

## Session One: Participant Material

# Distinctive United Methodist Convictions About the Church

The communities of Christian faith that came together in 1968 to create The United Methodist Church shared some distinctive convictions that continue to energize and guide its life and witness. Among these are the convictions that the saving love of God is meant for all people, not just for a favored few; that it is a transformative love; and that it is a community-creating love.

### The Saving Love of God Is Meant for All People

God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

In discussing 1 Timothy 2:4 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, John Wesley emphasizes that all of humankind is included in God's desire, and he also notes that God does not compel people to conform to this desire.

The grace of God extended to all does not override human freedom, but activates it, so that our salvation, while entirely a gift, involves our free participation. These two points about the universality of God's saving love are repeated throughout Wesley's writing and are embodied in his ministry. They were essential to Wesley's understanding of the gospel and to the power of the movement he inspired, and remain a vital part of United Methodist affirmation.

### The Saving Love of God Is Transformative

To use the language familiar to Wesley and his contemporaries, as God's grace is accepted in faith, it brings both *justification*, the restoration of a right relationship with God, and *sanctification*, the renewal of our very being.

There is a new birth. The love of God for us becomes the love of God in us. In the words of the apostle Paul, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1), and being "called to freedom," we are to "live by the Spirit," which means living by the love of God that empowers us to put aside "the works of the flesh" and to bear "the fruit of the Spirit . . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:13, 16, 19, 22-23).

A hallmark of John Wesley's preaching, and of the preaching and testimony of the people called Methodist through the years, is that such an experienced, here-and-now transformation of human life by the power of the Holy Spirit is real.

### The Saving Love of God Creates Community

The transformation just described is by its very nature a transformation of our relationships with others. It is through others that we experience the love of God; it is with others that the pattern of new life that God gives is both learned and lived out. Many of the New Testament descriptions of the church originate in the early Christian experience of the community-forming power of the Spirit. The church does not come into being because isolated individuals experience God's saving love and then take the initiative to seek out others with whom to form a group. The church comes into being because the Spirit of God leads us into community—perhaps with people with whom we would least expect to associate—as the very matrix of our salvation.

That Spirit-formed community becomes the context within which we enter into the new life God offers us. It is a community whose reach is constantly being extended as its members, empowered by the Spirit, offer the gift of community to others and likewise receive the gift. In that very Spirit, Wesley and others connected with him found themselves moving beyond the established norms of churchly behavior and challenging the church, by their own example, to enact more fully God's gift of community. Thus the term *connection* took on new resonances of meaning, as what Wesley called *social holiness*—the growth in love and other fruits of the Spirit that are possible only in community—was realized in new situations and settings.

This willingness to transgress boundaries of convention, class, and culture in pursuit of God's gift of community, notes United Methodist historian Russell Richey, illumines connectionalism's essentially missional character. From the beginning, connectionalism stood in service of mission, tuning every aspect of Methodist communal life—from structure to polity to discipline—to an evangelizing and reforming purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Together, these convictions shape our United Methodist understanding of what it is to be the church. The ways they have come to expression in our history account in part for our particular ways of being the church, within the larger body of Christ.

## Going Further

This study is based on a working document currently titled *Wonder, Love, and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church*, produced by the Committee on Faith and Order of The United Methodist Church. Portions of the document are included in the participant handouts. You can read the entire document online at <http://www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise> (no hyphen in URL).

The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches released a document in 2013, on the nature of the church. This document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No.214, @2013 WCC Publications can be downloaded as a pdf document at <http://tinyurl.com/WCC214>

## Notes

1 Russell E. Richey, with Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology In Ecclesial Practice* (Abingdon, 2005), pp. 31-32

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