

## **Beliefs—Common Christian**

United Methodists share a common heritage with all Christians. According to our foundational statement of beliefs in The Book of Discipline, we share the following basic affirmations in common with all Christian communities:

### **Trinity**

We describe God in three persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are commonly used to refer to the threefold nature of God. Sometimes we use other terms, such as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

### **God**

- We believe in one God, who created the world and all that is in it.
- We believe that God is sovereign; that is, God is the ruler of the universe.
- We believe that God is loving. We can experience God's love and grace.

### **Jesus**

- We believe that Jesus was human. He lived as a man and died when he was crucified.
- We believe that Jesus is divine. He is the Son of God.
- We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and that the risen Christ lives today. (Christ and messiah mean the same thing—God's anointed.)
- We believe that Jesus is our Savior. In Christ we receive abundant life and forgiveness of sins.
- We believe that Jesus is our Lord and that we are called to pattern our lives after his.

### **The Holy Spirit**

- We believe that the Holy Spirit is God with us.
- We believe that the Holy Spirit comforts us when we are in need and convicts us when we stray from God.
- We believe that the Holy Spirit awakens us to God's will and empowers us to live obediently.

### **Human Beings**

- We believe that God created human beings in God's image.
- We believe that humans can choose to accept or reject a relationship with God.
- We believe that all humans need to be in relationship with God in order to be fully human.

## **The Church**

- We believe that the church is the body of Christ, an extension of Christ's life and ministry in the world today.
- We believe that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.
- We believe that the church is "the communion of saints," a community made up of all past, present, and future disciples of Christ.
- We believe that the church is called to worship God and to support those who participate in its life as they grow in faith.

## ***The Bible***

- We believe that the Bible is God's Word as revealed to humans in a particular place and time.
- We believe that the Bible is the primary authority for our faith and practice.
- We believe that Christians need to know and study the Old Testament and the New Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures).

## **The Reign of God**

- We believe that the kingdom or reign of God is both a present reality and future hope.
- We believe that wherever God's will is done, the kingdom or reign of God is present. It was present in Jesus' ministry, and it is also present in our world whenever persons and communities experience reconciliation, restoration, and healing.
- We believe that although the fulfillment of God's kingdom--the complete restoration of creation--is still to come.
- We believe that the church is called to be both witness to the vision of what God's kingdom will be like and a participant in helping to bring it to completion.
- We believe that the reign of God is both personal and social. Personally, we display the kingdom of God as our hearts and minds are transformed and we become more Christ-like. Socially, God's vision for the kingdom includes the restoration and transformation of all of creation.

## **Sacraments**

With many other Protestants, we recognize the two sacraments in which Christ himself participated: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

### **Baptism**

- Through baptism we are joined with the church and with Christians everywhere.

- Baptism is a symbol of new life and a sign of God's love and forgiveness of our sins.
- Persons of any age can be baptized.
- We baptize by sprinkling, immersion or pouring.
- A person receives the sacrament of baptism only once in his or her life.

### **The Lord's Supper (Communion, Eucharist)**

- The Lord's Supper is a holy meal of bread and wine that symbolizes the body and blood of Christ.
- The Lord's Supper recalls the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and celebrates the unity of all the members of God's family.
- By sharing this meal, we give thanks for Christ's sacrifice and are nourished and empowered to go into the world in mission and ministry.
- We practice "open Communion," welcoming all who love Christ, repent of their sin, and seek to live in peace with one another.

## **Beliefs--Distinctive Emphases**

Wesley and the early Methodists were particularly concerned about inviting people to experience God's grace and to grow in their knowledge and love of God through disciplined Christian living. They placed primary emphasis on Christian living, on putting faith and love into action. This emphasis on what Wesley referred to as "practical divinity" has continued to be a hallmark of United Methodism today.

The distinctive shape of our theological heritage can be seen not only in this emphasis on Christian living, but also in Wesley's distinctive understanding of God's saving grace. Although Wesley shared with many other Christians a belief in salvation by grace, he combined them in a powerful way to create distinctive emphases for living the full Christian life.

**Grace** (see diagram at the end of this section)

Grace is central to our understanding of Christian faith and life.

Grace can be defined as the love and mercy given to us by God because God wants us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it. We read in the Letter to the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Our United Methodist heritage is rooted in a deep and profound understanding of God's grace. This incredible grace flows from God's great love for us. Did you have to memorize John 3:16 in Sunday school when you were a child? There was a good reason. This one verse summarizes the gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The ability to call to mind God's love and God's gift of Jesus Christ is a rich resource for theology and faith."

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, described God's grace as threefold:

- prevenient grace
- justifying grace
- sanctifying grace

### **Prevenient Grace**

Wesley understood grace as God's active presence in our lives. This presence is not dependent on human actions or human response. It is a gift—a gift that is always available, but that can be refused.

God's grace stirs up within us a desire to know God and empowers us to respond to God's invitation to be in relationship with God. God's grace enables us to discern differences between good and evil and makes it possible for us to choose good....

God takes the initiative in relating to humanity. We do not have to beg and plead for God's love and grace. God actively seeks us!

### **Justifying Grace**

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). And in his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul wrote: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

These verses demonstrate the justifying grace of God. They point to reconciliation, pardon, and restoration. Through the work of God in Christ our sins are forgiven, and our relationship with God is restored. According to John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, the image of God—which has been distorted by sin—is renewed within us through Christ's death.

Again, this dimension of God's grace is a gift. God's grace alone brings us into relationship with God. There are no hoops through which we have to jump in order to please God and to be loved by God. God has acted in Jesus Christ. We need only to respond in faith.

### **Conversion**

This process of salvation involves a change in us that we call conversion. Conversion is a turning around, leaving one orientation for another. It may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative. But in any case, it's a new beginning. Following Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "You must be born anew" (John 3:7 RSV), we speak of this conversion as rebirth, new life in Christ, or regeneration.

Following Paul and Luther, John Wesley called this process justification. Justification is what happens when Christians abandon all those vain attempts to justify themselves before God, to be seen as "just" in God's eyes through religious and moral practices. It's a time when God's "justifying grace" is experienced and accepted, a time of pardon and forgiveness, of new peace and joy and love. Indeed, we're justified by God's grace through faith.

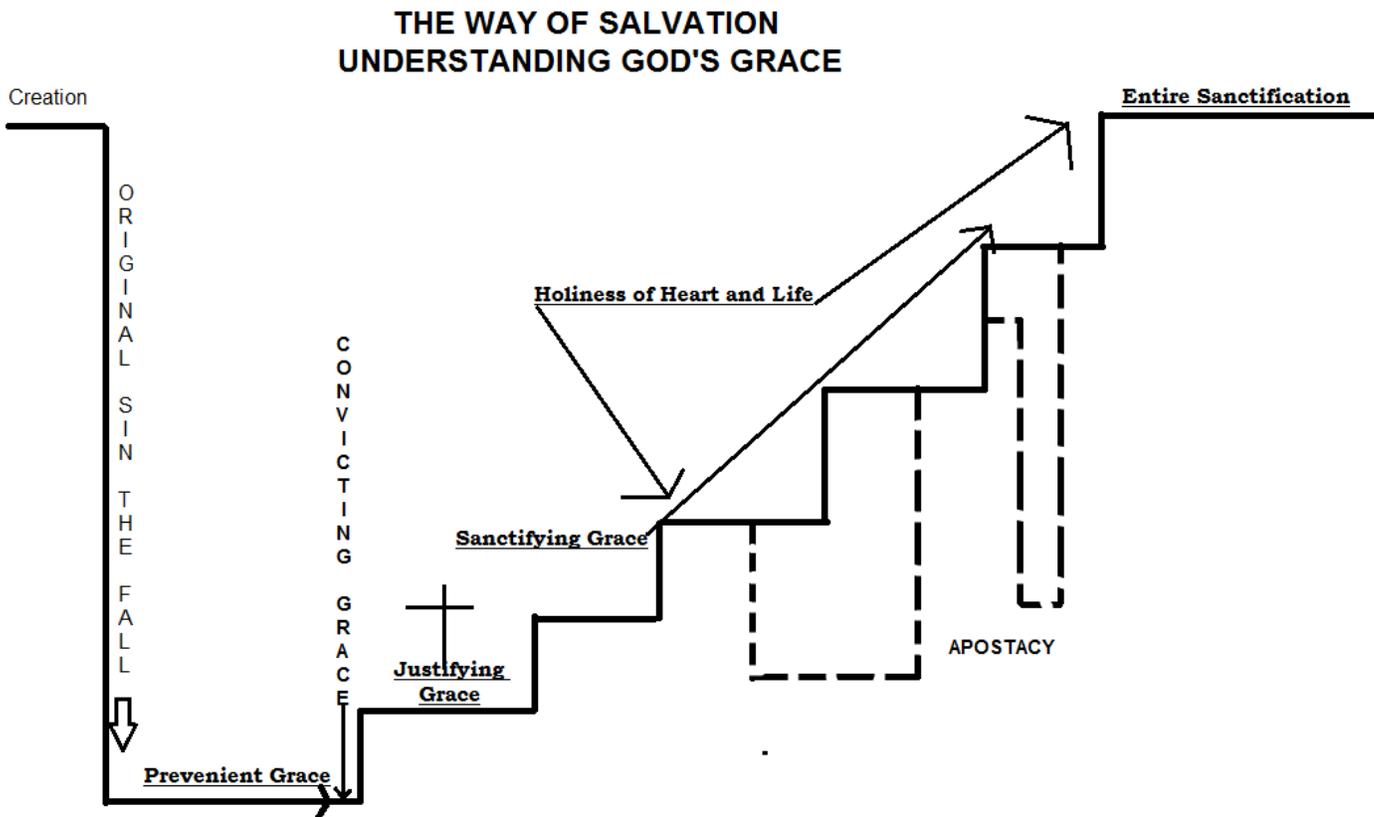
Justification is also a time of repentance—turning away from behaviors rooted in sin and toward actions that express God's love. In this conversion we can expect to receive assurance of our present salvation through the Holy Spirit "bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16).

## Sanctifying Grace

Salvation is not a static, one-time event in our lives. It is the ongoing experience of God's gracious presence transforming us into whom God intends us to be. John Wesley described this dimension of God's grace as sanctification, or holiness.

Through God's sanctifying grace, we grow and mature in our ability to live as Jesus lived. As we pray, study the Scriptures, fast, worship, and share in fellowship with other Christians, we deepen our knowledge of and love for God. As we respond with compassion to human need and work for justice in our communities, we strengthen our capacity to love neighbor. Our inner thoughts and motives, as well as our outer actions and behavior, are aligned with God's will and testify to our union with God.

We're to press on, with God's help, in the path of sanctification toward perfection. By perfection, Wesley did not mean that we would not make mistakes or have weaknesses. Rather, he understood it to be a continual process of being made perfect in our love of God and each other and of removing our desire to sin.



## **Faith and Good Works**

United Methodists insist that faith and good works belong together. What we believe must be confirmed by what we do. Personal salvation must be expressed in ministry and mission in the world. We believe that Christian doctrine and Christian ethics are inseparable, that faith should inspire service. The integration of personal piety and social holiness has been a hallmark of our tradition. We affirm the biblical precept that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17).

## **Mission and Service**

Because of what God has done for us, we offer our lives back to God through a life of service. As disciples, we become active participants in God's activity in the world through mission and service. Love of God is always linked to love of neighbor and to a passionate commitment to seeking justice and renewal in the world.

## **Nurture and Mission of the Church**

For Wesley, there was no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness. In other words, faith always includes a social dimension. One cannot be a solitary Christian. As we grow in faith through our participation in the church community, we are also nourished and equipped for mission and service to the world.

"From Wesley's time to the present, Methodism has sought to be both a nurturing community and a servant community. Members of Methodist Societies and class meetings met for personal nurture through giving to the poor, visiting the imprisoned, and working for justice and peace in the community. They sought not only to receive the fullness of God's grace for themselves; but...they saw themselves as existing 'to reform the nation...and to spread scriptural holiness over the land'"

There are two kinds of believing, and both are essential for Christian life. They're closely related and influence each other, but they're different. One is belief and the other, beliefs. One is faith and the other, doctrine or theology.

## **Faith**

Faith is the basic orientation and commitment of our whole being—a matter of heart and soul. Christian faith is grounding our lives in the living God as revealed especially in Jesus Christ. It's both a gift we receive within the Christian community and a choice we make. It's trusting in God and relying on God as the source and destiny of our lives. Faith is believing in God, giving God our devoted loyalty and allegiance. Faith is following Jesus, answering the call to be his disciples in the world. Faith is hoping for God's future, leaning into the coming kingdom that God has promised. Faith-as-belief is active; it involves trusting, believing, following, hoping.

## **Theology**

Theology or doctrine is more a matter of the head. It's thinking together in the community of believers about faith and discipleship. It's reflecting on the gospel. It's examining the various beliefs we hold as a church. Some may say that theology is only for professional theologians. This is not true. All of us, young and old, lay and clergy, need to work at this theological task so that our beliefs will actually guide our day-by-day actions and so that we can communicate our belief to an unbelieving world.

## **Our Theological Journey**

Theology is thinking together about our faith and discipleship. It's reflecting with others in the Christian community about the good news of God's love in Christ.

Both laypeople and clergy are needed in "our theological task." The laypeople bring understandings from their ongoing effort to live as Christians in the complexities of a secular world; clergy bring special tools and experience acquired through intensive biblical and theological study. We need one another.

But how shall we go about our theological task so that our beliefs are true to the gospel and helpful in our lives? In John Wesley's balanced and rigorous ways for thinking through Christian doctrine, we find four major sources or criteria, each interrelated. These we often call our "theological guidelines": Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. (See *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004*, pp. 76-82.) Let's look at each of these.

## **Scripture**

In thinking about our faith, we put primary reliance on the Bible. It's the unique testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life of Israel; in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ; and in the Spirit's work in the early church. It's our

sacred canon and, thus, the decisive source of our Christian witness and the authoritative measure of the truth in our beliefs.

In our theological journey we study the Bible within the believing community. Even when we study it alone, we're guided and corrected through dialogue with other Christians. We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole. We use concordances, commentaries, and other aids prepared by the scholars. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we try to discern both the original intention of the text and its meaning for our own faith and life.

### **Tradition**

Between the New Testament age and our own era stand countless witnesses on whom we rely in our theological journey. Through their words in creed, hymn, discourse, and prayer, through their music and art, through their courageous deeds, we discover Christian insight by which our study of the Bible is illuminated. This living tradition comes from many ages and many cultures. Even today Christians living in far different circumstances from our own—in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia—are helping us discover fresh understanding of the Gospel's power.

### **Experience**

A third source and criterion of our theology is our experience. By experience we mean especially the "new life in Christ," which is ours as a gift of God's grace; such rebirth and personal assurance gives us new eyes to see the living truth in Scripture. But we mean also the broader experience of all the life we live, its joys, its hurts, its yearnings. So we interpret the Bible in light of our cumulative experiences. We interpret our life's experience in light of the biblical message. We do so not only for our experience individually but also for the experience of the whole human family.

### **Reason**

Finally, our own careful use of reason, though not exactly a direct source of Christian belief, is a necessary tool. We use our reason in reading and interpreting the Scripture. We use it in relating the Scripture and tradition to our experience and in organizing our theological witness in a way that's internally coherent. We use our reason in relating our beliefs to the full range of human knowledge and in expressing our faith to others in clear and appealing ways.

Excerpt from United Methodist Member's Handbook, Revised by George Koehler (Discipleship Resources, 2006), pp. 64-65.

## **Foundational Documents of UMC**

Just as creeds such as the Apostles' Creed summarize the belief of all Christians, the Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church and the Confessions of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church form a foundation of doctrine for United Methodists. They, along with Wesley's Sermons on Several Occasions and Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, are "standards" of doctrine for United Methodists.

### **The Articles of Religion**

When the Methodist movement in America became a church in 1784, John Wesley provided the American Methodists with a liturgy and a doctrinal statement, which contained twenty-four "Articles of Religion" or basic statements of belief. These Articles of Religion were taken from the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England—the church out of which the Methodism movement began—and had been the standards for preaching within the Methodist movement.

These articles became the basic standards for Christian belief in the Methodist church in North America. First published in the church's Book of Discipline in 1790, the Articles of Religion have continued to be part of the church's official statement of belief.

### **The Confession of Faith**

The Confession of Faith is the statement of belief from The Evangelical United Brethren Church. Consisting of 16 articles, the current form of this statement of faith was presented and adopted by the 1962 General Conference.

When The United Methodist Church was formed in 1968 from the union of several branches of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, both The Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith were adopted as basic statements of the Christian faith.

### **Wesley's Sermons and Notes on the New Testament**

Wesley's sermons contain his basic understanding of the Christian faith and his thinking about how we are to live out this faith both personally and corporately. His written sermons were intended to teach the basic beliefs of the faith as well as nurture and encourage his followers in their discipleship.

Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament provided his followers with tools for interpreting the Bible. These notes contained both Wesley's own ideas as well as insights borrowed from other interpreters and commentaries.

While the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith are considered foundational documents, they are not legalistic or dogmatic creeds that do not allow for differing

interpretations. They are guidelines that themselves require continuing reflection, interpretation and expansion in light of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

## **World Wide**

9,854,079 members

## **UMC Data from Inside of the United States**

8,341,375 members

35,469 local congregations

26, 236 pastoral charges (multiple churches under one pastor)

64 annual conferences

50 bishops/episcopal areas

5 jurisdictions

## **UMC Data from Outside the United States**

1,512,704 members

7,995 organized churches

55 conferences

18 bishops/episcopal areas in Angola, Germany, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe

## **Mission**

The United Methodist Church is in mission in more than 100 countries.

1,329 mission personnel supported by the Board of Global Ministries

103,000 United Methodist Volunteers in Mission

## **Education**

8 two-year colleges

82 four-year colleges

10 universities

13 theological schools

1 professional school

10 precollegiate schools

## **Polity**

No person or organization except the General Conference, which convenes every four years, has authority to speak officially for the denomination. General Conference, the denomination's top policy-making body, has a maximum of 1,000 delegates – half clergy, half lay, from around the world. The conference revises church law and the "Social Principles" (related to a wide range of social and economic concerns) and adopts resolutions on various current moral, social, public policy and economic issues. It also approves plans and budgets for churchwide programs for the next four years.

## **Bishops**

The United Methodist Church has 50 active bishops in the United States and 18 active bishops in Angola, Germany, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. Bishops are elected every four years and serve until retirement. Each bishop supervises a specific geographical area of the church and annually appoints all ordained ministers in that

area. The Council of Bishops supervises and promotes the temporal and spiritual interests of the entire church.

Current bishops include 11 African-American men, three African-American women, two Hispanic-American men, one Asian-American man, 24 white men and eight white women.

### **History**

The United Methodist Church was formed in 1968 with the union of the former Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church.

The Evangelical United Brethren Church, established in 1946, resulted from the union of two U.S.-born denominations: the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. These two churches originated among German-speaking people during the great spiritual awakening in the late 18th century.

The Methodist movement began in England in the early 1700s, under Anglican minister John Wesley and his followers. Wesley and his brother Charles brought the movement to the colony of Georgia, arriving in March 1736 as Church of England missionaries. The U.S. Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1784. The denomination grew rapidly and was known for its "circuit rider" ministers on the advancing frontiers. A split in 1828 formed the Methodist Protestant Church, and in 1844, over the issue of slavery, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The North and South factions reunited in 1939 (as The Methodist Church), but retained racial segregation. That separation ended in 1968 with the merger of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches.

### **Structure**

The United Methodist Church's legislative branch is its General Conference; Judicial Council is its supreme court. The United Methodist Church has no single general officer or executive, although the Council of Bishops elects a president each year. General agencies are primarily accountable to the General Conference rather than to the Council of Bishops. Boards of directors, who are lay and clergy elected jointly by General Conference and regional organizations, govern their staffs.

Each church in the United States and Puerto Rico is part of a district, an administrative and program grouping of 40-80 churches with a full-time superintendent. Districts are grouped into annual conferences, regional bodies that meet yearly for legislative purposes. Annual conferences approve programming and budget, elect delegates to General and Jurisdictional conferences, and examine and recommend candidates for ministry. Five geographic jurisdictions (divisions) in the United States include 8-13 annual conferences each. Jurisdictional conferences meet simultaneously every four years to elect and assign bishops and some members of general church agencies, and, in some cases, to develop jurisdictional programs. Each local church is governed by a charge conference with an administrative board as the year-round supervisor. A council on ministries coordinates the program of the congregation. In smaller churches, the board and the council are combined.

## **Ecumenical Relationships**

The United Methodist Church is a member of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America and of the World Council of Churches. It also participates in Churches Uniting in Christ (formerly the Consultation on Church Union), where nine U.S. denominations are discussing steps to greater union. Combined membership of CUIC churches is about 20 million in 82,000 congregations.

The United Methodist Church and three historically black Methodist denominations (the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Zion and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches) have been exploring union since 1985. All four churches share a common heritage in the Methodist movement, and have a combined membership of 12 million.

The 36-member Commission on Pan-Methodist Cooperation and Union continues negotiations related to the meaning of "union" in the context of the four churches.

*The information found on this page was provided by InfoServ, the information service of The United Methodist Church.*