



# Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



## Unit 2: Understanding the Nature and Action of God

# Session 7: Diverse By Design

### The Reality of Diversity

United Methodists live in many places around the world, from rural areas and large cities, to suburbs and villages. Regardless of where we live, I suspect most of us live in communities that are more diverse now than they were a decade ago. Even the most rural areas in Texas, the state with which I am most familiar, are rapidly becoming more diverse. In the mid-size Texas town where I live, it is rare to go to a store or a restaurant and not hear three or four different languages spoken.

Some of us come from other nations as first- or second-generation immigrants. Some of us were born and raised right where we are now. Some grew up not being the majority ethnic group in our culture. And even if our community is made up of folks who look and speak just like us, we don't need to look far to glimpse the reality that the almost eight billion human beings living in the world right now are diverse. I am arguing that we are diverse by design.

### Diversity as a Wesleyan Root

When it comes to living with one another in the midst of our differences, United Methodists are clear that we are to treat one another as sisters and brothers. We put great value on diversity in our denomination, in our congregations, and in our world. Article IV of our Constitution delivers a clear statement on the inclusiveness of the church, which goes hand-in-hand with diversity. At our best, United Methodists strive to be diverse by intent, not by default.<sup>1</sup> We are called to look for ways to be more inclusive and diverse throughout our local congregations, annual conferences, and ecumenical endeavors.

The Wesleyan root of diversity stems directly from our roots in the Bible. We know from Genesis 1:26–27 that all people are created in the image of God. We are distinct from the rest of God's created order. Because we carry a spark of God's image within us, when we look at another human being, we are looking at a part of God's own image.

We might say that God is present in every face of every human being we encounter. In Acts 2:5–12, the account of Pentecost—the birthday of the Church—makes it clear that God was doing something new when it came to those who were included in the Church.

"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'"

This amazing event confirmed what Jesus had indicated in his ministry all along: both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) were to be a part of the Reign of God.<sup>2</sup> Scripture describes God stating this clearly several places in Genesis, including Genesis 22:18, "... by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves..." But people back then were not all that different from people today. It takes a while for us to catch on to God's expectations of us, especially when those expectations are countercultural.

All people are of sacred worth to God. God created, and therefore loves, all people, including people of all ages, genders, races, national origins, native languages, educational status, socioeconomic conditions, sexual orientations, abilities or disabilities, and political ideologies. Jesus made it a point to engage with people on the margins of society in his day: Samaritans, Gentiles, Roman soldiers, women, children, those experiencing illness

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2016. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016. Paragraph 4, Article 4, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 2:1–12, Matthew 8:11, Matthew 28: 19, Mark 5: 1 – 20, Mark 7:31–3, Luke 7:1–10, Luke 10:22–37, John 4:1–42, etc.

## Wesleyan Roots Session 7: Diverse by Design

including leprosy, and individuals struggling with blindness, deafness, and mobility differences. Jesus could not have been clearer about the fact that in the reign of God, including the kingdom present now, things are different than in this world. Indeed, those who come in last in the social order are just the ones to come in first in the order that matters most – the eternal order of the Kingdom of God.

### More than Tolerance

Insofar as the Church can live out God's reign on Earth, we are called to be diverse and inclusive by intent. But this does not mean that we simply tolerate one another. Instead, we are to encourage participation and leadership by every person according to their spiritual gifts as part of the Body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-31). This means that women and men, people of color and white people, people who speak languages other than English and English-speaking people and so on, are all key parts of Christ's body. We need one another. If everyone looked the same, spoke the same, came from the same background, and thought the same, the Church would be an exclusive club and not the Body of Christ at all.

And here is perhaps the most difficult part: each one of us has our own spiritual growing to do when it comes to including others. Perhaps one person is enthusiastic about people of all races being part of the United Methodist Church, but when it comes to people who are not neurotypical... well, not so much. Perhaps another person believes that more mature men and women should be included in decision-making within a congregation, but when it comes to including younger folks in church government, that is somehow different. Each of us individually, and all of us collectively, are called to be sure we are not guilty of "false advertisement" – of saying we welcome everyone, yet living as if we do not.

### Theological Diversity

United Methodists are also theologically diverse, and I consider this to be a great gift. John Wesley is remembered for his openness to Christians from other theological positions. Among his words on the issue are the following: "There are many doctrines of a less essential nature... In these we may think and let think; we may 'agree to disagree.' But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials..."<sup>3</sup>

I consider it a great blessing to be a part of a denomination that encourages me to think, ask questions, and seek

answers, as this is not the case in all denominations. In fact, some other Christian traditions view divergence among theological ideation to be a bad thing. For us it is a strength and a way in which we provide a check and balance against ourselves as we work together to help bring about the fullness of God's Reign.

### Unity, not Uniformity

We are called to be diverse and to be united in our diversity, but we are not called to be uniform. This is important. Every culture has its own characteristics. While I long for true diversity in all parts of life, and especially in the Church, this is not the same thing as wanting everyone to worship the same way, to sing exactly the same hymns and worship songs, to read the Bible in the same language, and to listen to the same style of preaching. We are different, yet we are the same. Most importantly, we are in this journey of life and faith together.

When you find yourself being challenged or stretched by another who differs from you in any number of ways, remember Jesus Christ, our God Incarnate, who spent his ministry demonstrating how to love the person in front of him regardless of who they were or where they were from.

From my perspective as a white woman who carries certain inherent privilege, I am called to be vigilant in how I embrace diversity in all aspects of my life. I am called to learn all I can about the sin of exclusion, to own my part in that sin, to repent of my sin, and to endeavor to live a new life following the commandments of Christ (Matthew 22: 36-40). I have a long way to go, but the Holy Spirit is empowering me to grow toward perfection in love, and as I become sanctified, I am able to recognize the hatred and exclusion around me and that in which I participate. Let us be diverse by intention and not by default, and let us keep vigilant watch on behalf of our brothers and sisters. May it be so.

*Marsha Engle Middleton*

### United Methodist Identity Points:

- All people are of sacred worth, including people of all ages, genders, national origins, native languages, educational status, socioeconomic conditions, sexual orientations, abilities, and political ideologies.
  - United Methodists strive to be diverse by intent, not by default. We are called to look for ways to be more inclusive of others and to live this intentional diversity out in our everyday lives, as well as in our lives related to the church.
  - United Methodists are diverse in almost every way imaginable, including in how we understand non-essentials of Christianity.
- 

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- What are some ways that you see United Methodists working towards diversity? Do you think this is important? Why or why not?
  - What are some ways in which we are not doing well enough in our inclusion and acceptance of others?
  - Given our belief that all people are created in the image of God, how does that make you consider the sin of racism? How is acting to minimize racism connected to your Christian faith?
-