

Welcome

TO A CONGREGATION OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

By Ronn Kerr

Welcome to this United Methodist congregation! It is one of the nearly 40,000 similar congregations spread across the United States which, together, make up The United Methodist Church.

United Methodism is a uniquely diverse denomination and it is almost impossible to characterize either a “typical” congregation or an “average” United Methodist. Our congregations range from large metropolitan congregations of several thousand members to small country churches of 20 members, from suburban middle-class congregations to inner-city store-front churches. Our worship styles vary from “high church” liturgical formats to free flowing celebrational styles and our theological emphases range from conservative to liberal, and every shade in between.

We are the most ethnically and socially diverse and the most evenly distributed denomination in America. With only minor exception, every town of at least 2,000 people in America has one or more United Methodist congregations.

While this diversity sometimes gives us identity problems, it remains one of our greatest strengths. Whatever your needs and interests, there is a United Methodist congregation for you. No matter what our surface differences may be, we are all members of God’s family. We are brothers and sisters who love the same

God and our differences genuinely allow us to be more creative and flexible in our response to God's call. As a means of further introduction to The United Methodist Church, the remainder of this booklet is divided into a question-answer format focused on the things we think you might like to know about the people called United Methodists.

OUR HISTORY

How did Methodism begin?

In the early 18th Century, the Church of England had become formal, prosperous, intellectual, and "stuffy." The intellectual enlightenment had swept England and Scotland leaving a stable monarchy, church, and society. After two centuries of religious turmoil, any kind of enthusiasm was looked on with suspicion.

However, within all this stability, a new movement of experiential religion was stirring, and a couple of young Anglican priests, John and Charles Wesley, were about to change the face of Protestantism.

The Wesley brothers were born into a large Anglican ministerial family in Epworth, England. John entered Christ Church College, Oxford (Charles followed a few years later) and both were ordained Anglican priests. John was chosen a fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, and the two brothers, along with George Whitefield and a few colleagues, formed a small club through which they systematically organized their religious activities, including study, fasting, prayer, and ministry to others. Fellow professors and students poked fun at the group, calling them the Holy Club and "Methodists," a term which was to remain with them throughout their lives.

In 1735, John and Charles came to Georgia

in the American Colonies as missionaries. Their high-church Anglican formalism did not go over well on the colonial frontier and in less than two years they were both back in England, disgraced, disgusted, and struggling with questions about faith.

About this time, religious societies were blossoming all over London. They were private groups which were organized for prayer, Bible study, services to the poor, and preaching.

On May 24, 1738, at an Anglican society meeting on Aldersgate Street, John Wesley had a transforming experience in which his intellectual belief was strengthened by a heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ. About the experience, Wesley wrote, "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

This "Aldersgate Experience" was really the beginning of the Methodist movement. John and Charles began preaching in as many of the churches and societies of London as would tolerate their new-found enthusiasm. In 1739, George Whitefield encouraged John to begin preaching outdoors to low-income people who felt uncomfortable in the Anglican churches. Wesley had phenomenal success at field-preaching and he continued it almost daily for the next fifty years.

Wesley was a prolific writer and preacher, but it was probably his work as an organizer that had the greatest immediate impact on the church. In 1739, he founded a Methodist society in Bristol. He established another in an old foundry in London the next year. Soon, there were Methodist societies all across England and Wales, each of which was subdivided into classes of about twelve members.

Although Wesley never separated from the Church of England and greatly revered the concept of priestly ordination by properly consecrated bishops, he began appointing lay preachers in 1742 and organizing them into traveling circuits and an annual conference. These lay preachers visited the Methodist societies, preached wherever they could, and organized respondents in societies. Wesley himself traveled hundreds of thousands of miles by horseback, preaching from one to six times every day, writing nearly 400 volumes, and setting an unprecedented example of industry for his traveling preachers. These preachers, however, were prohibited from administering the sacraments and had to turn to the Anglican establishment for Baptism and the frequent participation in the Lord's Supper urged by Wesley. Soon after John Wesley's death in 1791, a separatist Methodist Church was born in England.

How did The United Methodist Church begin?

The United Methodist Church is the largest of more than a hundred denominations around the world that trace their heritage to John Wesley.

Although Methodism began in England, it flourished more in America than anywhere else in the world. By the time of Wesley's death, there were as many Methodists in the new United States as there were in England.

After the War for Independence severed the American Methodists from access to the sacraments, Wesley ordained Thomas Coke as Superintendent and sent him to America along with a doctrinal statement and an order of worship for the American Methodists.

At Christmas time, 1784, 60 of the 81 American Methodist preachers gathered at Baltimore, Maryland for what we now call the Christmas Conference. In a democratic spirit,

they adopted Wesley's *Order of Worship* (although it was too formal and was never really used) and a form of *Discipline* based on Wesley's English administrative style. They added an article (in support of the United States government) to the *24 Articles of religion* sent by Wesley and consecrated Francis Asbury as their first elected bishop.

The new Methodist Episcopal Church grew rapidly and the Methodist circuit-riding preachers became the primary religious presence on the expanding American frontier. In 1968, The Methodist Church, a direct descendent of the first Methodist denomination, united with the Evangelical United Brethren Church, a descendent of German-speaking American Methodists, to form The United Methodist Church.

OUR BELIEFS

What do United Methodists affirm about basic Christian beliefs?

We believe that each person is called to work out his or her own theology based on the four basic authorities of Scripture, religious experience, church tradition, and human reason. Each of these poles of authority must be balanced by the others so that, for example, something experienced must fall within the boundaries of human reason, church tradition, and, most important of all, Scripture, which we revere as the ultimate authority.

Because of this fluid understanding of theology and doctrine, it is impossible to say precisely what any individual United Methodist believes about any single doctrine. However, some general statements can certainly be made.

God. The Article of Religion on God can be summarized as, "There is one true God, who has all power, wisdom, and goodness. God made and preserves all things. Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit are one God, the Trinity.” Wesley affirmed a God of infinite wisdom, power, and love whose boundless love and tender mercy are for all persons.

God is a reality that defies definition. To communicate God is to communicate the incommunicable and the many writings about God ultimately list only attributes and not definitions. In the final analysis, if we could define God, we would necessarily limit God who would, therefore, no longer be God. God can be the subject of academic reflection but God can only be fully known through fully experiencing God’s mystery.

Grace. God loves every person and continually seeks to forgive our failure to be obedient. This constant love and forgiveness is given freely. There is nothing we can do either to deserve or to earn it. This activity of God—God’s constant loving and forgiving of every person—is God’s grace.

Christ. A God of total love and forgiveness is a difficult if not impossible concept for us to understand. Therefore, the great mystery we call God was fully revealed to us in the form of a man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Both the words and actions of Jesus, as recorded in the Scriptures, help us to better understand the loving nature of God. Even his ultimate act of obedience—giving up his life—is a means of illustrating the extent of God’s desire to reconcile all persons to God’s unending love. Finally, God raised Christ from the dead and the ultimate power of God was illustrated for all time.

Justification by Faith. The sense of the ninth Article of Religion of The United Methodist Church is that “We are justified, or pardoned, not by good works but by faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” This means that when we fully have faith that Christ’s death opened the way to wholeness and love, we are justified. Justification is being brought into a

proper relationship with God and neighbor, fully understanding God's purpose for us, being freed from our obsession and self-interest, released from guilt for our inability to be obedient to God, and rescued from our anxiety about meaninglessness and death.

The Holy Spirit. God continues to be revealed to us today in many different ways, most of which are identified through experience rather than knowledge. Both the experienced presence of God in our lives and the assumed activity of God in history are identified as the Holy Spirit. God is a mystery and when this mystery touches our lives in some way, we identify it as the activity of the Holy Spirit. This experiential, mystical, revelation of God has always been a characteristic affirmation of Methodists.

What beliefs are uniquely Methodist?

Three basic doctrines can be lifted up as unique contributions of Methodists to the whole of Christian theology: *Universal Redemption, Assurance, and Sanctification.*

Universal Redemption. Although the Methodist understanding of how salvation happens has never varied much from that of other Protestants, we have historically been staunch believers that salvation is available to *every* human being. Especially in its early years, Methodism was in conflict with the predominant Protestant concept that Christ died only for a select group of persons who had been preordained for salvation by God. This doctrine of Universal Redemption, once touted only by a Methodist minority, is now accepted by most other Christians.

Assurance. One of the more controversial doctrines of United Methodism is the idea that God makes God's love, forgiveness, and salvation known to us through an inner experience of

the Holy Spirit. Although most United Methodists will admit that the doctrine of Assurance is easily abused and frequently misunderstood, it remains a prominent concept. Through the Holy Spirit, God causes an inner experience to take place through which we can know for certain that we have been saved and can say with Wesley, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that God had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Sanctification and Christian Perfection. Probably the best known doctrine of United Methodism is our emphasis on the pursuit of "holiness" and the possibility of achieving final Christlike "perfection" in this life. Sanctification is the process of becoming perfectly loving, taking on the character of God, growing to be Christlike. We move toward Christian Perfection or "entire sanctification" through the intensification of personal holiness, through our involvement in Christ's mission in the world, and through regular participation in worship and the sacrament of Holy Communion. Even though the accomplishment of Christian Perfection is extremely rare, the belief that it is achievable is of critical importance.

Which sacraments do you recognize?

We celebrate the two sacraments ordained by Jesus Christ, *Baptism* and *Holy Communion*, and we attach a significant degree of liturgical and mystical importance to them. However, we also believe that a variety of other activities such as confirmation, ordination, marriage, teaching, preaching, social service, and others are of a sacred nature and worthy of a nearly sacramental emphasis.

How and when do you Baptize?

In concert with the mainstream of Christians around the world, we Baptize infants (as well as older youth and adults) and require their parents and the congregations to take vows to live their lives so that they will be examples which will help lead their children to choose Jesus Christ. The parents and the rest of the congregation pledge to raise the children under the ministry and guidance of the church until they accept the gift of salvation themselves and, through confirmation of their own profession of faith in Jesus Christ, they become full and responsible church members.

At around 12 years old, most United Methodist children attend a pastor's Confirmation Class for several weeks after which they are confirmed as full members of the church. In the historic Confirmation ceremony, the young people ratify the vows made by their parents at their Baptism and are initiated into full church membership. In short, the Baptism which was begun in faith by their parents is completed in faith by the children when they reaffirm the vows themselves and have those vows Confirmed by the laying-on-of-hands by the pastor or bishop.

United Methodists may select any of the three historic modes of Baptism: immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. However, nearly all United Methodist Baptisms are by sprinkling with the three-part blessing, "in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

How and when do you celebrate Holy Communion?

We are historically a sacramental denomination. Our founder, John Wesley, taught that Holy Communion was one of the means by which we receive God's grace and that every Christian should take Holy Communion frequently. Today, the most common pattern is the

celebration of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of every month plus special Holy Days such as Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Christmas Eve, etc. However, the pattern varies all the way from quarterly Communion to weekly Communion in different congregations.

Although United Methodists encourage variety in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the most common pattern is using a prepared liturgy which reflects patterns and practices which have been followed with some consistency since the First Century. We believe the priestly act of consecrating the bread and juice is to be done by an ordained minister and, in most congregations, the people come forward and kneel to receive the elements from the minister.

Very important to us is the belief that Christ's table is open to everyone who is willing to repent of their sins, to live in love and charity with their neighbors, and to follow the commandments of God. We do not restrict the Lord's Supper only to members or even only to United Methodists. *Everyone* is invited to Christ's table. (Some United Methodist parents choose to follow the historic practice of withholding Holy Communion from their children until after they have been Confirmed while others bring their young children to the table.)

Do you use music and instruments in worship?

Music has always played a very important role in our worship and fellowship. In fact, the Wesley brothers who began the Methodist movement in 18th Century England were prolific hymn writers. Charles Wesley wrote more than 6,000 hymns, many of which are still being used in nearly every Christian denomination. Virtually every United Methodist worship service involves congregational singing as well as a wide variety of choral and instrumental music.

Do United Methodists emphasize

evangelism or social action?

Both. United Methodism has always been characterized by its balance between spiritual concerns and social concerns, between the pursuit of personal holiness and the confrontation of social evils, and between *proclaiming God's love* in evangelistic outreach and *demonstrating God's love* in social action. In fact, this balance between evangelism and social concern is one of the significant characteristics of United Methodism.

Even in the earliest days of Methodism in England, the movement was characterized by its balance of evangelistic fervor and confrontational social action. John Wesley was the leading evangelist of his time. He was the primary leader of the Evangelical Revival and was renowned for his emphasis on prayer and the pursuit of personal holiness. Yet, he was also famous for his militant opposition to the evils of child labor, the slave traffic, and strong drink.

It is unfortunate that some Christians today emphasize personal evangelism at the expense of social action or *vice versa*. We believe that either of these emphases without the other fails to be fully Christian.

Do United Methodists take stands on specific moral issues?

Yes. The United Methodist Church has a long history of concern for social justice. Its members have often taken forthright positions on controversial issues involving Christian principles. Early Methodists opposed slavery, liquor traffic, gambling, industrial exploitation, war, and the cruel treatment of prisoners.

Today, The United Methodist Church maintains a *Statement of Social Principles* with definitive stances on a wide range of issues.

These stances are hammered out every four years by the General Conference and published in *The Book of Discipline*.

In addition to the lengthy *Statement of Social Principles*, United Methodists have a *Social Creed* for affirmation and celebration of our active and aggressive social consciousness:

- We believe in God, Creator of the world; and in Jesus Christ the Redeemer of creation. We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we acknowledge God's gifts, and we repent of our sins in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends.
- We affirm the natural world as God's handiwork and dedicate ourselves to its preservation, enhancement, and faithful use by humankind.
- We joyfully receive, for ourselves and others, the blessings of community, sexuality, marriage, and the family.
- We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children, youth, young adults and those with handicapping conditions; to improvement of the quality of life; and to the rights and dignity of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.
- We believe in the right and duty of persons to work for the good of themselves and others, and in the protection of their welfare in so doing; in the rights to property as a trust from God, collective bargaining and responsible consumption; and in the elimination of economic and social distress.
- We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world and to the rule of justice and law among nations.
- We believe in the present and final triumph of God's Word in human affairs, and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world. *Amen.*

Do United Methodists cooperate with other Christians?

The United Methodist Church has always been a leader in Christian cooperative ventures and ecumenical organizations such as national cooperative evangelism activities, the National Council of Churches, the Consultation on Church Union, the American Bible Society, the World Council of Churches, and the World Methodist Council. In fact, it is common to find a plurality of United Methodists staffing many nondenominational and interdenominational organizations. In the last several decades, United Methodists have been particularly active in supporting the kinds of ministries in which the mission of Christ is best served through interdenominational efforts.

OUR STRUCTURE

How is The United Methodist Church structured nationally?

Our national structure is somewhat like state and federal governments in which the executive, legislative, and judicial branches serve to balance one another.

We have bishops which serve an executive function, conferences of clergy and laity which serve a legislative function, and a national court which serves the judicial function. In addition, like governments, we also have a large and sometimes cumbersome bureaucracy which carries out many of the ongoing functions of the Church such as administration, publishing, communications, resource development, and advocacy.

The Episcopacy. United Methodist bishops are elected for life from the ranks of the ordained ministry and each bishop serves as

spiritual leader and administrative officer over his or her assigned area. All of the bishops periodically function as a group in the Council of Bishops where they plan and direct the general program of the church. Bishops preside at all conferences.

The Conferences. The United Methodist Church balances the executive branch of its government, the Episcopacy, with a representative body, the *General Conference*. Every four years, this primary lawmaking body of the church meets with complete legislative power amended only by five restrictive rules which protect the powers of the Episcopacy and the doctrinal statements of the church. The General Conference is composed of an equal number of lay and clergy delegates representing every United Methodist Annual Conference.

In addition to the General Conference, five *Jurisdictional Conferences* meet quadrennially to direct the church programs within their boundaries, to elect and place bishops, and to set Annual Conference boundaries.

Each local congregation is related to the national church structure through its own *Annual Conference*. At least one lay and one ministerial delegate represent each local church (or circuit) at the Annual Conference where overall planning and directing of the activities in that area takes place.

The United Methodist Church functions as a legal entity with a written book of law and judicial authority. *The Book of Discipline* contains the constitution of the church, doctrinal statements, general rules, social principles and detailed bylaws which regulate the operation of The United Methodist Church from the responsibilities of a bishop to the organization of a local congregation. A nine-person *Judicial Council* comprised of both laypersons and ministers serves as the court of ultimate appeal on interpretation of *The Book of Discipline*.

United Methodists are sometimes accused of

believing more in the rightness of our structure than in the rightness of our doctrine and there is some truth to these accusations. Certainly, the balance of Episcopal authority and Conference power has allowed The United Methodist Church to remain both strong and flexible in carrying out the mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

How is a local United Methodist congregation governed?

Pastors are appointed to each congregation by the bishop over that particular area. However, movement of pastors from one congregation to another usually involves consultation between the bishop, the district superintendents, the pastors involved, and representatives of the congregations.

The month-to-month administrative authority of the congregation is carried out by the *Administrative Board* which has general oversight of the program of the local church including the fiscal responsibility of establishing the budget.

The basic creative unit of the local congregation is the *Council on Ministries*. It considers, initiates, develops, and coordinates the church's strategy for mission. The Council is made up of the minister, other staff persons, representatives of other local church organizations, boards, and committees, and persons assigned as special age-level coordinators, family ministry coordinators and work area chairpersons. The work area chairpersons assume primary leadership in the areas of ecumenical affairs, evangelism, education, missions, social concerns, stewardship, and worship.

Do you have missionaries and missions?

Everywhere in the world that Christian missionaries are needed and allowed, United

Methodists are there. Primary emphasis is on serving the needs of people in the under-developed nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America with food, education, medical care, agriculture, and spiritual aid. This twin emphasis on meeting both spiritual and physical needs has resulted in thousands of native churches, schools, hospitals, community centers, etc. around the world. Today, there are native Methodist denominations active in 55 countries and missionary activities in many, many more.

In addition to the world mission, The United Methodist Church operates thousands of missional activities, projects, and institutions in the United States including hospitals, nursing homes, colleges, universities, seminaries, high schools, primary schools, kindergartens, community centers, etc. The same creative diversity which is a primary strength of United Methodist congregations is also true of our institutions. Diversity, excellence, and commitment to Christ's mission are the hallmarks of United Methodist institutions from the smallest local churches to the largest hospitals and universities.

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