

The United Methodist Way

Living the Christian Life in Covenant with Christ and One Another

Introduction

Methodism began as a movement of spiritual renewal within a national church marked by much nominal commitment and spiritual lethargy. Early Methodists adopted a Way of living in covenant with Christ and one another that yielded rich spiritual fruit in their lives and in their engagement with the world. One result of this vitality was the emergence of Methodism as a distinct tradition and its growth in North America into a family of denominations. But over the course of this growth these denominations gradually abandoned central aspects of the original “Methodist Way.” They settled into the status of mainstream Protestant churches, distinguishing themselves primarily by their unique polity. This process was accompanied by increasing loss of spiritual vigor, evangelical zeal, and missional vitality. As an heir of these developments, The United Methodist Church finds itself today (particularly in North America) in the ironic position of being marked by much nominal commitment and spiritual lethargy. We stand in need of our own movement of renewal!

There are many pockets of vitality within contemporary United Methodism, especially in broader global settings, that can and must contribute to this renewal. But even in these settings there is much to be gained from considering anew—and reclaiming—the Way of life that defined and empowered the early Methodist movement.

Orienting Goal of the Methodist Way: Transformed Lives and a Transformed World

One of the sharpest distillations of the Methodist Way is John Wesley’s “Thoughts upon Methodism,” published in 1786, near the end of his long and faithful ministry. In this short essay Wesley warned that the Methodist movement would become a dead sect, having the form of religion but lacking its power, unless they held fast to the crucial insights and practices that birthed the movement. Significantly, the first insight that he emphasizes early Methodists drew from their broad study of Scripture is “That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ; or, in other words, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.”

Every journey is oriented by its goal. For the early Methodists the goal of their Way of life was to become faithful and mature disciples of Christ. This meant far more than just affirming Christ as their Lord, or having an assurance of his pardoning love. They longed for what they saw promised in Scripture—the transformation of their sin-distorted attitudes and dispositions into ever greater conformity with Christ’s abiding love for God, for neighbor, and for the whole creation. As Charles Wesley put it in a hymnic prayer, they longed for Christ to “Plant, and root, and fix in me / All the mind that was in Thee.”

In other words, while the early Methodists celebrated the freedom from sin that comes in the new birth, they fervently desired that greater freedom for walking in God’s life-giving ways and participating in God’s saving mission. Implicit in this desire was their conviction that concern for transformation of the heart is not a distraction from or alternative to concern for the world around us. As John Wesley frequently reminded them, holiness of heart is reciprocally connected to holiness of life. As we experience the love of God transforming our lives we are more inclined to engage the world around us in compassionate and transforming ways—and as we engage the world in these ways we find our own transformation in Christ-likeness deepened!

Crucial Dynamics of the Methodist Way: Doctrine, Spirit, and Discipline

Such “holiness of heart and life” is surely desirable, but how is it possible? John Wesley’s contribution to early Methodism focused particularly around this question, as he led in developing a balanced Way of life that drew upon the wisdom of Scripture and the broad Christian tradition. He summarized the central dynamics of this Way in “Thoughts upon Methodism” by exhorting Methodists to hold fast “the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

I. Centered in God’s Empowering Spirit

It is fitting that “spirit” stands in the middle of this list, for the central characteristic of the spirit of early Methodism was recognition that their desired transformation was possible only through the gracious empowering work of the Holy Spirit. In Wesley’s enumeration of the crucial insights of early Methodism, the opening emphasis on the goal is followed immediately by: “2) That this can never be wrought in us, but by the power of the Holy Ghost. 3) That we receive this, and every other blessing, merely for the sake of Christ.”

Well aware that any concern for holy living was seen by some as “works righteousness,” Wesley consistently stressed that our human efforts are possible and effective only because they are preceded and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But he immediately added that the Spirit invites and expects us to “work out” what God is “working in” us (Phil. 2:12–13). Thus, while affirming that it is most truly the Spirit who “makes disciples of Jesus Christ,” Wesley encouraged early Methodists to own their role in *responding* to Christ’s call to discipleship, in *cultivating* their graciously-empowered growth as disciples, in *supporting* one another on this journey, and in *servicing* as ambassadors of Christ inviting others into the journey.

2. Shaped by Vital Christian Doctrine

Wesley’s careful articulation of our responsive participation in the journey of discipleship exemplifies the crucial role of doctrine in the Methodist Way. Much of his leadership of the movement was devoted to challenging inadequate and distorted conceptions of Christian teaching that he discerned were contributing to the inadequate (and sometimes perverse) lives of many Christians. He was equally concerned to articulate positively—for believer and skeptic alike—the central Christian convictions about the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the nature of sin and evil, and the scope of God’s salvific mission. Wesley emphasized the role of pastors as theologians/teachers in interchanges with his fellow Anglican priests, and embodied that role in his own pastoral work.

The prominence of Wesley’s concern for doctrine has been obscured for some by his sharp criticism of equating “being Christian” with mere affirmation of correct doctrine. But this was not a dismissal of doctrine, it was an insistence that Christian teaching is intended to shape the core convictions and dispositions that guide our choices and actions in the world. Wesley imbibed this conviction about the formative intent of doctrine from the early Church. Their precedent also led him to appreciate the most effective means of helping to instill abiding Christian convictions and dispositions. Sporadic exhortations are not sufficient. We are shaped most deeply by recurrent practices which engage our whole being. So Wesley made regular participation in such practices central to the Methodist Way—as specified in the General Rules. Through regular worship, Scripture study, prayer, and the like, the early Methodists immersed themselves in the whole of the Christian story and allowed it to form (and reform) the breadth of their convictions and dispositions. As an aid to this end, Wesley also devoted much of his pastoral energy to providing rich and balanced practical-theological materials (hymnals, Bible study guides, etc.) for his people to use in these routine practices.

3. Nurtured within a Rich Set of Disciplines

If recognition of the *vital role of practices* in our appropriation of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit was central to the Methodist Way; Wesley's appreciation for the *full range of these practices* was its deep wisdom. He often summarized this appreciation in a saying from the early church: "The soul and the body make a [human], the Spirit and discipline make a Christian." "Discipline" is used here, as it is in athletics or music, in the sense of regular practices that create greater capacity for performance. Significantly, it is directly correlated to the Spirit—who inspires and meets us in these practices, making them effective "means of grace." Just as important in Wesley's proverbial saying is the reminder that we humans are holistic creatures, that our actions rarely flow from intellectual motivations alone. As such, renewal of our sin-distorted convictions and dispositions is most effectively nurtured within a set of disciplines that address *all* the dimensions of our nature.

Nothing drew more of Wesley's attention in shepherding the early Methodist movement than weaving together such a rich set of "means of grace" as the core of their Way of life. Alongside standard practices of corporate worship he commended innovative practices such as the Love Feast and Covenant Service. While prescribing personal devotional reading and regular immersion in Scripture, he stressed the need for concurrent participation in corporate settings ("no holiness but social holiness"). Ever conscious of the value of practices that increase rational understanding of Christian truth, he put special emphasis on complementary practices where the empowering presence of the Spirit is mediated through touch, and taste, and tears. He gave particular prominence to the formative power of the faith sung, of small groups that provide support and accountability, and of regular participation in works of mercy. Finally, he recognized the crucial role of mentors, of those who are far enough along in their journey with Christ to be able to say with Paul "follow me, as I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Renewing the Methodist Way in United Methodist Congregations

Wesley and the early Methodists understood their Way of life not as an attempt to earn salvation, but as the wisdom drawn from Scripture and the broad Christian tradition about how to *respond* to and *appropriate* God's gracious transforming work in our lives and our world. It is a wisdom that we would do well to embody more fully in United Methodist congregations today.

A first step in this renewal would be to recognize and strengthen those dimensions of the Methodist Way that continue to define and empower our life together as United Methodists. We should also celebrate, and adopt more broadly, several programs developed in recent years that have been making a positive impact in our congregations—like Accountable Discipleship Groups, Disciple Bible Study, United Methodist Volunteers in Mission, and so on. But the effectiveness of these existing resources has been limited by the reality that they often stand alone, or are adopted in haphazard combinations within a congregation's life. We need to recover Wesley's broader vision of the Methodist Way, so that these resources can find their place within holistic attention to Doctrine, Spirit, and Discipline.

As we recover Wesley's vision, we can engage a second step in renewal. We desperately need to identify and reclaim in forms appropriate to our time and settings those dimensions of the Methodist Way that have been lost over the years due to neglect or abuse. This analysis and creative retrieval will need to take place at all levels of the church, so that it can take into account the distinctiveness of our various conferences and congregations. It will also require pastoral leaders at every level to take seriously their role as teachers and practical theologians, nurturing and guiding their communities like Wesley did the early Methodists.

It must be recognized that there are challenges to face in seeking to renew the Methodist Way in our congregations. Some of these challenges are features of modern culture, particularly in North America, such as the lingering romantic assumption that persons are innately provided with moral character (so no formation is needed), or the now more common assumption of stringent genetic and cultural determinism (so no transformation is possible). Other challenges are posed by features in church life, such as the ballooning of administrative and institutional demands upon bishops, superintendents, and pastors, largely at the expense of their role as “practical theologians” providing leadership in the formative practices of the community. The biggest challenge is that we live in a setting permeated by powerful shaping forces for ideals other than the Christian gospel.

Naming these competing forces and ideals, within the church and the culture, will be a necessary step in the self-recognition and repentance necessary for renewal in the Methodist Way. But this must be complimented by wise and effective leadership—both in developing structures, practices, and patterns of life that embody the alternative ideals of our tradition; and in discerning those current structures, practices, and patterns of life that must be “let go” in order to embrace the new.

Appendix

As we work together to describe what it means in the twenty first century to live the United Methodist Way, the following thoughts are offered as a springboard for further conversation.

Characteristics of Congregations Embodying the Methodist Way

A congregation that embodies the wisdom of the Methodist Way broadly in its life and ministry will be marked by at least these characteristics:

- Commitment to ongoing catechesis and formation in Christian doctrine, with emphasis on the transforming power and goal of God’s saving work in our lives and world.
- Faithful worship that draws on the rich liturgical resources of the tradition within the cultural context, inviting participants to celebrate and be shaped by the whole of the Christian Story into the image of the triune God.
- Regular celebration of Holy Communion and use of other occasional ritual means of grace such as the Love Feast and the Wesleyan Covenant Service.
- “Watching over one another in love,” through small groups that nurture growth in discipleship by providing mutual support, mentoring, and accountability.
- Emphasis on cultivating intentional relationships and ministry with those whom Charles Wesley called “Jesus’ bosom friends”—the poor, the imprisoned, children, the powerless, and the vulnerable.
- Embrace of Wesley’s model of stewardship as a way of life for individuals and the congregation.
- Support for, and modeling of, regular Bible study, prayer, fasting, and other personal “works of piety.”
- Consistent concern for inviting individuals and families into relationship with Jesus Christ, combined with wise practices for initiating them into the Body of Christ.
- Attention to identifying and cultivating those gifted to take roles of leadership in the range of ministry of the congregation.
- Appreciation for connection with other congregations and institutions in participating in God’s mission of personal, societal, and global transformation.

Role of Bishops in Leading the Renewal of the Methodist Way in United Methodism

As those who are consecrated by the church to provide “temporal and spiritual” oversight of The United Methodist Church, bishops are uniquely positioned to lead in reclaiming the wisdom of the Methodist Way in United Methodism in the 21st century. The following are means by which bishops, individually and collectively, can lead the church in this renewal:

- Reclaim and maximize the role of bishop as spiritual mentor whose life and leadership reflect and model Wesleyan doctrine, spirit, and discipline.
- Appoint and nurture District Superintendents and Cabinet members as spiritual mentors whose lives and leadership reflect and model Wesleyan doctrine, spirit, and discipline.
- Give priority to the teaching office of the episcopacy and spend significant time in teaching, interpreting, and implementing in the programs, structures, and emphases of the Conference and General Church the doctrines, disciplines, and practices that comprise the United Methodist Way.
- Develop with other bishops systems of support and accountability for growth in discipleship as bishops and faithfulness in the fulfillment of episcopal duties.
- Develop and implement systems of evaluation, affirmation, support, accountability, and deployment that maximize the pastoral roles of “practical theologian,” spiritual mentor, and effective leader in shaping faithful communities centered on the task of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.