups (societies, class meetings, and bands) in forming and transforming people. Maddix focuses on the educational role of groups in promoting a whole of life catechesis—continual growth in holiness of heart and life. Blevins considers how accountability in small groups transforms not just the individual but the church as a whole. Both small groups and corporate worship become means of grace to transform people into holy love. Three authors examine the external functions of the church in the world. LaCelle-Peterson outlines the Biblical basis for egalitarian liberation (of women, people with disabilities, of different ethnic groups, and slaves). Riley extends the egalitarian liberation theme to the concept of shalom (wholeness, compassion and righteousness) that foreshadow life in the world to come, shalom that is communal

rather than individual. This leads to Basic's chapter on the church as a witnessing community, asserting that "we must become persons of the message before we deliver the message" (171).

The final section, 'The Church as Organized Organism,' examines the structural organization of the church, starting with an examination of Paul's concept of the Body of Christ by Thompson. Laird's discussion of the priesthood of all believers reminds us that "ministry is meant for amateurs" (191). This chapter affirms the ministry of lay people alongside clergy, with even clergy never ceasing to be apprentices. In the following chapter Peterson asserts that although all are ordained (priesthood of all believers), some are ordained for leadership. Ordination is a gift to the church rather than to the individual. Crosno considers the role of pastoral leader in ordering congregational life, asserting that formation of holy character in the pastor is more important than the latest techniques and methods. This reiterates discussion in earlier chapters on the church community being formed in lifestyle before it can witness in words. The final chapter by Rowell discusses the function of Nazarene superintendents as 'overseers,' and the danger of overseers being seen as managers rather than being life-giving to pastors and teachers and the church community.

Both the strength and weakness of this volume is its attempt to articulate a Wesleyan approach to church. The strength is in using John Wesley's teachings as a model for ecclesiology. The weakness is that some chapters are so specific as to be unreadable to those outside the Church of the Nazarene, through constant reference to the Nazarene Articles of Religion and use of terminology that is denominationally specific (particularly 'ordained elder' and 'superintendent'). That said, if one is prepared to gloss over references to Nazarene polity, this book has much to recommend it. Thompson's articulation of the body of Christ has relevance to other churches of the Wesleyan tradition, as does Blevins' discussion on the church as a formational fellowship. Crutcher's description of the classical marks of the church and Riley's chapter on compassion and justice hold relevance beyond the Wesleyan tradition.

Some topics are encouraging for those with no formal theological education, for example Basic's very readable chapter 'The Church as a Witnessing Community,' Laird's 'The Priesthood of All Believers,' and Peterson's contribution on Ordination. Others are more academic, particularly in the first section, which may discourage laity from delving further. This volume may be most valuable as an introduction to ecclesiology for theological students.

Leclerc and Maddix's admirable attempt in *Essential Church* to articulate a Wesleyan ecclesiology, through the focus of perceived need in one denomination, is an enormous task, and its success in shaping thought in the Church of the Nazarene may not be known for some years to come. However this volume may provide a springboard for those in other denominations to consider and celebrate a distinctive Wesleyan way to 'doing church.'

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