

CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY

# UNITED METHODIST HERITAGE & BELIEFS

by Chris Wilterdink



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**DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES**  
The United Methodist Church

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A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, *“Hope you don’t crash!”* as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They’re also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

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# INTRODUCTION

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**YOU VOLUNTARILY PICKED UP (OR YOUR PASTOR SENT YOU) THIS RESOURCE ON THE HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND BELIEFS OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH.**

Who are you and why are you like you are? You don't have to answer that, but it is a great question for anyone involved in youth ministry.

This primer provides a brief overview of how the United Methodist denomination came to be. **Knowing who we are informs how we build and sustain meaningful ministry with young people.**

*This brief resource is not all-encompassing. People go to seminary and still don't get the whole of Methodist history. This resource will give you enough of a background in Methodism to better understand foundational elements of the Methodist story!* Knowing where our theology comes from will influence the shape your ministry with young people takes, better equipping you to help form faithful, world-transforming disciples of Jesus Christ.

As you read through the resource, you will come across **buzzwords**, terms that if you hang around long enough in Methodist circles, you are bound to hear, and these



are important for you as a leader of young people to know about. These **buzzwords** will appear in **bold**. You don't have to memorize them, but if you hear one come up during church meetings, come back to this resource for a refresher!

# 01 IDEAS TAKING SHAPE: THEOLOGY INFLUENCES YOUTH MINISTRY

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## UNITED METHODIST HERITAGE AND THEOLOGY INFLUENCES HOW YOUTH MINISTRY IS BUILT AND EXPRESSED IN YOUR UNITED METHODIST CHURCH.

The story of Methodism and its spread involves young people from the very beginning. **John and Charles Wesley** were university students when they formed the **Holy Club** (a small prayer and Bible study group). Young people in smaller groups drove the spread of Methodism across the United States in the 1800s.

**The Epworth League of the Methodist Episcopal Church** combined five early groups focused on young people when the term “adolescent” was still emerging in 1889. This eventually gave rise to the **Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF)** in 1941, which brought together youth from several Methodist denominations under a centrally organized structure. Some United Methodist churches still refer to their youth ministry as “MYF” or “UMYF” because of this history. The Methodist movement birthed hundreds and thousands of churches, some organized into denominations that continue today.

The denominational organization of young people continued after the **1968 General Conference (The Uniting Conference)** with the formation of the **National**



**Youth Ministry Organization (NYMO)**, which became the **United Methodist Youth Ministry Organization (UMYO)**, which became the **Division on Ministries with Young People (DMYP)**. (By the way, acronyms are the best. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise!)

In the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, the paragraphs that number in the 1200s are those that outline the purpose and responsibilities of the denominational office for youth and young adults. As of the writing of this resource, a proposal to reorganize and clarify the work of the **DMYP** will be presented at the next **General Conference**. This would evolve the **DMYP** into the **Young People's Connectional Network (YPCN)**. Whether the **DMYP** or **YPCN** exists as you read this resource, that group is an elected body of young people responsible to guide the UMC's denomination-wide ministries with young people through **Discipleship Ministries**, one of the **general agencies of the UMC**.

Methodism does have things that make it theologically distinct in addition to the structures that the church has created! You will find some of the points of emphasis that come from **Wesleyan** (named after John Wesley) **Theology** in this resource. Jokes or commentary about Methodism "not standing for anything" really only seem to make sense to those unfamiliar with how Methodism came to be. The terms **Holy Club** and **Methodist** were originally derogatory terms from fellow students at Oxford. Jokes made about Methodist committee structures and potlucks, however, are absolutely fair game.

## 02 THE ENGLISH REFORMATION: THE STORY STARTS HERE

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THE CHRISTIAN STORY REALLY GOES BACK MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS, CONSIDERING THE ROOTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE LIFE OF JESUS AND ALL...BUT WE'LL SKIP A MILLENNIUM OR TWO FOR THE SAKE OF OUR FOCUS.

By the Middle Ages (let's say between 600–1600 CE) in Europe, many people began to sense corruption in the church, believing that leaders were mixing politics and money with religion in dangerous ways. The predominant Christian churches were the **Catholic Church in Western Europe** (think Pope in Rome), and **Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe** (think decentralized, no single leader. Either way, think of amazing hats!)

Many people sought to reform the Catholic Church from within, with mixed success and lots of failure. By the middle of the sixteenth century (1500–1600 CE), reformation movements (literally reforming or re-forming the church) took place all over Europe, mostly along national borders. Lutherans, Presbyterians, and all other **Protestants** (named because they protested the Catholic Church) trace their beginnings to this time period. This **Protestant** family of Christian churches includes **Methodists**.



England broke away from the Catholic church as well, but not purely for religious reasons...King Henry VIII wanted a divorce, and the Catholic Pope (Clement VII) wouldn't allow it. So, King Henry decided to form an "English Catholic Church" with himself as its head. This created the Church of England, also known as the **Anglican Church**, or in the United States, the **Episcopal Church**. (Why can't we be nice and tidy and just have one name for things?)

For nearly two hundred years, the faith of the ruling monarch in England caused confusion and violence in England. If a Catholic sat on the throne, Protestants were harassed and killed. If a Protestant sat on the throne, Catholics were on the receiving end of that abuse. Showing too much excitement about your faith became physically dangerous and socially costly. John Wesley enters this very reserved scene in the 1700s, and that may help us understand his encouragement for early Methodists to "sing lustily." Early Methodists were known for being loud musically. Given that strong history, it is amazing how difficult it is for many current congregations to clap on beat.

Eventually, a "**Middle Path**" (**Via Media**) or "**Third Way**" emerged that wasn't explicitly Catholic or Protestant, but a church that blended elements of both. This blending represents a "*both...and*" approach that continues to influence Methodism today, as opposed to the "*either...or*" approach that was literally killing people.

# 03 EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: THE RISE OF METHODISM

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## TWO-HUNDRED-SOMETHING YEARS OF WAR BASED ON RELIGION WORE PEOPLE OUT BY THE 1700s.

Practically everyone in England grew tired of religious zeal, so, of course, the church had no passion. Combined with this lack of enthusiasm, the church in England was ignoring major social ills such as child labor, rising alcoholism rates from newly available distilled alcohol, extreme poverty, debtors' prisons, and slavery—just to name a few. In this context, Susanna and Samuel Wesley married and had children (Nineteen kids! Although nine of them died as infants), including **John and Charles Wesley**. John and Charles are largely recognized as the central figures of the Methodist movement.

**John Wesley**, a genuine organizer, became the driving force behind the Methodist Movement. He was a minister for the Church of England, so his being a **Methodist** was about his behavior, not a label for the denomination he ministered for. He studied at Oxford during the “**Age of Enlightenment**,” when an emphasis on reason became a big, big deal. He was influenced by early Greek Fathers as he formed ideas on “sanctification,” “holiness,” and “Christian perfection.” He also believed that faith had to do with feelings and the heart, so the “**both...and**” concept from the “**Middle Path**” again shows up in this



combination of faith that should include both thinking and feeling. This emotional facet of religion came from John's experiences with religious groups like **Moravians** and **German Pietists**. John's intentional, disciplined, and organized approach to faith is where the word "**Methodist**" comes from...a methodical approach to life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

**Charles Wesley**, who may be best described as a song-writing mystic, had the unique ability to write theology into song—memorable songs with great beats that also communicated Methodist thoughts about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and how we as people relate to them. He wrote thousands of songs, many of which are still found in hymnals across a variety of denominations. Classics like "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," "Christ the Lord has Risen Today," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," and "Love Divine, All Love's Excelling" could be considered among his greatest hits. One can even find playlists of Charles Wesley's hymns on Spotify and other music streaming services. Mix up your go-to playlists; we dare you!

Charles's ability to create a soundtrack for the Methodist Movement expanded the spread of Methodist theology, educating Methodists through songs. John's ability to write, inspire, and organize provided the framework for others inspired to join the Methodist movement to begin preaching and planting churches. The Methodist Movement planted seeds that later blossomed into several different denominations, as well as Methodist churches with national identities.

From the beginning, Methodists put their faith into action, working to address the social ills present in their communities. This tradition continues in forms of hospitals, schools, outreach, mission, and service ministries today.

# 04 MODERN METHODISM AND THE CREATION OF THE UMC

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JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY WERE IN NORTH AMERICA BEFORE THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR, IN WHICH THE AMERICAN COLONIES DECLARED INDEPENDENCE FROM BRITAIN AND EVENTUALLY BECAME THE UNITED STATES.

John and Charles did not stay during the war; like lots of other priests, they headed back to the relative safety of Britain.

After the Revolutionary War, John Wesley asked the **Bishop of London (Church of England)** to ordain ministers for the “New World” of the Americas, but he was turned down. In 1784, because John had been told “no” a few too many times, John went rogue. **John Wesley** ordained **Thomas Coke** as a **Superintendent for America**. John actually ordained several folks, and he still tried to do it within the structure of the **Church of England**. Many Methodist preachers were inspired to travel to the emerging country of the United States once the Revolutionary War was over. They did this in spite of harsh living conditions. These traveling Methodist preachers came together for “**The Christmas Conference**” in the city of **Baltimore** in 1784, where “**The Methodist Church in America**” was formed. It was



the Methodists in America's turn to go rogue because John Wesley was really not in favor of this move.

At this conference, **Thomas Coke** and **Francis Asbury** were elected as superintendents for this new church. Asbury goes on to ride hundreds of thousands of miles, preaching and organizing Methodist churches. The model that John Wesley created encouraged churches to create smaller groups called **bands, classes, and societies**. Some of Wesley's model took root in the United States, but not exactly as it did in England. Each of those smaller groups within a church was designed to inspire relationships and accountability for church members to keep living godly lives. If you've got small groups in your local United Methodist church, it would be nice and tidy to believe that this is their origin story. Sadly, life is rarely nice and tidy. The classes that were originally organized as faithful social support groups became...Sunday school.

Asbury was among a group who became known as **circuit riders**, ministers who traveled by horse between different towns and churches, preaching, administering the sacraments (**baptism** and **Communion**), teaching, and equipping the people who lived in those towns to keep the church going even when the pastor was away. This was a hard life, and circuit riders did this as part of their calling to ministry, even without perks like frequent rider miles. Some areas still organize their churches into circuits or have one minister serving multiple congregations.

**Coke** and **Asbury** were termed “bishops” in 1787, and the Methodist story in the United States grew from there. Side note: John Wesley isn’t crazy about Coke and Asbury being called bishops; Wesley was not in favor of forming a new church or that church electing its own bishops and leadership. Side-side note: **Cokesbury**, a group that publishes Methodist materials, takes its name from Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury’s last names getting mushed together. There are some ups and downs, some splits and some reunions during the Civil War as Methodists wrestled through slavery and other social issues of the 1800s and 1900s.

In 1968, the over 10.3 million-member **Methodist Church** and the over 750,000-member **Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB)** merged to form the **United Methodist Church (UMC)**. During this **General Conference**, (or **Uniting Conference** — again with the multiple name thing!?), the *first United Methodist Book of Discipline* was put into place, outlining the structure of this new denomination as well as social and theological positions. Before 1968, there were other administrative books that outlined the structure of different denominations, including page-turning titles such as “*The Book of Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Church.*”

The spirit of the Methodist “both...and” approach left room for interpretation in the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* and set the stage for each General Conference to follow (every four years) to debate, discuss, and refine the official positions of the United Methodist

Church. The 1968 General Conference also worked to eliminate the structural segregation of African Americans into a separate jurisdiction in the USA. The “United” in “United Methodist” comes from the Evangelical United Brethren Church, and the symbol of the UMC includes two flames coming together as one.

The Methodist movement has birthed many churches and denominations, truly influencing the Christian faith globally. The **General Conference of the UMC** continues to meet every four years, and it remains the only body capable of speaking officially on behalf of the denomination. Church members (annual conference delegates) and clergy are elected to serve as representatives to General Conference, and they have the power to vote on legislation to update the *Book of Discipline*. Challenges, like global pandemics, delayed the General Conference of 2020. When the General Conference cannot meet, many issues that cause stress and tension within the UMC cannot be officially addressed.

As of the writing of this resource (2021), **General Conference** had taken place every four years since 1968, and it always included debates, legislation, and language to keep working through any items created in the spirit of the **Middle Way’s “both...and”** ideals that needed to be revisited, or updated, due to tension associated with those items. **General Conference of 2016** was unique in that so much of the legislative process time was taken over by arguments over human sexuality that a **Special Called General Conference**

of 2019 was organized (yes, it took place in 2019), specifically for the UMC to wrestle with issues related to human sexuality. The 2019 General Conference took place, and it provided some proposals that could create avenues for The United Methodist Church to both continue on and branch off into new denominations after 2020. (Notice that both...and thing again!)

**The 2020 General Conference**, where recommendations from 2019 could officially be considered and voted on, has been delayed for several years (thanks, COVID-19), and it remains unclear how and when The United Methodist Church will address issues related to human sexuality. The potential for new denominations to be formed by a split of The United Methodist Church remains a reality; however, the process is complicated. Consider the very human example of a divorce, where people who had previously been united by marriage vows now have to decide how to separate fairly. Property, retirement funds, money donated to and cared for in togetherness—all need arrangements—because each of those things had previously been shared.

Because of the timing of the writing of this resource, we do not have clear answers for what the United Methodist connection will look like in the future. We can confidently say, that because of our Methodist ideals and Wesleyan roots, that if new denominations are birthed from the structure of The United Methodist Church, the UMC will look for opportunities to be ecumenical partners where appropriate with those new denominations.

# 05 METHODISM'S HERITAGE BELIEFS

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THE UMC LAYS OUT ITS OFFICIAL BELIEFS AND STRUCTURE IN *THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE* AND ADDITIONAL TEACHING AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN *THE BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS*.

Since its founding, the United Methodist Church has spoken to the issues of the day as an expression of the Wesleyan commitment to social holiness. You can find these in *The Social Principles*. Other denominations in the Methodist family have similar documents with a variety of names. Below are generalizations that apply to denominations with a Methodist heritage. This section is not all-encompassing, official, nor is it specific to every context. That said, the Methodist family of faith does share much in common across the world, and the parts of our heritage and theology that we choose to emphasize make Methodists unique.

- Methodists understand themselves to be a part of **historic Christianity**. We believe that we are a part of **Christ's universal church**.
- Methodism is a **conjunctive tradition**. *This means we believe God is found more in "and" rather than "or"*. For example, Methodism teaches God is found in grace and good works. Salvation is a free gift of God's



forgiveness and healing; Christ's work for us and the Holy Spirit's work in us; freedom from sin and freedom to love.

- Methodists embrace a **catholic spirit**. (Note the little "c," which makes this word mean "universal" as opposed to meaning the Catholic Church.) *We recognize that people who love God and love what God loves will not all think alike.* Methodists are called to reach out and work with people of other Christian traditions. We do not allow our various opinions get in the way of our common pursuit of God's mission in the world.
- Methodism is a **Protestant** tradition. We recognize **two sacraments: baptism and Holy Communion**. In baptism the Holy Spirit marks us as God's beloved child and receives us into the universal Church of Jesus Christ. Methodists do not re-baptize people who were baptized in other Christian denominations because all baptized Christians are members of Christ's universal Church. *(In other words, God gets it right the first time. We can "remember" and celebrate our baptisms of course.)* Therefore, **The Lord's table (Holy Communion)** is open to all people who seek forgiveness of their sins, desire to know Christ, and strive to live in peace with their neighbors.
- Methodists are **ecumenical**. We work with other Christian denominations, serving with Christ as his representatives in the world. We are committed to religious toleration and theological diversity.

- Methodists believe **God is love**. This understanding should permeate all that the church creates and drive how we act toward God and toward one another.
- We believe **Scripture is the primary source and guide** for Christian faith and life.
- Methodists understand the church is a “**priesthood of all believers**” where ordained pastors and lay ministers work together pursuing God’s mission in the world.
- Methodists are a connected people who believe the church does not have a mission...instead, the God of mission has a church. We believe the church is a network of local congregations working together to make disciples of Jesus Christ equipped to serve with him in God’s mission for the world.
- Methodists embrace an **evangelical spirit**. We believe in conversion and lifelong growth in **holiness of heart and life**. Holiness of heart is an inward love of God with all the heart, soul, and mind. Holiness of life is living our love of God by loving who God loves: our neighbor and ourselves. God’s reach and disposition toward us, and God’s work with us, makes growth in holiness possible. As Christians, we desire an outer, relational change, which Wesley called **justification**. This is what God does for us; our part in the process is accepting the gift of God’s forgiveness and acceptance in Christ’s life, death,

and Resurrection. Justification marks the beginning of the Holy Spirit working in us. John Wesley called this inner change **sanctification**. As we cooperate with what God is doing in us, grace heals the damage sin has done to the image of God in each of us. The Holy Spirit works in us, replacing what the apostle Paul calls “works of the flesh” with “fruit of the Spirit.” Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control become our natural response to the world (see Galatians 5:21-24).

# 06 UNIQUELY FOCUSED BELIEFS (CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING!)

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## GRACE UPON GRACE UPON GRACE

### WHAT IT MEANS

God's grace manifests in all of creation and endows us with dignity and freedom. Methodist confirmation materials and teachings will describe grace in three large categories:

- ***Prevenient Grace***—God's grace always surrounding us, whether we asked for it or deserve it or not, draws us closer and into a deeper relationship with God.
- ***Justifying Grace***—God's grace demonstrated through the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (once accepted personally) works inner transformation, forgiveness, and alignment with God's way of doing things.
- ***Sanctifying Grace***—God's grace that helps us recognize the depth of sin in our lives and the need for ongoing forgiveness and dependence on a Savior. Experiencing this grace and noticing the movement of the Holy Spirit guides us as we grow toward Wesley's idea of **Christian perfection**.



## **WHY IT MATTERS**

Grace-based youth ministry allows for exploration, failure, reflection, and growth. This is not “cheap grace” that might simply mean forgiveness. Instead, God’s gift of grace is what empowers us to respond with a life of faithfulness. We can show God’s love through youth ministry because God first loved all of humanity.

## **HOW IT CAN SHAPE YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY**

- **Guide Salvation as Process:** Salvation is a lifelong journey and process of us becoming something new, something made more and more in God’s image, living lives patterned more and more after the life of Jesus. Help youth discern their callings and help them understand how to carry their faith with them in their vocation. Create opportunities to live and learn as intentional disciples. Build an [intentional discipleship system](#), and reflect young people’s growth back to them.
- **Demonstrate Christian Assurance:** At baptism, we understand that God claims us as beloved members of God’s family. Help young people recognize how to expect to experience the love of God in their daily lives.
- **Encourage Thoughtful Reflection and Embrace a Latitude of Perspectives:** Value thinking and reasoning during Bible studies and discussions. Encourage youth to seek answers (and be open with their doubts!) consistent with a Christian worldview

and teach them to ask and engage in meaningful questions.

- **Develop Meaningful Relationships with God and People:** Help youth understand that **salvation** is by **grace** (from God) through **faith** (our response to grace). Create opportunities for youth to partner with God, through the teachings of Jesus, and energy of the Holy Spirit to demonstrate how to show love and care for all of creation. Allow for fellowship opportunities along with teaching and serving opportunities. Friendships lead to support networks of all ages and stages of discipleship in the church.
- **Recognize Human Dignity:** In the Methodist spirit of **both...and**, build a community of welcome where youth can understand that all people are made in the image of God *AND* are still “made of clay” being worked to perfection by the potter’s (God’s) hands. Stress the goodness of being created in the image of God, as opposed to being created as sinful creatures to start with.

## Doctrinal Standards

### WHAT IT MEANS

The United Methodist Church does not make people completely agree to a certain document to be members. Although the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* contains items like “**Articles of Religion**” and “**Confessions of Faith**,” church members are not required to affirm

those statements as part of their membership. Christians should be in relationship with one another and should discover together the difference God is making in the world and in their lives. Time to process beliefs, chew on questions, wrestle with God, and the social nature of Christianity are important for Methodists. One of the processes for discernment and reflecting on faith experiences and wrestling with theological issues or current social issues is outlined below:

- We are grounded in the truths revealed through scripture. We are informed by Christian tradition. We are enlivened through life-giving experiences. We can test and confirm faith by reason and sometimes our faith challenges our reason. **Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience** together are sometimes called the **Wesleyan Quadrilateral**.
- **Scripture:** Scripture is primary and the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice, but Methodists are not biblical literalists. Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation in addition to guiding our faith and practice, but we still have to interpret the scriptures. Methodists do take scripture seriously, which does not mean the same thing as always taking scripture literally.
- **Tradition:** Tradition is the source and measure of what it means to be authentic in our expression of Christianity. The legacy of the “great cloud of witnesses” and earlier Christian communities

provides us insight to the common history of our faith and the issues we wrestle with because of that faith.

- **Reason:** We are encouraged to use our minds to read, interpret, and ask questions about scripture and faith. We can test, understand, and confirm scripture and tradition through reasoning. In John Wesley's context, being enthusiastic about faith was deemed irrational; so often, John went out of his way to praise reason, because he was often accused of having none. A difficult part of the Christian journey, in Wesley's opinion, was the process of transforming our reason as we better understand our faith. It's weird, but certainly Christians are sometimes called to do irrational things!
- **Experience:** Our chance to experience the love of God confirms and enlivens our faith. Our experiences can authenticate the truths of scripture in our lives. Tradition could be looked at as the collective experience of the church and all humanity through time. Remember, personal experiences can also take place in community.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Methodists value the chance to wrestle with spiritual experiences. As a youth leader in a United Methodist Church, it is important to offer your youth chances to ask questions and work to make sense of things that challenge their faith. This process asks you as a leader

to create judgement-free spaces where youth and leaders can ask and seek answers to difficult questions about faith, social issues, and the human condition. It also means the discussion and reflection times that you create as a youth leader should include time for young people to share both what they think and what they feel as you move through Bible studies and other lessons. Remember, students (and adults for that matter!) do not have to wrestle with their experiences alone. That can be done within the larger tradition and community of faith.

The Methodist approach to learning, or knowing the mind and heart of Christ, starts with questions ([The Holy Club at Oxford actually used these 22 questions in their discussions](#)) and opportunities to reflect on how our personal thoughts, feelings, and actions are getting us closer to or taking us farther away from living a Christian life.

### **HOW IT COULD SHAPE YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY**

- As you select curricula (that is the plural of the word *curriculum*...thanks Latin), refer to the guidance provided by Discipleship Ministries about [how to spot Methodist and Wesleyan theological approaches](#) in any material you consider.
- When you facilitate prayer times, Bible studies, worship, or acts of service, provide ample time for discussion and reflection. Thoughts and feelings are important components in faith.

- Create opportunities for young people to practice their faith. If you are really focused on a specific passage of scripture or spiritual concept that is important in your ministry setting, do more than talk about it; provide chances to actually do it and then reflect on the experience.
- Ask young people, their families, and church leadership about what each of those groups believe to be important for young people to learn about, address, and apply to living. If you can identify topics that all three of those groups believe to be important, start with those! When you begin to organize lessons or learning experiences on those topics, the **Wesleyan Quadrilateral** provides one approach to explore that topic.
  - What does scripture say about this topic? Are there multiple or seemingly conflicting teachings from scripture? Are there other passages that seem to exist in tension with this passage? What research resources can I provide to help young people understand the context from which the scripture comes from? (Dictionaries, encyclopedias, concordances, etc.)
  - What have Christians from other times and contexts said about this topic? What does our community or cultural tradition say about this topic? Are there stories from within our congregation, our surrounding schools, our neighborhoods, towns, and cities that are

important to include? Consider bringing in guest speakers or community members that fit the topic to be a part of the group during the discussions and activities. Get out into the community as well!

- What does reason say about this topic? (Remember, Wesley would have defined this as “Western Reason” because he lived during the “**Age of Reason.**”) So, whose reasoning do we value and include in this step? As individuals, what knowledge and wisdom do we bring to the discussions and activities? Take time to list scenarios and questions that both challenge and confirm scripture and tradition.
- What do personal experiences say about this topic? Create welcoming spaces, where youth trust to be held with care and confidence, so that if someone in your group has personal experiences with a topic you want to discuss, you can provide them a supportive platform as they share their story. What does the Christian experience say about this topic, both in our lifetimes and the lifetimes of those we know came before us?

## **The Life of the Church**

### **WHAT IT MEANS**

Every congregation is an expression of the living body of Christ. Methodists should expect their experiences

with a church to be life-giving. Methodists should also be ready to serve as a living example of Christ's teachings.

- **Vital Piety:** Christianity is more than just what one believes; it is also a matter of what one feels and experiences.
- **Practical Divinity:** It is important to practice what we preach. Living out our faith in the everyday world through serving others informs our beliefs. That spirit historically has been more important than splitting theological hairs.
- **Social, Not Individual Christians:** We do not stand alone in faith. Nurturing community and connection is a vital expression of our faith.
- **Mission, Social Activism, Social Creeds:** Involving ourselves in social issues is part of faithfulness and our discipleship. Historically, Methodists are among the first to get involved in social issues because personal religion and service for society's betterment go hand in hand.
- **Heart and Mind:** We can learn faith and we can experience faith, both are affirmed and welcomed.
- **"Conciliar" Church:** There is no specific document people agree to in order to be Methodist. "Conciliar" comes from the word "council," and we often call our internal councils "conferences"

or “committees.” We recognize ancient creeds and confessions as valid summaries of Christian truth, and we understand that creeds can provide boundaries for Christian beliefs. We do have **“Articles of Religion”** and **“Confessions of Faith”** that give our beliefs points to orbit around.

- **Armenian, not Calvinist:** Methodism focuses on free will and does not believe all things are predestined. Because we are actively in relationship with God, we can choose to cooperate with God’s grace.

## **WHY IT MATTERS**

One of the contributions United Methodism makes to the Christian faith is our **emphasis on grace** and the understanding that **God is Love**. United Methodists can struggle to define what it is that makes them Methodist or how they are connected to the broad, connectional network of United Methodist churches all over the world. These seven elements are a few of the common threads that tie churches of the Methodist movement together. The focus on a discipleship-centered and behavior-driven expression of the church invites active faith lives. Youth leaders, remember that salvation and transformation are lifelong journeys of discipleship. You play a part in helping young people discover their identity, belonging, and purpose as they mature into world-transforming disciples of Jesus Christ. This ministry is about much more than a series of single moments like a baptism, an altar call, or a confession. Youth ministry in the UMC is about inspiring and

supporting a lifetime of discovery, action, and habits that will shape the world for generations to come.

### **HOW IT COULD SHAPE YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY**

- Equip young people as agents of change in your church and community. Help youth discern where God is at work in the world and how they might come alongside that work to drive change. Provide leadership development opportunities, connect them with spiritual mentors, and advocate for their meaningful presence on existing church committees.
- Develop a leadership team structure for youth and equip them to take the lead in some aspects of youth ministry. Also provide space for them to reflect on their leadership journeys.
- Help youth connect to the broader connectional network of the UMC through districts, annual conferences, episcopal areas, caucus groups, and national or global gatherings. The experiences of leading beyond a local church are tremendously valuable.
- Offer youth opportunities to meet with **certified lay leaders** and **clergy** to discuss calling and discernment possibilities. **All youth are laypeople** (not ordained as clergy), and the Methodist movement is at its best when driven by passionate laypeople! After all, the Methodist movement started on a college campus. There are training materials

and courses available to help anyone (including youth) to become lay servants at [UMCdiscipleship.org](https://umcdiscipleship.org).

- Listen to youth about social issues and injustices that they encounter through the course of their daily lives. Support them in confronting societal issues and welcome discussion, debate, and action steps to address barriers that prevent us from recognizing the value of all people. Help young people to become educated about justice issues and how their discipleship is tied to service and activism in the Methodist tradition.

# CONCLUSION

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## KNOWING WHERE METHODIST THEOLOGY CAME FROM AND HOW METHODIST BELIEFS ARE OFTEN EXPRESSED SHAPES THE YOUTH MINISTRY IN YOUR UNITED METHODIST CHURCH.

As you create opportunities for young people to experience the love of God, you also are responsible to help them make sense of those experiences and encourage them to express their growing faith to others!

- Practicing what we believe leads to transformational experiences.
- Reflecting on those experiences with others and the Christian tradition will give us words to describe the thoughts and emotions we experienced during the transformation.
- Those experiences are so awesome and life-changing, we feel like we just have to tell someone else about our experience with God.
- Sharing our faith experiences and God's love (or witnessing if you like more churchy language) then inspires us to go and live out our understanding of what it means to be a disciple.



That pattern of experiencing God’s love and inevitable sharing adds up to a lifetime of transformation, especially when a youth leader helps young people repeat that process over and over again, until it is second nature. A spiritual habit, if you will.

If you just skipped to the end of this resource because it was too long, and you just couldn’t force yourself to read even this very brief and broad overview of Methodist history and beliefs...that’s fine. We are a family based in grace, after all. The short-short version is this:

- Methodists believe in a disciplined approach to faith. You can’t spell “Methodist” without the word “method.” We approach our lifetime of transformation by God’s grace methodically.
- Methodists believe being “Christian” doesn’t just happen. We have to allow God’s grace to work in us and through us to experience transformation individually and in our world.
- Methodists can be encouraged to grow in faith through using scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. These four elements encourage us to question, discuss, and find answers in community.
- Methodists’ disciplined approach to faith includes ways of organizing ourselves and our church. This organization affects local United Methodist churches, as well as a larger connectional structure that spans the globe.

# OTHER RESOURCES

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## From Discipleship Ministries

- [Frequently Asked Questions About Baptism, Membership, and Salvation](#)
- [By Water and the Spirit](#)

## From UMC.org

- [Basics of Our Faith](#)
- [UMC History](#)
- [UMC Family Tree](#)
- [UMC Structure](#)

## From Archives and History

- [Methodist History Journal](#)
- [Search the Archives](#)

