

Introduction to The United Methodist Church: History, Structure, and Beliefs

History

Methodism began as an eighteenth-century spiritual renewal movement within the Church of England. John Wesley, a priest in the Church of England, and his brother Charles, a priest and songwriter, are most often identified as the founders of the movement, although neither intended to start a new church.

The Wesleys emphasized scriptural holiness, vital piety, and acts of justice and compassion. Observers derided the Wesleys and their followers for being so “methodical” in their discipline and spiritual practice. The Wesleys embraced this description as their moniker, and the Methodist movement was born.

Once the movement crossed the ocean to colonial America, it took on a life of its own, becoming The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. Eventually, the Wesleys’ governing authority waned over the American Methodists, even though their spiritual and doctrinal influence remained.

In the nineteenth century, the growth of The Methodist Episcopal Church paralleled the emergence of another Christian movement in the United States, The Evangelical United Brethren Church. The EUB Church was born from a merger of The Evangelical Church and The United Brethren Church, with strong roots in the Midwest and the Northeast. Over time, the Methodist and EUB churches recognized their similarities in doctrine, practice, and church organization. In 1968, these churches became The United Methodist Church.

Structure

The organizational structure of the United Methodist Church is established in *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* much as the United States government was outlined in the Constitution. Both are made up of three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The United Methodist Church’s version of these three is the Council of Bishops, the General Conference, and the Judicial Council.

The church is also organized in a hierarchical system. Beginning from the bottom, the smallest units in the UMC are its lay and pastoral members. Each local church has an annual “local church charge conference” to elect representatives and guide them in fulfilling their missions. Churches are connected to each other to form districts, which are connected in annual conferences. At the annual conferences, an assigned bishop announces ministerial appointments for the year.

The annual conferences are grouped into jurisdictions; there are five in the United States. At the top of this chain is the General Conference, which meets once every four years, made up of lay people and clergy elected by their annual conferences. Its main purpose is to vote on church law. If enacted by the General

Conference, the proposed laws are published in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*.

Beliefs

Key Beliefs and Values

- We believe that salvation is found in and through Jesus Christ.
- We believe that the Bible is the word of God and the primary authority for Christian life and faith. While we believe the Bible is true, we do not believe every verse of the Bible must be interpreted literally. Methodists interpret Scripture through reason, tradition, and experience.
- We believe in justification by grace through faith. We believe in personal holiness and social action.
- We believe in living by grace and striving for holiness—to become like Christ.
- We believe in the balance of heart and head.
- We believe in providence on the one hand and human freedom on the other.
- We value tradition and are willing to embrace change.
- We believe that God’s redemptive love is realized in human life by the activity of the Holy Spirit.
- We believe that we are part of Christ’s universal church as we become conformed to Christ.
- We recognize the kingdom of God as both a present and a future reality.
- While affirming the faith we share in common with all other Christians, we also affirm the unique emphasis the Wesleyan tradition places on the love and grace of God.
- We believe the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion are means by which the intangible reality of God’s grace touches our lives in tangible ways.

The Trinity

United Methodists believe in a trinitarian God in keeping with Christian tradition. This means that we believe in one God made known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father, or God Almighty, is the creative God who authored all life. The Son is the redeeming God who became fully human—Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the sustaining God who nurtures individuals and communities.

Salvation

We believe that as God’s creations, we are meant to live in a holy covenant with this trinitarian God. However, we also teach that we have broken this covenant by our sins, and we are forgiven by God’s love and saving grace in

Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus was God on earth (the product of a virgin conception) in the form of a man who was crucified for the sins of all people, and who was physically resurrected to bring us the hope of eternal life. We believe that salvation is found in and through Jesus Christ. We believe in justification by faith through grace.

Grace

United Methodists place a strong emphasis on the love and grace of God. We believe that God's grace is an active part of every human's life from the moment of birth (*prevenient grace*), to the individual's saving experience of God through Jesus Christ (*justifying grace*), and throughout the rest of his or her life in Christian discipleship (*sanctifying grace*). The grace of God is perceived by people through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in their world.

The Bible

We believe that the Bible is the word of God and the primary authority for Christian life and faith. While we believe the Bible is true, we do not believe every verse of the Bible must be interpreted literally. Methodists interpret Scripture through reason, tradition, and experience. We uphold the Bible as the primary witness of the nature and activity of God and God's relationship to humanity. Our canon, or official collection of biblical material, is the same as other Protestant churches—sixty-six books (thirty-nine in the Old Testament, twenty-seven in the New Testament).

The Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion

Along with other Protestant churches, The United Methodist Church affirms two sacraments as “the outward and visible sign” of the grace of God in human experience: baptism and Holy Communion. We believe these sacraments are means by which the intangible reality of God's grace touches our lives in tangible ways.

Baptism is the sign of the grace of God that claims us as God's own children. We believe it is the beginning point of our spiritual journey. Baptism is the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of God's work of love in an individual's life even before he or she is able to understand it or choose to accept it. We call this “prevenient grace.” Baptism is a ceremony in which a person is anointed with water to symbolize being brought into the community of faith by the grace of God. Baptism is celebrated in worship because the person being baptized is welcomed into the community of faith.

While some denominations choose to wait until a person is able to couple baptism with understanding and public profession of faith, we invite the parents and the church to affirm this grace on behalf of the child as they pledge to raise the child in the faith until the time that the child is able to accept God's grace for himself or herself, usually at the time of confirmation, which is between sixth and

eighth grades in most churches. A candidate for Holy Baptism or his or her sponsors may choose any of the traditional ways baptism is administered: sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. The most common method in United Methodist Churches is sprinkling.

We believe that Holy Communion, also known as The Lord's Supper or Eucharist, celebrates the grace of God that is present with us as we share in the body (the bread) and the blood (grape juice or wine) of Christ. As participants eat and drink, they symbolically receive Christ's body (the bread) and blood (typically juice in United Methodist churches).

We observe an open invitation for Communion, which means one need not be a member of a United Methodist congregation in order to observe the Eucharist. The only requirement is a personal desire to experience the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Often parents wonder whether it is appropriate for their children to receive Communion. Since there is no official doctrine on the matter, parents are free to decide at what point their children are able to understand its meaning and significance, and we welcome children of any age to receive the sacrament.

Providence and Free Will

United Methodists don't necessarily believe in a micromanaging God who directly controls everything that happens. While holding to a high view of the sovereignty of God, we don't believe that "God has a reason for everything." Rather, we believe that God loves us enough to give us the freedom to reject that love and to experience the consequences of that freedom. At the same time, God is relentlessly at work to fulfill God's saving purpose for us while never abrogating the freedom planted within us. God intends for everyone—not just a predestined few—to receive God's saving love and redeeming grace in Jesus Christ.

Personal Holiness and Social Action

United Methodists believe in living by grace and striving for holiness—to become like Christ—in both personal piety and social action. We agree with the writer of the epistle of James that faith without works is dead. The inner transformation of the heart must be expressed through social transformation of the world in which we live. Personal holiness is the way we breathe in; social holiness is the way we breathe out.

As a result, United Methodists place a great emphasis on service to others, outreach, and evangelism as the expressions of God's love at work in the world. We have a strong legacy in ministries of mercy and justice. John Wesley gave the early Methodists three guiding principles for their lives, which he called "General Rules" (paraphrased from *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, 2004, pp. 73-74):

- Do no harm by avoiding evil.

- Do good in every possible way.
- Be faithful in the practices of Christian discipline.

Methodist hospitals, schools, relief agencies, and numerous other organizations seek to alleviate human suffering, promote peace and justice, and improve the welfare of the global community. For more information about how The United Methodist Church is involved in missions around the world, see the website of the General Board of Global Ministries (www.gbgm-umc.org).

The Social Principles is the document that best reflects the ongoing dialogue within the United Methodist community in matters of social, economic, and political importance. The Social Principles is an expression of the church's effort to discern biblically, traditionally, experientially, and rationally the Methodist stance on the controversial issues of the day. To find more information and to read the full text of the Social Principles, visit www.umc.org.

Creeds of the Faith

The Apostles' Creed in *The United Methodist Hymnal* is the affirmation of faith most widely used by United Methodists. The Apostles' Creed derives its name from its use in the Christian church from as early as A.D. 150 and the early belief that it was used by the apostles. Beginning in the third century, this creed was used at baptisms by the Roman Catholic Church. Through the years it has been used widely by both Roman Catholics and Protestants as the formative statement of the faith into which Christians are baptized (from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989, p. 881):

The Apostles' Creed

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;*

*And in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic* church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,*

*the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

*catholic—small “c” means universal. So it means we believe in the universal church, rather than in the Catholic denomination.

The Nicene Creed is frequently used as an affirmation of faith in United Methodist worship services. The Nicene Creed is the historic statement of belief of the Christian faith devised by the Council of Nicaea, convened in A.D. 325 by the Emperor Constantine in the city of Nicaea, located in what is now northwest Turkey. The Creed was revised in 381 by the Council of Constantinople. The Nicene Creed set forth the key affirmations concerning the Christian faith and served as a guide in combating heretical or false teaching. The other important distinction is that it is communal; it is what “we” believe as opposed to what “I” believe, as in the Apostle’s Creed. Following the Apostles’ Creed, it is the second oldest creed of the Christian faith (from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989, p. 881):

The Nicene Creed

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory*

*to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son
is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic* and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

*universal church

The Mission of The United Methodist Church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Recommended Resources

- Thomas S. McNally, *Questions and Answers About the United Methodist Church*, Abingdon Press, 1995 [see <http://www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=438810>]
- Belton Joyner, *The “Unofficial” United Methodist Handbook*, Abingdon Press, 2007 [see <http://www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=446592>]
- Introductory brochures on Communion and United Methodists, Baptism and United Methodists, It’s All About God’s Grace, Membership and United Methodists, The People of The United Methodist Church, and What’s So Great about Being United Methodist? [see <http://www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=855745>]
- <http://UMC.org>
- <http://gbod.org>