

Important Things to Know About Being United Methodist
Information gleaned from www.umc.org

Our Christian Roots

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.
- 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.

Our Wesleyan Theological Heritage

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

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'.

Reflecting on Our Faith

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. 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.

Foundational Documents of the United Methodist Church

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. When these articles were voted on by the American conference, an additional article was added regarding the American context, bringing the total number of articles to 25.

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.

Church and Society

We Act in Society

Taking an active stance in society is nothing new for followers of John Wesley. He set the example for us to combine personal and social piety. Ever since predecessor churches to United Methodism flourished in the United States, we have been known as a denomination involved with people's lives, with political and social struggles, having local to international mission implications. Such involvement is an expression of the personal change we experience in our baptism and conversion.

The United Methodist Church believes God's love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people's lives to risk interpreting God's love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex. The church helps us think and act out a faith perspective, not just responding to all the other "mind-makers-up" that exist in our society.

To help guide our thinking and acting about how we live in and are engaged in ministry in the world, The United Methodist Church has created statements to guide the church in its efforts to create a world of justice.

"Our Social Creed" is a basic statement of our convictions about the fundamental relationships between God, God's creation and humanity. This basic statement is expanded in a more lengthy statement called the "Social Principles." This statement explains more fully how United Methodists are called to live in the world. Part of our *Book of Discipline*, the "Social Principles" serve as a guide to official church action and our individual witness.

Preface

The Social Principles are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions.

Preamble

We, the people called United Methodists, affirm our faith in God our Creator and Father, in Jesus Christ our Savior, and in the Holy Spirit, our Guide and Guard.

The Natural World

We affirm that we're responsible for the way we use the Lord's creation. We support social policies that promote the wise use of water, air, soil, minerals, and plants. We support the conservation of energy and oppose energy-using technologies that threaten human health. We're concerned for the humane treatment of animals and the respectful use of space.

The Nurturing Community

We affirm the family and work to strengthen its relationships. We affirm the sanctity of marriage and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We recognize divorce as regrettable and intend to minister to the members of divorced families. We affirm the integrity of single persons. We recognize that sexuality is a good gift of God and that sex between a man and woman is only to be clearly affirmed in the marriage bond. We recognize the tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion and urge prayerful consideration by all parties involved. We assert the right of every person to die with dignity.

The Social Community

We affirm all persons as equally valuable in God's sight. We reject racism and assert the rights of racial minorities to equal opportunities in employment, education, voting, housing, and leadership. We urge social practices that will uphold the rights of religious minorities, of children, youth, young adults, and the aging, of women, and of disabled persons. We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol and illegal drugs, and we support the rehabilitation of drug-dependent persons.

The Economic Community

All economic systems are under the judgment of God. We believe the private ownership of property is a trusteeship under God and must be responsibly managed. We support the right of employees and employers to organize for collective bargaining. We affirm the right of safe and meaningful work and creative leisure. We support efforts to ensure truth in pricing, packaging, lending, and advertising; and we urge people to evaluate their consumption of goods in the light of the quality of life. We call on Christians to abstain from gambling and to be in ministry with persons who are the victims of this societal menace.

The Political Community

We hold governments responsible for the protection of people's basic freedoms. We believe that neither church nor state should attempt to dominate the other. We call for freedom of information and quality education. We defend the right of individuals to practice conscientious, non-violent civil disobedience. We support government measures to reduce crimes consistent with the basic freedoms of persons; and we urge the creation of new systems of rehabilitation.

The World Community

God's world is one world. We hold nations accountable for unjust treatment of their citizens. We affirm the right of people in developing nations to shape their own destiny; and we applaud efforts to establish a more just international economic order. We believe war is incompatible with the teachings of Christ, and we claim that it is the primary moral duty of every nation to resolve disputes peacefully. We endorse the United Nations and commend all who pursue world peace through law.

Our Social Creed

We believe in God, Creator of the world; and in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of creation. We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we acknowledge God's gifts, and we repent of our sin in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends.

Theology of Discipleship

Theology is not just about God. It is also about us. We live out of our understanding of who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world. The Christian faith is grounded in the love and grace of God, experienced through Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is our response to God's love and grace.

The church calls our response to God Christian discipleship. Discipleship focuses on actively following in the footsteps of Jesus. As Christian disciples, we are not passive spectators but energetic participants in God's activity in the world. Because of what God has done for us, we offer our lives back to God. We order our lives in ways that embody Christ's ministry in our families, workplaces, communities, and the world.

Loving God

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, his response was: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment" (Matt. 22:37-38. See Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; and Luke 10:25-28.)

Discipleship is about loving God...It is more than an acknowledgement of God's existence or a statement of belief regarding God. It is total devotion, head-over-heels-in-love-with adoration. It is the deep desire to know God, to be one with God, and to worship God.

There are a variety of ways that we can develop our knowledge of and love of God. These include

- Prayer
- Bible study
- Worship
- Fasting
- Conversation with other Christians

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, called these practices means of grace. They are means for developing our relationship with God and for experiencing God's presence in our lives. These practices help us spend time with God, a significant factor in loving God.

Loving Neighbor

Jesus responded to questions about the most important commandment by quoting the Hebrew Scripture's admonition to love God with our whole being. (See Deut. 6:4-9 as well as gospel passages listed in the above section.) Then immediately he broadened the meaning of this admonition: "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mark 12:31).

These verses about loving God and loving neighbor as ourselves are known as the Great Commandment. Again and again, the Bible teaches us that loving God and loving neighbor are two sides of the same coin. We cannot do one without the other. Check out some of these passages for a glimpse at how prevalent this understanding of Christian discipleship is:

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| Matthew 5:43-48 | Matthew 25:31-46 |
| Luke 10:25-37 | John 15:12-17 |
| Romans 12:9-18 | 1 Corinthians 13 |
| 1 John 4:19-21 | |

From these passages and others we can draw several conclusions about what it means to love our neighbors. First of all, loving our neighbors means responding to specific needs—hunger, illness, imprisonment, loneliness, and so forth. Love is more than a feeling; it is behavior. It is practical and concrete.

Secondly, our neighbors include many people. Within the context of the Christian community, our neighbors are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Neighbors may also refer to the contemporary understanding of those who live near us. However, from a biblical perspective, neighbors often include people whom we might not normally consider:

- strangers;
- prisoners;
- people who mistreat us (who are our enemies);
- people from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds;
- people from different religious traditions;
- people who irritate us and push the boundaries of our patience.

Therefore, loving our neighbors requires attention and sacrifice. We have to pay attention to what is happening around us in order to see our neighbors and to recognize their needs. We must also consider their needs to be as important as our own in order to live faithfully. Loving neighbor is more than random acts of kindness. It takes time, energy, and commitment. It is a lifestyle carefully cultivated in response to God.

Finally, these passages emphasize that loving our neighbors is not optional; it is mandatory. It is what Christians do and what Christians are. Our lives are a testimony to our love—our love for God and our love for neighbor.

We Have a Mission

Why does the church exist? According to Matthew's Gospel, the risen Christ made it clear: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:19-20).

Based on this "Great Commission," our United Methodist Church has stated its purpose: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs".

So the mission of our congregation is to make disciples. This is a four-fold task....We could abbreviate our mission as one of welcoming-worshipping-nurturing-sending.

We reach out to people and welcome them into the church

We have a direct responsibility for people of the "world" around our church, the community in which we and others study, work, shop, play, and so forth. In this world are people with many hurts, doubts, and questions. There are some who are new in the community and feel a little lost, some who are proudly self-sufficient, and others who are in desperate circumstances. Our mission is to reach out to them, listen to them, accept them, share the gospel in word and deed, invite them into the family of faith, and joyfully receive all who will respond.

We relate people to God and help them deepen their relationship with God

The second task in making disciples is to offer people opportunities for growing closer to God. Whether they are visitors or old-time members, just beginning the journey of faith or well along the road—all are in need of God's love in Christ. Through worship, prayer, study, and honest sharing, we help one another discover that the Holy Spirit is not far off but present with us, wanting an open and loving friendship with each of us—not only friendship but commitment as well. Through our congregation's various ministries we encourage one another to give ourselves to Christ, to ground our lives in the living God.

We nurture people in Christian living

Third, our congregation's mission is to nurture people of all ages in the Christian faith and to help them practice the disciplines of discipleship. The church exists not to serve itself but to serve the world. We come to church not only for our own personal enrichment but also to prepare ourselves to do the work of love and to get ready to be Christ's disciples in the community. Through worship, baptism, Communion, Bible study, prayer, and other means of grace, we're strengthened for ministry.

We support people in their ministry

As members of the congregation, we're sent into the community to serve those in need and to make our community more loving and just. We believe that the Holy Spirit empowers and guides us in these ministries and that wherever there's need and suffering, we meet Christ, already at work. But still, we cannot be effective in ministry on our own. So the congregation exists, in part, to surround and support each member in his or her ministry. We do not always succeed in our efforts to be faithful disciples in the world. But with the loving support of the community of faith, we can continue to grow.

Methodists in Mission

The United Methodist faith is deeply rooted in the Scripture and in the basic beliefs of all Christians. Out of that theology and the faith have grown some specific actions that mark United Methodists as Christians engaged in ministry to the world. The early members of the groups that eventually became The United Methodist Church

- took strong stands on issues such as slavery, smuggling, and humane treatment of prisoners;
- established institutions for higher learning;
- started hospitals and shelters for children and the elderly;
- founded Goodwill Industries in 1902;
- became actively involved in efforts for world peace;
- adopted a Social Creed and Social Principles to guide them as they relate to God's world and God's people;
- participated with other religious groups in ecumenical efforts to be in mission.

The Ministry of All Christians

All Christians are called by God, through their baptism, to be in ministry in the world. Therefore, the term *minister* is appropriately used to describe any Christian who responds to God's call to reach out to the world and its people through loving acts of service. The ministers of the church are called to serve in a variety of ways.

As Laity—From its earliest days, Methodism has been a lay movement. The term *laity* comes from *laos*, which means of the people. The laity are the whole people of God, who serve as ministers witnessing to the work of God in individual lives and in the world.

As Clergy—Within the body of all Christian ministers, though, some are called to fulfill a specific ministry through the church.

Deacons—ordained ministers appointed to focus on servanthood. A deacon models the relationship between worship in the community of faith and service to God in the world. Deacons serve in a variety of ministry settings, both in the church and in the world.

Elders—ordained ministers appointed to lead congregations of Christians in the celebration of the sacraments and to guide and care for the life of the community. Some elders may also serve in extension ministries beyond the local church.

Local pastors—licensed ministers appointed to perform the duties of a pastor in a specific church or charge.

We Are All Called to Minister

Though our gifts vary widely, we're all called to and engaged in the one ministry of Jesus Christ. Some aspects of our ministry are easy and come naturally. Some are difficult, involving long hours, tough work, perhaps with conflict, perhaps with disappointing results. What drives us? What keeps us going? The list includes at least these three things:

- the memory of Jesus' life of service to others, which inspires us to follow him in ministry;
- the assurance of God's gracious love for us, which empowers us to love others;
- the promise of God's coming reign on earth, which draws us into action directed toward this vision.

Let's be more specific. Where does ministry happen?

It happens in our daily activity

For those who are alert to the needs of others, each day abounds with opportunities to serve. We minister with our families as we inquire about one another's lives, as we listen and respond with care, as we touch, as we smile and offer a kind word, and as we decide questions and reconcile conflicts. We take time to listen to a friend in need and we respond; this is often the greatest gift we can offer. We minister at work, to both co-workers and those we serve. We minister in the neighborhood or the shops as we go about the day's work.

It happens through new initiatives

We also go out of our way to minister. We hear of a need, read of a crisis, or see an opportunity to share God's love. It may be with someone across town, someone of another racial or economic group, a person with a disability, or a person of another nation or culture. We take time to call, to visit, to write, and to ask how we can help. We also take the time to respond.

It happens through groups and institutions

Many needs are best met by joining forces with others. We take part in community groups that are trying to serve human need or trying to change social forces that cause suffering. We give our time, our energy, and our money. Though others in these organizations may not think of it this way, for us it's Christ's ministry.

It happens through the church

Through our support and our contributions, we participate in the far-flung ministries of The United Methodist Church—in our district and annual conference, across the nation, and around the world. Here in our congregation we take part in service groups, we sign up for special action projects, we visit, we telephone, we lead, and we teach. And we minister face-to-face in all kinds of ways, both when we gather and in our informal contacts.

Inspired by the example of Jesus and empowered by God's love for us, we all carry out our ministry, both individually and together with others.