

A Guide for Small Group Study

**Based On
Wonder, Love, and Praise:
Sharing a Vision of the
Church**

Prepared by the Committee on Faith and Order of
The United Methodist Church in response to the action of the
2016 General Conference, petition #6033.

Preface

During the 2008 quadrennium, The United Methodist Committee on Faith and Order received a request from the Council of Bishops to prepare a new theological study document on ecclesiology—that is, on a theological understanding of the church itself. In response to this request, a draft document titled *Wonder, Love, and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church* has been developed. It is intended to assist all of us in The United Methodist Church in gaining a clearer, more comprehensive vision of the reality of the church, and to place our life and work as United Methodists within the context of that vision. It engages with our Wesleyan heritage, with the common Christian tradition rooted in the scriptural witness, and with the contemporary ecumenical discussion.

It is the hope of the committee that, after a period of study, conversation, and reflection leading to whatever corrections and other improvements might be found needful, this present document might take a place alongside other official theological statements of the church. As a step toward that realization, the 2016 General Conference approved the resolution printed below.

This guide is the “brief study and response guide” mentioned in item 1 to be used in the “congregationally-based studies of United Methodist ecclesiology” mentioned in item 2, or other relevant small group studies.

The Committee on Faith and Order proposes a period of study to stimulate and aid theological reflection throughout the church on the identity and mission of The United Methodist Church.

The Study and response process in the coming quadrennium will involve these elements:

1. A teaching document on ecclesiology will be made available electronically through www.umc.org, www.gbhem.org, and www.gbod.org along with a brief study and response guide to facilitate study of the document. These documents will be translated into the language of the General Conference.

2. Each resident bishop will be asked to arrange for congregationally-based studies of United Methodist ecclesiology between June 2016 and December 2017 involving approximately ten percent of both the laity and clergy of her or his episcopal area. Resources for the study will be provided by the Committee on Faith and Order.

3. Responses will be solicited from specific groups who may have particular expertise in ecclesiology, including: faculty from United Methodist seminaries and schools of theology, general agency staff, pan-Methodist theologians and officials; and other selected ecumenical partners.

4. All United Methodists will be invited and encouraged to offer feedback on United Methodist ecclesiology.

5. The Committee on Faith and Order will design processes to solicit and receive these responses.

6. The Committee on Faith and Order will be responsible for evaluating the study process, considering the responses received, and will offer appropriate action to the 2020 General Conference. The Committee on Faith and Order will send to the 2020 General Conference a theological teaching document on ecclesiology for adoption as an official document of the church, comparable to *By Water and the Spirit* and *This Holy Mystery*.

Adopted by the 2016 General Conference of The United Methodist Church on May 19, 2016

Preparing to Lead the Study

Who Should Participate

This study is designed to be used by small groups in a variety of settings. This could include existing groups such as adult Sunday school classes, weekday groups, and United Methodist Women and Men. Some churches will want to use this as a churchwide study, creating a number of small groups that meet at a variety of times over a four-week period.

The study is four sessions long, with each session being approximately an hour and a half. Most groups will want to meet weekly, although it is possible to use this material in a weekend retreat setting or to extend it over a longer period of time. Groups such as adult Sunday school classes that may have less than an hour of meeting time may want to take two weeks per session.

Who Should Lead

The sessions do not need to be led by a “content expert,” although it would be very appropriate for the church pastor to lead the sessions. The leader needs to be willing to do some preparation in advance of the setting, to facilitate discussion during the session, and to organize the submission of feedback at the end of the study.

What Happens During the Session

Sessions include Scripture reflection related to the material that will be discussed. Each session also includes reading excerpts from the document, *Wonder, Love, and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church*. These excerpts form the “Participant Material” and should be printed prior to each meeting to be distributed to the study participants. While it is hoped that participants will read the whole document outside of class, it is not assumed that they will have read the “Participant Material” before the session in which it will be discussed.

In addition to the reading material, the leader’s guide suggests learning activities that will help the participants process what they have read and make connections with their own context. Introductory videos for each session are available at www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise. These videos are available to stream on YouTube or to download

onto a device. They are only in the English language and are intended only as a supplement to the study. The study is designed to function without the use of the videos if these are not available or helpful in your context.

Also, each session includes suggestions for those who wish to do more in-depth study on their own.

The purpose of the study is not only to help participants think deeply about the nature of the church but to also assist the Committee on Faith and Order in developing an interpretive document to be taken to the 2020 General Conference. If approved by the General Conference, the document would become an official statement of the United Methodist understanding of ecclesiology. This is the reason that every session includes a time of evaluation that will inform the final collection and submission of feedback at the end of the study. The feedback collected will be very valuable in helping the committee formulate this interpretive statement.

How to Submit Feedback

At the end of each session, participants will be asked to answer two basic evaluative questions and note their answers in a simple journal or notebook. These notes should be used when responding to the feedback questions upon completion of the study. Directions for submitting feedback can be found at the end of this document, after the Session 4 material. If possible, we ask that feedback be reported through the online survey (English language only) available at www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise. However, if this is not possible for you or your group, you may simply answer the response questions included at the end of the study and e-mail them to cfo@umc-cob.org.

Individual members of the class may want to offer specific comments to the committee. Encourage these people to e-mail their comments directly to cfo@umc-cob.org.

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.¹

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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Session One: Leader's Guide

Preparation

- Collect the following materials: newsprint, markers, copies of “Session One: Participant Material,” Bibles, *United Methodist Hymnals*, participant journals/notebooks and pens.

1. Introduce the Study

When everyone has arrived, ask people to introduce themselves by telling their names and the first words that come to their minds when they hear the word *church*. As words are mentioned, record them on the newsprint.

Watch video “Orientation to Wonder, Love and Praise Study” found at www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise (English language only, no hyphen in URL)

If the video is not available to you, explain that during this four-session study the group will be using excerpts from a working document that has been prepared by the Committee on Faith and Order of The United Methodist Church to explore how we as United Methodists understand the nature of the church. Congregations from all across The United Methodist Church are being asked to participate in this study and provide feedback to the Committee on Faith and Order. This feedback will help the committee to shape a document that will be submitted to the General Conference of 2020.

Read together Acts 2:43-47. Ask the group to reflect upon what this Scripture indicates about the nature of the early church. Who was included? What did they do? How did they relate to one another? As ideas are mentioned, add them to the newsprint.

2. Read and Discuss the Participant Material

Distribute copies of “Session One: Participant Material” and invite the group to silently read the first page.

When they have finished, **watch video “WLP Study: Session 1 Introduction” found at www.umc.org/CFO-WonderLovePraise (English language only, no hyphen in URL)**

Direct the group's attention back to the newsprint. Review each of the items listed and, using different colors of markers to differentiate, star those items that relate to one of the three convictions mentioned:

- The saving love of God is meant for all people.
- The saving love of God is transformative.
- The saving love of God creates community.

The group may decide that some items relate to more than one of the convictions and therefore are starred multiple times, and other items don't relate to any of the convictions.

Use the following questions to further the discussion:

- What trends do you see?
- What surprises you?
- What questions do you have?
- Where do you see the three convictions lived out in the life of our congregation or community?
- How might our congregation or community live out these convictions more fully?

3. Sing the Hymn

United Methodists have always expressed our theology through our hymns. Point out to the group that the working title of the study paper is called *Wonder, Love, and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church*. This title comes from the last stanza of the well-known Charles Wesley hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” found at number 384 of *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

Sing together the hymn or read the hymn responsively as a poem. Point out that this hymn is found in the “Sanctifying and Perfecting Grace” section of the hymnal. Invite the group to discuss ways the words reflect the three convictions.

4. Offer Advice to the Committee

Remind the group that one of the purposes of this study is to provide feedback to the Committee on Faith and Order. Discuss the following questions, and ask the participants to note their responses in their journal or notebook. At the end of the study, you will be asked to submit your feedback to the committee.

- In what ways do you recognize The UMC in the materials for this session? What themes or topics accurately reflect who we are as United Methodists?
- Is there anything essential to the life of The UMC related to the topics discussed in this session that is missing?

5. Close With Prayer

Point out that page 2 of the participant material offers suggestions for further reading. Each session will include additional reading for those who wish to dig deeper.

Use the first and fourth stanzas of “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” as a closing prayer.

Session Two: Participant Material

Shaped by Our Wesleyan Heritage

As United Methodists, we have a considerable store of affirmations concerning the church, drawn from resources throughout the broader Christian tradition and found in our hymnody and liturgy as well as in official statements of doctrine and polity.

Our Historical Journey

The United Methodist Church traces its origins to certain movements of Christian renewal and revitalization within the established churches of Europe in the seventeenth century and of a number of such movements in eighteenth-century Britain. Its leader, John Wesley, was an ordained minister in the Church of England. His aim was not to create a new church, separate from the Church of England, but to help that church toward a recovery of its spiritual vitality and its mission. He and the early Methodists adopted some unconventional ways to bring the gospel of Christ to many sorts of people who were not being reached, or were not being reached effectively, by the established church. Wesley's own practice of traveling to where the people were and preaching—in an open field, if necessary—wherever and whenever a group of hearers could be gathered, his commissioning and training of lay preachers to do likewise, and the organization of those hearers who were receiving the gospel into small groups for mutual support and growth in grace, led to the emergence of a “connection” of people across Britain and Ireland that eventually (and only after Wesley's death) took on the full identity of a distinct manifestation of the Christian church.

Meanwhile, on the continent of Europe another movement known as Pietism had been underway within the churches of the Protestant Reformation. Like Wesley and his people, the Pietists were intent upon realizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and upon the spread of the gospel. Like the Methodists, they included in their mission efforts to improve the conditions of life among the poor and vulnerable, to support popular education and the dissemination of knowledge, and to be a Christian presence where such a presence had not yet been known. In fact, a significant influence on John Wesley's life and thought was his acquaintance with representatives of this movement, with whom he engaged at various points in his life. He and the Pietists had their differences, but they also recognized a deep kinship.

Participants in both the Methodist movement and varie-

ties of Pietism (which would help to shape the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association) made their way to North America, where they encountered each other as well as some other awakening movements within the Christian churches already present there. They continued their efforts in this new context. Both Methodists and Pietists struggled with their relationships to the churches from which they came, and both movements eventually found themselves taking the form of distinct churches. For the most part, it was not doctrinal differences but practical circumstances, such as the American Revolution, that led to their making that transition. As they took on a churchly identity, the movements bore witness in various ways to the radical aims and effect of God's grace.

There has followed a complex and often ambiguous history of accomplishments and failures, growth and loss, separations and unions, over the past two centuries and more—a very human history, in which God has been steadily at work both within and despite human plans, decisions, and actions. A heritage of racism and related difficulties around culture and social class has affected our common life and our efforts at mission in both overt and subtle ways throughout our history, even as our core convictions have offered a constant challenge to overcome it. The United Methodist Church is an heir to, and itself a part of, this history, with its burden and its promise.

The dramatic recent growth of The United Methodist Church in parts of Africa and Asia, and the increasing visibility and involvement of United Methodists from other countries in its leadership, are gradually bringing United Methodists in the United States to a greater (if belated) awareness that theirs is, if not a “global” or “worldwide” church, at least not simply an American denomination. This reality brings a number of new factors into play. It challenges the adequacy of a polity that has been essentially U.S.-centric, taking for granted a basic, normative national identity for the denomination. It greatly expands the range of cultural differences to be found within the church, and the range of issues that the church faces in carrying out its mission. At these and other points, our common self-understanding as a church has lagged behind the pace of change in our actual situation. Wherever we United Methodists find ourselves, we need fresh vision, and a broadening of horizons.

Church as Community

In the classic creeds, the church is mentioned immediately after the Holy Spirit. In the Apostles' Creed they are affirmed literally in the same breath: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church. . . ." Evidently, in the judgment of the makers of the creeds and of those who have affirmed their faith with them through the centuries, the church has something to do with the Spirit's giving of life. It is *communion* that the Spirit gives, and that animates—or we might say, creates—the church. In the Greek of the New Testament, the term is *koinonia*.

Aspects of our own Wesleyan heritage resonate deeply with this affirmation of the centrality of *koinonia* to the life and mission of the church. When John Wesley, in a late sermon on "The New Creation," wished to portray the final goal of human life—the end for which we are created, and to which we are to be restored through Christ—he used these words: "And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!"¹ For Wesley, and for his followers, we are given a foretaste of this goal, and more than a foretaste, here and now. Salvation is "a present thing," Wesley declared; the term rightly embraces "the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory."² Human beings are "created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and to enjoy [their] Creator to all eternity."³ Wesley's understanding of our "fallen" state involves the distortion or loss of those capacities for knowledge, love, and joy—in short, for communion with God and with one another—and salvation involves their recovery and their eventual fulfillment in glory, when (as his brother Charles memorably wrote) we are to be "lost in wonder, love, and praise."⁴

To the extent that these Wesleyan themes still inform our witness, hymnody, and common life, we have ample reason to make our own the affirmation that communion is the gift by which the church lives, and the gift that it is called to offer the world.

Definitions of Church

Among the standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church are the Articles of Religion brought into the union by The Methodist Church and the Confession of Faith brought into it by the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Each contains an article on the church, along with other material relevant to the subject. The two principal ar-

ticles are these: First, from the Articles of Religion, Article XIII—Of the Church:

The visible church of Christ is a congregation . . . in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

And from the Confession of Faith, Article V—The Church:

We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached . . . , and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.⁵

The second definition, reflecting the Evangelical United Brethren heritage, contains basic elements of the first, but enriches it in several ways. It makes more explicit the element of faithful response with such terms as "redemptive fellowship" and with reference to the church's mission, and it also includes the adjectives from the Nicene Creed identifying the church as "one, holy, apostolic and catholic."

Going Further

United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching On the Nature, Mission, and Faithfulness of the Church is a resource paper available at <http://www.tinyurl.com/UMCNMF>.

Notes

- 1 "The New Creation," Sermon #64 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon64>.
- 2 "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Sermon #43 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon43>.
- 3 "God's Approbation of His Works," Sermon #56 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon56>.
- 4 "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," by Charles Wesley. 1747. The words set to a new tune can be found at <http://www.tinyurl.com/DMLoveDivine>.
- 5 "Section 3—Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules." From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2012*. Copyright ©2012 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

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Session Two: Leader's Guide

Preparation

- Collect the following materials: paper, pencils, copies of “Session Two: Participant Material,” Bibles, *United Methodist Hymnals*, participant journals/notebooks and pens.

1. Introduce the Session

Remind the participants that this is the second session in a study exploring how we as United Methodists understand the nature of the church. Recall the three distinctive United Methodist convictions that were discussed in the previous session: The saving love of God 1) is meant for all people; 2) is transformative; and 3) creates community.

Explain that today the group will be exploring how our Wesleyan heritage informs our convictions about the church, particularly how these convictions are expressed in our hymns and liturgy, found in official statements of doctrine and polity, and shaped by our historical journey.

Invite the participants to read aloud Psalm 95:1-7. Remind the group that the Psalms are hymns. Through hymns and poetry we are able to express important feelings and beliefs that cannot be adequately described through prose. Ask the group to reflect upon how this psalm speaks to them about the purpose of the church. Then ask each person to write a one-sentence definition of the church. Don't discuss the definitions but explain that they will be used later.

When they have finished, **watch video “WLP Study: Session 2 Introduction” found at www.umc.org/CFO-WonderLovePraise (English language only, no hyphen in URL)**

2. Explore Our Historical Journey

Distribute copies of “Session Two: Participant Material” and invite the group to silently read the first section, “Our Historical Journey.” Use the following questions as a springboard to discussion:

- Early Methodists and Pietists took the church to those that were on the margins of society. Who are at the margins of our community, and how is our congregation or community taking the church to them?
- In what ways are the values and priorities of our present culture in tension with our core convictions of witnessing to the radical aim and effect of God's grace?
- What are the practical circumstances that are pushing us to change the way we “do church?” What new opportunities do these circumstances create?

Based on your discussion, invite the participants to review their definitions of the church and make any additions or revisions.

3. Look at Hymns

Ask the group to read silently “Church as Community,” from the participant material. Distribute hymnals and point out that the hymns from pages 537 to 593 are in the section titled “The Nature of the Church.” Seven of these hymns were written by Charles Wesley (numbers 541, 550, 553, 554, 561, 562, and 566).

Divide into groups of three and assign each group one of the Charles Wesley hymns. Ask each group to examine the words to the assigned hymn, particularly looking for phrases that relate to the material they just read.

Give groups an opportunity to report the highlights of their conversation to the entire group. If you have time, sing some of the hymns. Once again invite the participants to review their definitions of the church and make revisions.

4. Discuss Definitions of Church

Ask the group to read silently the section of the participant material titled, “Definitions of Church.” Invite people to report the definitions they have been working on throughout the session. Discuss the following questions:

- What common themes do we see in our definitions?
- How do our definitions compare to the statements from the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith?
- Which definitions most accurately reflect the experience of our congregation?

5. Offer Advice to the Committee

Remind the group that one of the purposes of this study is to provide feedback to the Committee on Faith and Order. Discuss the following questions, and ask the participants to note their responses in their journal or notebook.

- In what ways do you recognize The UMC in the materials for this session? What themes or topics accurately reflect who we are as United Methodists?
- Is there anything essential to the life of The UMC related to the topics discussed in this session that is missing?

6. Close With Prayer

Use the first stanza of “See How Great a Flame Aspires” (UMH 541) as a closing prayer, and encourage participants to read at home the document listed in “Going Further.”

Session Three: Participant Material

Marks of United Methodist Identity

Priest, Prophet, King

John Wesley urged the early Methodists to proclaim Christ “in all his offices.”¹ The reference was to the doctrine of the three offices of Christ, as priest, prophet, and king. The threefold office seemed to have particular resonance for Wesley, as it matched up with his understanding of salvation—of what we are saved from and of what we are saved to. If we are meant “to know, to love, and to enjoy [our] Creator to all eternity,”² and if in our present problematic state we are unable rightly to exercise those capacities for knowledge, love, and happiness, then what we need is a regeneration of those capacities. We need to be set free from our captivity to lies and distortions, misguided loves, and misplaced hopes. We need to be born again and nourished in a new life. This is the possibility that Christ brings to us and that the Holy Spirit actuates in us. Wesley wanted his preachers and his people to keep that comprehensive vision in mind, and not to settle for reductionist, one-office accounts of salvation. The realization of the *koinonia* for which we are created, and of which the church is to be both sign and servant, involves being freed from those conditions (both external and internal) that make us miserable, and entering into the harmony of knowledge, love, and joy with the Triune God and with all creation.

General and Representative Ministry

To proclaim Christ in all his offices is not just the work of preachers. It is the work of the whole church, the calling of the whole people of God, personally and corporately; it is the general ministry of all Christians.

Although it informs and shapes the life and mission of the whole people of God, this threefold pattern also informs and shapes the ordained ministry. The United Methodist Church at its uniting conference in 1968 described ordained ministry as a “specialized ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order.”³ This new formulation, which does not appear in the official depictions of ordained ministry in either of the predecessor denominations, reflected the influence of contemporary ecumenical conversation as well as the established patterns of a number of other Christian communities.

In The United Methodist Church, although we have deacons, elders (presbyters), and bishops, we do not have a *threefold ministry* in the sense in which that term is used in

other traditions or in the ecumenical discussion. We ordain deacons and elders; we do not ordain bishops, who are elected from among the elders to exercise a special supervisory role. Further, we do not at present practice sequential ordination, in which a person to be ordained as an elder must first be ordained as a deacon.

The United Methodist Church established a permanent ordained diaconate in 1996, and at the same time abolished the practice of sequential ordination. Now prospective deacons and prospective elders are on separate tracks, and the language indicating the character of the ministry to which each is ordained—in the case of a deacon, a ministry of “Word, Service, Justice, and Compassion,” and in the case of an elder, a ministry of “Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service”—is intended to indicate that although there may be common areas of responsibility there are also distinct areas in each that the other does not share.⁴

The Scope of Grace

One marker of United Methodist identity has to do with the scope of grace, in two senses. One sense is our Wesleyan conviction—by no means exclusive to Wesleyans, but definitely claimed by this tradition—that God’s love extends to all of God’s creatures, and not just to some.

God’s grace is available to all, in equal measure. Among other things, this accounts for the emphasis placed in The United Methodist Church upon full inclusivity in membership and ministry, so that the church might be a faithful sign of the scope of God’s grace.

The second sense in which the scope of grace is a distinctive theme has to do not with its extent or reach, but with its aim or effect. It is the affirmation that as God’s grace is received in the freedom that it creates, it is transformative. It leads, as Wesley said, to a “real change” within the recipient.

Being born anew and receiving faith filled with love were for the early Methodists, and have been for their spiritual descendants, vivid experiential realities, leading to new personal and social consequences as that love is absorbed in personal renewal and expressed not only in direct and explicit witness to the gospel but also in community-building (*koinonia* activity) in a great variety of ways—from personal relationships to the founding of hospitals and universities, from the outreach ministries of local congregations to

participation in large-scale efforts for social amelioration and reform.

The impetus in the United Methodist heritage is to create and support institutions and practices that foster human well-being, and to challenge those that do not. At times the inward cleansing and renewal of the heart is emphasized, and at times it is the promotion of justice, mercy, and truth throughout the social order that receives more attention. We are at our best when we realize the close relationship between the two, and at something less than our best when we play them off against each other.

Connectionalism

A second marker of United Methodist identity goes by the name of *connectionalism*. Our itinerant ministry, the superintendency (bishops and district superintendents), and the system of conferences are intended as instruments of connectionalism. All three are intended to foster an ethos and practice of mutual support and mutual accountability, of shared oversight and of the strengthening of all by the gifts of all.

We need forms of polity that are consistent with our core convictions. A specifically polity-related Wesleyan concept deserves further attention: the concept of Christian conference. *Conference*, in this usage, refers to a means of grace meant to foster our growth in holiness of heart and life.

It is one of the ways God helps us to help one another toward maturity in faith, hope, and love. It involves elements of prayerful, honest self-examination, of speaking the truth in love to one another, of mutual accountability and support, and of careful deliberation as to how we are to conduct ourselves in the future. The practice of Christian conference goes on under many forms, including one-on-one conversations between Christians, small group meetings of various kinds and for various purposes, and larger events such as those officially designated as *Conferences* in United Methodist parlance. Ideally, the practice of Christian conference is to some degree an aspect of virtually every encounter in the church. Wesley's relatively small regular conferences with his preachers included strong elements of the practice, although its normal structured settings within the early Methodist movement were the meetings of classes and bands within the local Methodist societies.

Theological Reflection

The third mark of United Methodist identity is a commitment to theological reflection as the task of the whole

church. The presence in the *Book of Discipline* not only of doctrinal standards, but also of a statement on our theological task, indicates the importance of this commitment.

The theological task, though related to the Church's doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling to spread scriptural holiness. By their very character and content, our doctrinal standards not only permit but require the sort of responsible, thoughtful critical engagement that "Our Theological Task" describes. Our theological work must be "both critical and constructive," "both individual and communal," "contextual and incarnational," and "essentially practical."⁵ To have given such attention and affirmation to the church's ongoing theological task is truly a hallmark of The United Methodist Church. It will stand us in good stead as we seek to embody our connectional covenant with theological creativity, flexibility, and dexterity in increasingly diverse contexts around the world.

Going Further

"¶105. Section 4 – Our Theological Task," is found in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church —2012*.

Notes

- 1 "The Law Established Through Faith – Discourse Two," Sermon #36 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon36>.
- 2 "God's Approbation of His Works," Sermon #56 by John Wesley. The entire sermon can be read at <http://www.tinyurl.com/WesleySermon56>.
- 3 ¶302 (p. 107) From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church —1968*. Copyright ©1968 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.
- 4 ¶¶329.1, 332 (pp. 246, 256) From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church —2012*. Copyright ©2012 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.
- 5 ¶105 (pp. 79-80) From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church —2012*. Copyright ©2012 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

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Session Three: Leader's Guide

Preparation

• Collect the following materials: newsprint, markers, paper, pencils, copies of “Session Three: Participant Material,” Bibles, *United Methodist Hymnals*, *United Methodist Book of Discipline –2012*, participant journals/notebooks and pens.

1. Introduce the Session

Remind the participants that this is the third session in a study exploring how we as United Methodists understand the nature of the church. Recall the three distinctive United Methodist convictions that were discussed in the first session: The saving love of God 1) is meant for all people; 2) is transformative; and 3) creates community. Remind the group that the second session explored how our convictions about the church are expressed in our hymns and liturgy, found in official statements of doctrine and polity, and shaped by our historical journey.

Explain that in this session we will be examining some particularly United Methodist aspects of our understanding of the church including grace, the general and representative ministry, connectionalism, and our commitment to theological reflection as the task of the whole church.

When you have finished this introduction, **watch video “WLP Study: Session 3 Introduction” found at www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise (English language only)**

Invite the participants to read silently Romans 3:21-31 and the sections in the participant material titled, “Priest, Prophet, King” and “The Scope of Grace,” and then discuss the following questions:

- What do we learn about grace from Romans 3:21-31?
- How do the ideas in the participant material relate to the Romans passage?
- When have you seen the grace of God result in the transformation of a person or a situation?
- Where in your local community and in the world community is grace particularly needed? How might the church be both a sign and a servant of God's grace in these situations?

2. Explore the Nature of Ministry

Divide into small groups of three or four. Give each group a paper and pencil and explain that they will have two minutes to record on the paper as many words or

phrases that come to mind when they hear the word *ministry*. Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers.

After the two minutes, reassemble the entire group and ask each group to name one of the items on its list that has not been previously named by another group. As the groups report, record the responses on newsprint. Continue the reporting process until all of the items have been recorded. Then ask the participants to read silently the section “General and Representative Ministry.” Review the items that were listed and decide as a group if each item relates primarily to the general ministry of all Christians, to the representative ministry of ordained deacons, or to the representative ministry of ordained elders. Use different colors of markers to indicate the group's decision.

Invite the group to scan the newsprint, and then discuss the following questions:

- Is our list primarily related to the general ministry or the representative ministry? More related to individual ministry or corporate ministry? More related to ministry inside the church or outside the church?
- Are the items on the list more descriptive of characteristics or of activities?
- What does the list say about how we view ministry?

3. Discuss Connectionalism

Ask the group to read silently “Connectionalism” from the participant material. Use the following questions as a springboard for discussion:

- What is the difference between mutual support and mutual accountability?
- What conditions need to be present for true Christian conferencing to occur?
- Where in the church or outside the church have you experienced Christian conferencing? How did it affect your beliefs and your behaviors?

4. Reflect Theologically

Ask the group to read silently the section of the participant material titled, “Theological Reflection.” Remind the group that because we live in a complex world with varied contexts, faithful living cannot be reduced to a list of do's and don'ts. Theological reflection is the dynamic process that enlivens our faith. It helps us examine our experience in light of God's love and move forward in faith. Explain that there are a variety of models for theological reflection and that today they will be experiencing one of those

models.

Invite the participants to name a positive experience that has happened in the church recently. If possible select something that most people in the group would have participated in at some level.

Use the following steps to help the participants reflect theologically on the experience:

1. Describe what happened. Who was involved? What actions were taken? What feelings were expressed?
2. Identify biblical stories and images that relate to the experience.
3. Identify points where the Holy Spirit was active.
4. Discuss what the church learned from the experience and how that learning might affect future action.

5. Offer Advice to the Committee

Remind the group that one of the purposes of this study is to provide feedback to the Committee on Faith and Order. Discuss the following questions, and ask the participants to note their responses in their journal or notebook.

- In what ways do you recognize The UMC in the materials for this session? What themes or topics accurately reflect who we are as United Methodists?
- Is there anything essential to the life of The UMC related to the topics discussed in this session that is missing?

6. Close With a Hymn

Remind the group that hymns are theological reflections upon life and Scripture. Close the session by singing together, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” number 384 of *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

Encourage the group to read at home “Our Theological Task,” referenced in the participant material section “Going Further.”

Session Four: Participant Material

The Church Universal: Unity in Diversity

Search for Christian Unity

The United Methodist Church affirms itself to be truly the church, but it also acknowledges that is not the whole church. We have things to contribute to a wider common Christian understanding of the church, and we also have things to learn: things to learn about other Christians and churches, and things to learn from them about ourselves. As we undertake to realize a new ecclesial vision for The United Methodist Church, we are committed to do work, as we have in the past, in an ecumenical context.

The search for Christian unity is misunderstood if it is taken to mean only a painstaking process of interchurch diplomacy among experts aimed at reconciling the doctrines and polities of separate denominations. Even less is it an exercise in nostalgia, trying to recover power, place, and prestige in society now long gone.

At its heart, the search for Christian unity is a search for the reality of the church itself. It is a prayerful quest to realize the unity for which Jesus prays as he says, “I ask . . . that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17:20-23).

Mission and unity are inextricably connected. To ask ecumenical questions about Christian unity-in-diversity is to ask missional questions. Indeed, such questions take us to the heart of the matter in our struggle as United Methodists to discern our ecclesiological identity and witness today: How might United Methodists characterize our particular role within the “Church Universal”? What is our niche in the ecclesial ecology? What insights might our deep attention to the ecumenical discussion generate for dealing more constructively and effectively with the vexing issues surrounding “legitimate diversity,” both as they affect our own life and mission in The United Methodist Church and in our ongoing relations with other Christian communities? How might a new vision of the reality of the church help us toward a better ordering of our common life? How might it lead us into more constructive relationships with persons of other religious faiths and traditions, as well as with those who identify with none?

Visible and Invisible

A distinction between the *visible church* and the *invisible church* was common at the time of the Protestant Reformation. As conventionally understood, the visible church was an actual community, a local congregation of professing Christians or a larger body incorporating many local congregations, who hear and affirm the Word rightly preached, partake of the sacraments, and support the church’s ministry. The invisible church was understood to be the totality of persons who are actually saved, or on their way to salvation. This company is invisible in the sense that no one but God knows with certainty who is included in it. It was commonly assumed that with a few exceptions the members of the invisible church, the truly saved, were also professing Christians, members of the visible church; but that the visible church also contains (to use John Calvin’s words) “a very large mixture of hypocrites, who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance.”¹

The perspective of many Christians and of many Christian communities on this matter has shifted in more recent years to allow the possibility that persons who are not explicit members of the church may yet be, in some sense, members of the church, participants in the one *ekklesia* of God, sharers in the communion God offers.

This is not to suggest that all people are, in fact, responding to the love of God in such a way, nor does it imply that those who do so respond are therefore “really Christians” without knowing it. It does, however, imply that God’s *koinonia* may be encountered in other forms and other places.

A lesson we can learn from Wesley is that we need, on the one hand, to exercise a realistically self-critical capacity when it comes to the quality of our own life and witness as Christians and Christian communities, to be alert to the dangers of self-deception and aware of our own permanent need for repentance and renewal; and, on the other hand, to be open to the presence of God in our neighbors, including our non-Christian neighbors, and open to the love of God that may come to us through them.

The Church Community

We might say that, theologically understood, the church is not an association of like-minded individuals serving purposes they may have devised for themselves. Instead, it

is a community established by God, grounded in the very life of God, an aspect of the new creation.

However, to stop there would be an oversimplification. It is correct in what it affirms about the ultimate source of the church's reality and about what truly sustains it as a manifestation of *koinonia*. But it is mistaken in what it implicitly denies. The truth—the theological truth, even—is that the church is indeed *also* a very human community, an association of often all too like-minded individuals, and that it does also serve human purposes quite distinct from, and sometimes counter to, the purposes of God.

Like other religious traditions and communities, Christian churches serve a variety of human needs and purposes, in ways that vary a great deal from one place and time to another. They commonly serve human needs for order, coherence, stability, belief-reinforcement, companionship, ethical guidance, and so forth. They are affected at every point by the typical ways human beings interact with each other in the satisfaction of those needs. They are also put to use in the service of other interests on the part of adherents and outsiders alike, for example, by being made to serve particular political and economic ends. No one acquainted with the history of Christian churches from the earliest centuries onward can fail to acknowledge this complex intertwining of human needs, desires, ambitions, and fears in that history.

Diversity and Conflict

Our understanding of the scope of grace, Christian conferencing, and theological reflection, taken together and enriched by ecumenical wisdom, points toward a way to address our current difficulties over conflict in the church.

Conflict is as complex as it is common. A church without conflict is very likely to be a church that is failing to be the church. Recall that it is God who brings us to the church, or who brings the church to us, creating church in our midst by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are brought together in the first instance by grace, and not because we share the same views, customs, cultural practices, or even moral values. Through our encounters with others in Christian community, we may of course come to share a good deal, gradually. Minds may be changed—perhaps most productively when it is not a case of one party winning an argument over others, but rather of their being led through their experience together to a greater understanding than any of them previously possessed. We may discover or come to agreement on a number of things. But erasing differences is not necessarily the best outcome. Some differ-

ences are part of the good diversity of creation, the diversity that is a gift from God and should be honored as such.

Some differences within the church aid the church in its mission to a diverse world. New technologies give rise to previously unimagined possibilities; new knowledge changes our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live. When the church is confronted with a new situation and is pondering its best response, it is well to have a wide range of experience and perspectives at hand. To understand and respect one another's differences and the ways in which they contribute to the church's fulfillment of its mission do not threaten the unity God intends, but instead enhance it.

At the same time, some of our more serious conflict is generated by differing responses to these developments. There are instances of conflict in which different people have incompatible or opposing judgments on some matter that they take to be vital to the church's own identity and mission, and in which a resolution seems beyond our capability. When a conflict can be resolved through discussion, through a process in which all involved are treated with respect, the whole event can be a powerful witness to the gospel. As the church, we are not called to avoid conflict, nor to banish it, but rather to deal with it redemptively.

Going Further

“Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Inter-religious Relationships” was passed by the 2016 General Conference and will be published in the *2016 Book of Resolutions*. The text can be read at <http://tinyurl.com/UMCNeighbors>.

Please offer us your feedback by completing the survey available at www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise or by answering the response questions provided by your study leader and e-mailing your responses to cfo@umc-cob.org.

Notes

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1962), volume 2, p. 288 (IV, 1, 7)

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Session Four: Leader's Guide

Preparation

- Collect the following materials: newsprint, markers, paper, pencils, copies of “Session Four: Participant Material,” Bibles, *United Methodist Hymnals*, participant journals/notebooks and pens.

1. Introduce the Session

Remind the participants that this is the final session in a study exploring how we as United Methodists understand the nature of the church. Invite participants to recall key points from previous sessions.

Ask participants to read John 17:18-23 and remind them that this is part of the prayer that Jesus prayed immediately before he was arrested. Invite participants to describe what they think the world and the church would look like if Jesus's prayer for unity were fully experienced.

When they have finished, **watch video “WLP Study: Session 4 Introduction” found at www.umc.org/CFO-WonderLovePraise (English language only, no hyphen in URL)**

Read aloud the section, “Search for Unity,” from the participant material. Use the questions posed in the section as a springboard for further discussion.

2. Consider the Church—Visible and Invisible

Ask participants to read silently the participant material sections “Visible and Invisible” and “The Church Community.” Invite participants to think about times in their own lives when they experienced *koinonia* inside the visible church and outside of the visible church. Then ask them to remember times when they experienced hypocrisy inside the visible church and outside the visible church. Without necessarily revealing specific details, allow those who wish to name aloud the feelings that were evoked in the various instances and to reflect on how the experiences affected their faith.

3. Explore Diversity and Conflict

Ask participants to read silently the section “Diversity and Conflict” in the participant material. Ask the group to name the Christian and other faith communities that are found in your area. Record the groups as they are named.

Divide into small groups and assign each group one or more of the faith communities named. Ask them to list the differences they perceive between each faith community and their own congregation.

After about five minutes, ask the groups to report their

findings and make a list of all the differences mentioned. Review the list, and discuss whether each difference is a difference that aids the church in its mission to a diverse world or a difference that reflects opposing beliefs on a matter that is vital to the church's identity and mission. Choose one of the items that falls into the latter category and discuss how our understanding of grace, Christian conferencing, and theological reflection as the work of the whole church might provide a way to deal with the conflict in a redemptive manner.

4. Offer Advice to the Committee

Remind the group that one of the purposes of this study is to provide feedback to the Committee on Faith and Order. Discuss the following questions, and ask the participants to note their responses in their journal or notebook.

- In what ways do you recognize The UMC in the materials for this session? What themes or topics accurately reflect who we are as United Methodists?

- Is there anything essential to the life of The UMC related to the topics discussed in this session that is missing?

Then ask the participants to consider the study as a whole. Follow the directions from “Wonder, Love, and Praise Response Questions” at the end of this study guide to report the group's responses.

If participants have particular feedback on any aspect of the document or the study, encourage them to send it directly to the Committee on Faith and Order of The United Methodist Church at cfo@umc-cob.org.

5. Close With a Hymn and a Prayer

Read each petition below, pause for silent prayer, and then together respond, “May we all be lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

Gracious God, we pray for your church that all may find welcome, experience community, and be transformed.

We give thanks for the saints that have gone before, leaving us hymns, writings, and a legacy of holy living.

We acknowledge that all are called to ministry, to proclaim Christ as priest, prophet, and king.

We pray for the unity of your church, so that the world may be transformed.

Close the session by singing together, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” number 384 of *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

Response Questions:

On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree,” please respond to the following statements:

I recognize The United Methodist Church in the materials presented in this study.

1 2 3 4 5

There are themes and topics essential to The UMC this study did not address.

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on your responses to the above questions by providing brief answers to the following:

In what ways do you recognize The UMC in this study? What themes or topics best articulate who we are as United Methodists?

Is there anything essential to the life of The UMC that is missing from this study?

What specific aspects of and/or new sights from the study have inspired you?