



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 3: The Way of Christ

Session 11: Teaching and Learning in the United Methodist Spirit

United Methodist Congregations Do Well to Teach Wesleyan Beliefs and Practices

By now I suspect that you probably understand something about the distinctiveness of Wesleyan Christianity. We have discussed the concept of grace and how it manifests as prevenient grace when it goes before us, bringing us to an awareness of our need for God. We have investigated the Wesleyan emphases within the sacrament of Holy Baptism and the role of free will in the United Methodist understanding of Christianity. We have seen how Wesleyans make conscious use of the “reading glasses” of tradition, experience, and reason when considering their primary source of scripture. Looking at the Wesleyan way of salvation as more of a process than an event, we have seen how prevenient grace by virtue of the Holy Spirit empowers us to say “yes” to a relationship with Jesus Christ (justification), and then to growth in faith (sanctification) until such a point in time where we might become perfect in love. We have seen how United Methodists are called to be diverse by intent rather than by default, how we share together in the real presence of God at an open communion table, and how we are called to both social holiness through our love and care for others, as well as personal holiness through the practice of spiritual disciplines. There is much richness here, and that is why United Methodists are called to pass on our heritage to others.

Different Christian Traditions Emphasize Different Things

The Church of Jesus Christ – the Church that includes all Christian denominations and traditions – is charged with the responsibility of teaching the Christian faith (Matthew 28: 18 – 20). But different denominations teach different things. It is only natural that a non-denominational congregation, a Baptist congregation, a United Methodist congregation, and all others will differ in the specifics of what they teach, and that is generally a good thing. I believe it is important for United Methodist congregations to generally teach from a Wesleyan perspective. Although this might sound obvious, in my

experience some folks find it is easier to order materials online from popular authors, or perhaps drop by their local Bible bookstore to pick up Sunday School curriculum. The issue is that not all books and curricula stem from our Wesleyan roots. To locate books, videos, and curricula that highlight our Wesleyan Roots it is often necessary to access materials related to the United Methodist Church, or to a handful of other publishers who lean toward a Wesleyan point-of-view.

Why the Curriculum Taught in Your Church Matters

The curriculum taught in your local church matters. The Sunday School lessons, Bible studies, books, and video resources are especially important when it comes to people who are new to the Christian faith, children, and younger youth. Often our churches include adults who have not yet learned that there are significant differences between Christian denominations, and who may have no idea that Wesleyan Christianity would handle some topics much differently than other traditions.

Consider what is at stake here. I am an adult, well-versed and educated in theology, so if I attend a local UMC and discover they are not teaching from a Wesleyan perspective, I can handle it. I sift through what I hear, keeping what I think is appropriate for my faith and discarding the rest. Children and some others would not have the same filters available to them.

Sound teaching that reflects our Wesleyan roots also provides us with a solid foundation, equipping us to live out our faith in ways that are consistent with our theology. When we are mature and well-formed in our faith, we are better able to interpret scripture or to respond thoughtfully to statements like “everything happens for a reason.” The ability to put our faith into action in meaningful, day-to-day ways is key to following Christ – whether we’re children, youth, or adults.

But What About Being Exposed to Different Points of View?

I want to be clear that just because something is not published by The United Methodist Church or a related Wesleyan denomination does not mean we should not learn from it. We are called to read the Bible and to learn about Christianity for ourselves. We are to think and learn to be comfortable with questions that may have different answers depending on the source. As we mature in faith, we are also called to be more comfortable with ambiguity, for there is much in scripture that we will not understand in this life. For voracious readers and long-term United Methodists, if all we are exposed to is Wesleyan material, we may not notice some of the differences between Wesleyan content and content from other Christian traditions. Plus, we would miss out on some good reading material and opportunities for spiritual growth. I am inspired by many non-Methodist writers: The late Madeleine L'Engle was Episcopalian. Richard Rohr is Roman Catholic. N.T. Wright is an Anglican Bishop. Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest. Gordon MacDonald is a retired pastor from the Reformed tradition, and although I would differ from him on many points of faith, he has written some of my favorite books to read when I need a spiritual boost.¹ When I come across a point of disagreement with any author, I simply make a mental note of it, then move on to see what I can learn.

Our Congregations Are Called to Take Great Care with the Curriculum, Books, and Other Materials It Presents to People

Generally speaking I believe United Methodist Churches are more closely tied to our Wesleyan roots when we use Wesleyan resources. When we use Wesleyan materials for Christian education, we reinforce the distinctive aspects of our Wesleyan Christianity. We have an opportunity to emphasize aspects of our Wesleyan identity, including our focus on grace; loving God rather than being afraid of God; being created with genuine free will; reading scripture through lenses of tradition, experience, and reason; salvation as more of a process than an event; prevenient grace; a Wesleyan understanding of baptism; justification; sanctification; perfection in love; diversity; an open communion table; social holiness; and personal piety. Much of what we love the most about the United Methodist Church is represented here, and it is important that these concepts are preached and taught about regularly.

How To Choose

There is a lot of Christian material available for purchase and sorting through it can be confusing. Here are a few things to consider as you select curricula and other media for your United Methodist congregation. Resources are more likely to align with our Wesleyan roots when you can answer the following questions affirmatively:

- Do the lesson plans invite participation from the learners?
- Is allowance made for leaders/facilitators to adapt and adjust the material depending on context?
- Does God seek for the reconciliation of all creation and invite human participation into this mission?
- Is salvation portrayed as a gift of grace that has both present and a future aspects?
- Is God portrayed as loving, gracious, and desiring a relationship with human beings?
- Is God's grace is more powerful than the power of sin?
- Is the crucifixion of Jesus part of God's plan for salvation of the world?
- Is it acceptable for a learner/participant to ask questions or disagree with the material or the instructor/facilitator?

Resources are less likely to align with our Wesleyan roots if they:

- Pose primarily fact-based answers, with no real thinking or application required.
- Convey salvation as a work we must achieve, and which happens only after this life.
- Center sin as the defining aspect of our relationship with God.
- Describe the world only as sinful and hostile.
- Present Jesus' death as the sacrifice to appease God's wrath.
- Present the Bible as inerrant, without any textual issues.
- Present baptism as being only for adult believers² and propose that the water must be used in certain ways for the baptism to "count."
- Present communion as only a memorial service?

While it may be convenient to make a quick run to the local Bible bookstore to pick up Sunday School material, Wesleyan Christians are wise to do some research first. The United Methodist Publishing House and a number of other publishers approach their curriculum, Bible studies,

1 Here is my favorite: MacDonald, Gordon. *Ordering Your Private World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Revised 2017. I try to revisit this book every year.

2. Adapted from the "United Methodist Curricula Checklist" published by Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church. Available at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/united-methodist-curricula-checklist>

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books, and videos from a Wesleyan point of view, and it is worth our time to check out what they have available. I believe it is fair to expect that a United Methodist Church would generally make use of Christian educational materials with a Wesleyan perspective. We are called to emphasize our Wesleyan roots faithfully, not only so generations to come can experience the rich depth of Wesleyan

Christianity, but also because folks – right now – need to receive the Good News of Jesus Christ in the most relevant way possible: the Wesleyan way.

Marsha Engle Middleton

United Methodist Identity Points:

- Living as a Christian means, in part, that we are called to demonstrate Christ's love through intentional Christian actions of mercy and justice.
- While we cannot do everything for everyone, we can do something for someone.
- Social holiness is part of sanctification and the Christian life.
- The connectional nature of The United Methodist Church makes it possible for us to do more together than any individual person or congregation can do on its own.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- When you think of holiness, do you tend to think of a Christian's personal lifestyle, of social holiness, or of both? Why?
- How might God be calling you to move toward social holiness in ways both big and small? What might be a first step for you as you seek to love as Jesus loved?
- How important, do you think, is the connection within The United Methodist Church? What are some additional ways in which our connection empowers us to do more ministry together than we could do as individual Christians or as individual congregations?

Closing Liturgy:

"God of Wisdom, Truth, and Beauty," Hymn lyrics by Jane Parker Huber

*God of wisdom, truth, and beauty, God of spirit, fire, and soul; God of order, love, and duty, God of purpose, plan, and goal
Grant us visions ever growing, Breath of life, eternal strength; Mystic spirit, moving, flowing, Filling height and depth and length.
God of drama, music, dancing, God of story, sculpture, art; God of wit, all life enhancing, God of every yearning heart;
Challenge us with quests of spirit, Truth revealed in myriad ways'; Word or song for hearts that hear it, Sketch and model forms of
praise. God of atom's smallest feature, God of galaxies in space; God of every living creature, God of all the human race;
May our knowledge be extended for the whole creation's good. Hunger banished, warfare ended, All the earth a neighborhood.
God of science, history, teaching, God of futures yet unknown; God of holding, God of reaching, God of power beyond each throne;
Take the fragments of our living, fit us to your finest scheme. Now forgiven and forgiving, Make us free to dare and dream.*