



BUTLER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
5 BARTHOLDI AVENUE, BUTLER, NJ 07405

973-838-2026

WWW.BUMCNJ.ORG

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO BE A
UNITED METHODIST?**

Steven G. Bechtold, Pastor

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A United Methodist is a person who confesses Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and seeks to grow in their faith as a faithful disciple through the community of faith known as United Methodists. As the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States, United Methodists stand together in a connectional ministry to witness to the love of God for our world in our lives, and to be in mission together to manifest that love in real and tangible ways.

The United Methodist Church is a global denomination with churches and affiliates within the Methodist family on every continent. In some places, such as South Korea, Methodist missionaries carried the gospel there over 100 years ago. In the ensuing years, the good news took root, and eventually, the South Korean church was able to stand on its own and become one of the fastest growing members of the Methodist family. In other areas, such as Africa, the United Methodist Church has been actively working to develop programs and facilities that will enable our African brothers and sisters to train their own clergy and other professionals to grow the church of Jesus Christ and improve the lives of the people. To say that the "United Methodist Church is" is not exactly accurate. We "have been" for more than 200 years, but we are always "becoming" what God intends for us to be as we respond to the needs of a changing world.

HISTORY

The Beginnings: John Wesley

The United Methodist Church traces its ancestry back to John Wesley, his brother Charles, and a small group of persons who met for prayer, study and the practice of spiritual disciplines at Oxford University in Oxford, England in the 1730's. It was there that the name "Methodist" was first used not by this small group that called themselves the Holy Club, but by others who used the name in a derogatory manner. This small band of Christians believed in a methodical practice of faith, rather than leaving things to chance. They sought not only to gather regularly and to study the scriptures, but also to serve others.

An ordained Anglican priest, Wesley kept searching for a deep, heart-felt faith that seemed to elude him within the confines of the Church of England. During an ill-fated attempt at mission work in the colony of Georgia (now our State) John Wesley met a group of Moravians who had a truly heart-felt, deep confidence in God. It was just what he was looking for. When he returned to London, he began attending services and Bible studies with the Moravians, and on May 24th, 1738, he had what he described as a "heart-warming experience." It was then that he knew, with confidence, that God loved him, that he was a forgiven person, that he was a recipient of God's grace. John Wesley's experience came just days after his brother had had a similar experience, and together they began to bring the good news to whoever needed to hear it.

Charles shared the good news primarily through his hymns, and is one of the most prolific hymn writers of all times. He wrote approximately 6,500 hymns in his lifetime. Some of his familiar titles are "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," and "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing." In many ways, Methodism was as much of a singing movement as it was a preaching movement.

John Wesley, meanwhile, did some things that the Church of England considered vile and unchurchlike. He began to preach in the fields and near the mines, where the common, illiterate people worked and lived. No one had ever brought the gospel to the people where they were. He did mission work in areas that the church considered off limits such as in prisons. This was the era of debtors prison, and Wesley's father himself spent a short time in debtors prison. He reached out to the poor and the common person to provide for their daily needs. He even began to publish short, inexpensive books so that the average person could afford to have information in their hands. Not all of these were about theology or about the Bible. Wesley even tried his hand at writing a home medicine book filled with home remedies. He did this to provide for persons who could never afford to go to a doctor. He also started sending people back to the Anglican Church to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, something that the hierarchy of the Church of England discouraged. It has been noted by non-Methodist historians that were it not for the mission and ministry of John Wesley and the Methodists reaching out to the underclass of England, there would have been an English revolution much like the French Revolution of 1789.

Wesley organized his people called Methodists into class meetings, led by lay people, to bring the people together throughout the various towns and villages of England. A class meeting was a way of holding people accountable for their spiritual journeys. The purpose was two-fold: to gather for sharing and learning about person's spiritual lives, and to collect the offering of the people, which incidentally did not go to support buildings and programs, but was used to reach out to the poor. Perhaps Wesley was drawing on experiences he witnessed in his own home where his mother, Susanna, would gather people in her kitchen for study and sharing. This, by the way, was not well accepted by all. Samuel Wesley, John's father, was the parish priest in Epworth, and many did not approved of the rector's wife being so boldly outspoken and influential in spiritual matters. Obviously, it did not stop her.

During Wesley's time, the American colonies were growing in numbers and independence. John Wesley commissioned preachers, known as Circuit Riders, to bring the gospel not only to the present towns and villages, but also to the frontier of America as the colonies expanded westward. Following the American Revolution, he reluctantly gave his blessing to the formation of a new church in the new nation. In England, Methodism remained a movement with the Anglican Church, but this would not work for America. Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, both sent by Wesley, were elected as the first Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church on Christmas Eve, 1784, in Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore (Episcopal describes the form of church government, i.e. bishops). From this beginning, Methodism spread across the country and around the world.

Methodism in America

One of the prime symbols of American Methodism was the Circuit Rider. This was a traveling preacher who rode on horseback from church to church, community to community. When the circuit rider came to an area, it was his job to preach and to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. A circuit rider might only come to a community or church once every for to six weeks. In between, it was the job of lay people (church members) to keep the church alive and to share the gospel. For the first hundred years or so, Methodist pastors (i.e. circuit riders) never lived next to the church in a church owned parsonage that is so common today. They were on the road all the time. Circuit riders changed circuits frequently, sometimes as often as every three months, because it was a painfully strenuous existence, and some areas were harder than others. The average circuit rider only served about 5 years, either retiring from exhaustion or dying. Most were not married.

This makes the example and life of Francis Asbury even more incredible. Asbury served as a traveling preacher (in those days, bishops served on the circuits alongside the other preachers) until his death in 1816, 32 years after being consecrated as the leader of the American church, and 45 years after being sent to America by John Wesley in 1771. He traveled as far north as Massachusetts (which included Maine at that time) and as far south as Georgia over 20 times each, and journeyed through New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, North and South Carolina, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and Tennessee between 45 and 80 times, depending on the territory. He did it all on horseback, which makes it even more remarkable. He, like all Methodist preachers were called on to do, kept a detailed journal of his travels, from which we are able to glean such information.

The results of a circuit rider's ministry was the formation of a Methodist church in every county of the 48 contiguous States of the United States, something which still stands today. The circuit riders empowered the laity to do ministry through class meetings and lay preaching. The camp meeting arose out of this ministry in the mid-nineteenth century. People such as Abraham Lincoln hailed the Methodists for their work in spreading "scriptural holiness" to the entire nation.

Not all of the history of Methodism in America is glory and honor. Methodism has had its share of divisions and struggles. Early on, the Methodist Episcopal Church limited the full participation of persons of African descent – slave and free, which resulted in several groups forming their own church, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion. In the 1820's a group of Methodists felt that the power of the bishop was increasing too much, and broke away to form the Methodist Protestant Church. In 1844, after a contentious debate at the church's General Conference in which a southern bishop was removed from office for being a slave owner, the Methodist Episcopal Church split north and south, foreshadowing what was to come some 16 years later in the nation. The Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist

Protestant Church did not reunite until April, 1939, some 74 years after the end of the Civil War. Discussions are presently under way with the predominantly African Methodist denominations for either merger or at least a closer bond, seeking to heal a wound that is over 200 years old.

Although women have always had an important role in Methodism, beginning with the influence of Susanna Wesley and the crucial leadership of women such as Barbara Heck in New York City, women were not given full rights and privileges within the church for many years. Although laymen were permitted to vote in the General Conference (previously it was only clergy who had these rights) beginning in 1872, laywomen were not permitted voting rights until the early part of the twentieth century. This, however, preceded women's voting rights in the nation by 15 years. Women, however, were only given full rights to serve as Elders (clergy given the right to preach and administer the sacraments) in 1956, which was earlier than almost all other Christian denominations, but much too late given their important role in the church. (Today, increasing numbers of women are being ordained, and in our area, at least 50 percent of new clergy are women),

When the frontiers of America hit the west coast, new frontiers were discovered. Besides a global mission field, new ministries emerged with immigrant populations. Methodism in its history has had churches in which the spoken language was not English. German, Swedish, and Italian people were among those groups who had language specific churches. These churches eventually became English speaking as the succeeding generations were acculturated into the American melting pot. Today, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Portuguese speaking people are present without our own New Jersey area. These are the fastest growing groups within United Methodism at the current time, and represent the continual search for new frontiers for Jesus Christ. We are truly a denomination of many nations and races, a representative rainbow of the whole family of God.

At the same time that Methodism was springing to life, there were other groups doing the same thing. Among those were the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association. These were denominations of German speaking Christians who held to similar beliefs as John Wesley. These two groups merged into one denomination in 1948 to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church, which in 1968 merged with the Methodists to create the United Methodist Church as we know it today. The Evangelical United Brethren Church traces its ancestry back to people such as William Philip Otterbein, Martin Boehm, and Jacob Albright.

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE

As United Methodists, we believe in the foundational teachings of Christianity. We hold to an understanding of God as expressed through the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), while recognizing that the scriptures point to other images and metaphors that help to explain the unexplainable vastness of God. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and look to Christ for our salvation and the salvation of the whole world.

United Methodists, holding fast to the Wesleyan understanding, see the Scriptures as the primary means of our understanding God and who God is for us. We affirm the necessity of claiming both Testaments as authoritative for our lives. Along with scripture, United Methodists affirm that our tradition, our reason, and our own experiences also help us to understand who God is in our lives. At no time, however, is this to be understood as replacing the scriptures. The Bible becomes the benchmark for understanding these other ways of knowing God.

United Methodists believe that as Christians, we are called to be a witness to the world by word and deed. It has been said that to be a United Methodist, one must have the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other, so that the word of God can help all people understand and respond to the many need of our world. Mission is an essential part of being a United Methodist, as is speaking up in matters of injustice and oppression in whatever forms they might find themselves. While some feel that this is a meddling by the church into matters of public policy and government, it is actually in live with the prophetic message found in the Hebrew Scriptures, calling all people to act in a manner of love and consistent with God's grace.

United Methodists believe that we are a connection. We do not exist as separate congregations or individual Christians. We are connected by the power of the Holy Spirit as one church under one Lord. There are times that this might create debate and dissention, however, as a connected people, we are like a family who seeks to listen and discern what it is that God intends for us to do. This is sometimes far more complicated than having a single person in charge who makes a decision from on high, however, the process works to bring people together as God intends. As a connected people, we seek to combine our resources and gifts for ministry so that all the world might know the power of Jesus Christ in their lives.

One of the hallmarks of the thought of John Wesley is the concept known as prevenient grace. This is the grace of God that goes before us, that works through us even before we are aware of its presence, that prompts our first wishes to please God. To listen to the faith of a child is to hear the profound meaning of prevenient grace. As a sign of that grace that goes before us, the United Methodist Church believes in the baptism of infants. IN that baptism is the work of God, not a ritual of the church, it is administered to infants to symbolize to the whole church that God is already at work in this child, and we may see in the child being baptized a reflection of God's grace.

We also believe that though God's grace goes before us, there is a time when we need to claim that grace for ourselves. Wesley used the term justification, or being made right with God. This is the Christian's acknowledgement that God's forgiveness of sin and God's unconditional continuous love is a gift given to "me" and all the "me's" who claim Christ as their savior. For some, this is a sudden conversion experience. For others, it is a gradual coming to understand in the power of God in their lives.

To grow in the grace of God is another essential part of the Christian faith for people called Methodism. Wesley called this sanctification, or being made holy. The scriptures call us “to be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect.” Does this mean we will never make a mistake?” Certainly not! It means that we, as Christians, are to commit ourselves to a process of seeking to walk closer and closer to God’s way, whereby our hearts are cleansed and we seek to make our motivations for all of life a motivation of love, which is the essence of God. Continued study of the scriptures, prayer, service, and discernment of God’s will all work together to help the Christian to walk in the pathway of God. It is a journey that does not end on earth, but comes to completion in eternal life.

As Christians, we believe in life eternal. No one knows exactly what heaven is like, but we affirm the resurrection as a real and present part of our own journey in the Christian life. We are resurrection people, called to new life in Christ, who is our redeemer and Savior. We are truly in need of a Savior because we are people of free will who can willingly choose to follow, or not to follow, the ways of God. In that we become separated from God in our sin, it is in the life, death and resurrection of Christ that the broken bond is restored and we are made right. This is by God’s initiative, not through our human endeavors.

We celebrate this gift of grace through the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist. We affirm that in the sacrament, there is a real, spiritual presence of Christ in our midst, although the bread and the cup are essentially the same. As United Methodists, we practice an open table for communion. Church membership or baptism is not a requirement. In that the grace of God is open to all, the great feast reminding us of that grace is also open.

This is what informs a couple of practices that some other denominations may not follow. First is the participation of children. The scriptures do not discriminate on age or whether a person has been confirmed in the church. Participation in the Lord’s Supper is an act of inclusion, where all children of God are invited to the feast. Some feel that children don’t understand, however, no one understands the mystery of the sacrament (the word sacrament actually means mystery) or the mystery of God’s grace. If understanding were a requirement, participation by any of us would be prohibited. The second practice that speaks to inclusion of all is the use of grape juice instead of wine. Though there may have been other historical reasons, today, there are persons who would have to stay away from the Lord’s table because of the presence of wine. To put a stumbling block at the table of the Lord for any desiring to walk in the light of God would be wrong, or in the language of faith, sinful. To use two different cups (one grape juice and one wine), as some churches have done, creates a division that is unnecessary and unwelcome. All must be done to bring the people of God together.

The United Methodist Church reflects the understanding that from a single doctrine or understanding, people of faith can have different interpretations. In that we believe that our experiences of God in our lives are one way in which God speaks to us, we seek to honor the fact that our experiences, and therefore our understandings, are

different. Though some have said that you can believe anything if you're a United Methodist, this is simply not true. The greatness of God speaks to the wide expressions and experiences of faith. To honor another person's experience of God is to see another expression of God in the world.

The United Methodist Church has been called a relational church by some. What this means is that we meet God and learn about God's great love for us through our relationships within the community of faith. While we celebrate the sacraments, it is not our only means of experiencing the grace of God. While we hold to the traditional creeds, we do not seek to define our faith to a singular confessional statement that leaves no room for different interpretations of the doctrines of the church. We find a richness in the experience of community, or joining with others in worship, study, prayer, fellowship, and mission. Jesus said, "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, there shall I be also." We experience the presence of Christ as we gather in his name.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

United Methodism is sometimes equated with a large hierarchical structure of boards, agencies, and endless committees and task forces. While this is somewhat the case, our name does not come from a methodical church structure, but a methodical prayer and study life. Never the less the structures and practices of the church do not have an effect on our ministry and mission at the local church level.

The United Methodist Church is organized around conferences. The local church is also called the charge conference. A church or charge conference is required to meet at least once a year to do the necessary business of the church such as setting goals for the coming year, receive a trustees and auditor's report, and set the pastor's salary. The church conference is open to all professing members of the church, while a charge conference is limited to members of the Church Council.

The Annual Conference is the basic unit of the church. It links the local church to the general church. Pastors hold their church membership in the Annual Conference, and are appointed by the bishop to serve in the church. Local churches do not hire a pastor. He or she is under appointment by the bishop. The Annual Conference is the arm of the church that provides programming and resources for the local church, as well as collecting the apportionments that pay for both the Annual Conference and general church ministries. The basic Ministry Share (apportionments) which are assigned to each church are:

DISCIPLINARY OBLIGATIONS: meets administrative expenses of the annual conference, health insurance for retired pastors, the expenses of the bishop's office, and our conferences share of the general churches administrative expenses.

WORLD SERVICE AND CONFERENCE BENEVOLENCE: This supports the programming of the Church on every level, including the education, worship, evangelism, mission, higher education, and social justice ministries.

MINISTERIAL EDUCATION FUND: supports the recruitment and training of clergy. These funds help to support the 13 United Methodist Seminaries, as well as continuing education for clergy.

BLACK COLLEGE FUND: provides funds for the traditionally black colleges that were started by the Methodist church to provide equal opportunity in education.

AFRICA UNIVERSITY: Since 1992, the United Methodist Church has been in the process of establishing a major university in Africa to provide education for teachers, clergy, agricultural workers, and other professionals.

MISSION INITIATIVES: This supports new missional work on the “frontiers” that are continually emerging in our nation and in our world.

Ministry Shares (apportionments) benefit the local church in many ways. The development of educational materials, prayer resources, the Upper Room devotional magazine, administrative support for mission so that our denomination can respond to immediate disaster, and a variety of resources in all aspects of church life are made possible because of these funds. Locally, ministry shares support the creation of new churches, workshops for local churches, leadership, scholarship support, the Relay (our New Jersey area United Methodist newspaper) and many other ministries that are too numerous to name.

The Jurisdictional Conference links together Annual Conferences in five major geographical areas of the United States. Outside the United States, the churches are linked into Central Conferences. The two primary responsibilities of these conferences are to elect bishops and set the boundaries of the Annual Conference. We are a part of the Northeast Jurisdiction. These conferences meet once every 4 years in July following the meeting of the General Conference.

The General Conference is the only body that can speak for the United Methodist Church. Any statement made by a bishop, pastor, denominational official, or employee that does not restate the position of the General Conference is just personal opinion and holds no bearing on the official position of the church. The basic function of the General Conference is to write and approve the Book of Discipline, which sets forth the governing principles and regulations of the church. It also contains historical and doctrinal material, as well as the church’s constitution. The General Conference, like the Jurisdictional Conference, meets every four years during the first two weeks of May. It happens to meet during the presidential election years. Its membership is made up of equal clergy and lay members elected by their Annual Conferences. Bishops preside at the sessions of the General Conference, but have no vote.

As stated earlier, pastors are appointed by the bishop and these are traditionally announced and set at the Annual Conference session in late May or the month of June. A pastor is appointed for a one-year period, which can be renewed as often as the bishop desires. A pastor promises to accept the decision of the bishop concerning her or his appointment, although there is a consultation process with the pastor and the receiving church so that a pastor is appointed where his or her gifts are best suited.

All property of a local church is held in trust by the congregation on behalf of the United Methodist Church. Recognizing that no one generation of a congregation builds a church, the property and assets of the church would revert to the annual conference should a church decide to close or pull away from the denomination. In this way, investments made in the ministry of a United Methodist Church are guaranteed to be present for future generations and will not be lost at the whim of any single generation.

WHAT ABOUT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Why join the church? If the ministries are available to all people, what are the advantages? First and foremost, becoming a member is publicly affirming our faith in Jesus Christ and his presence within the community of faith. It is a declaration that a person desires to be a member of the body of Christ, to be nurtured by it, and to share his or her gifts with others. If a youth or adult has not been previously baptized, they are received into membership through baptism.

To join the church, a person reaffirms their baptismal vows and then promises to be faithful to the United Methodist Church and the local congregation through his or her presence, prayers, gifts and service. The joining of the church is a commitment to be an active part of the body of Christ. This means that one not only receives, but also gives. However, it is in giving that we receive the true blessings, and the church seeks to support and encourage its members in their growth in the knowledge and love of God.

To be a member of the church expresses a desire to grow in faith. If we needed to wait until we had all the answers, no one would be able to join. We share together, grow together, study together, pray together and care for each other. We serve together as we reach out in mission. Is the church perfect in this? By no means! It is still a human institution, and church members do disappoint one another. However, our commitment to church membership includes the presumption that we will work to find healing and reconciliation in those moments of human failing.

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Please complete the form for membership and return it to the pastor as soon as possible. Members are received during a regular service of worship. If you are currently a member of another Protestant congregation, we will notify that congregation of your intention to join the congregation of the Butler United Methodist Church (most non-Protestant congregations do not deal with transfers). Some church will officially transfer your records. If you are transferred in, you will be recognized as such, whether that is from a United Methodist church or another denomination. If you have never joined a church or are not currently a member, you will be received by Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith. The pastor will explain this in your orientation meeting.