

Membership Lesson (1)

**Union Center UMC
Rev. Pastor J**

Becoming a Church Member!

Welcome to the *Union Center United Methodist Church!* Our hope is that you have discovered this to be a friendly place to worship and a wonderful place to learn more about the Christian faith, be in fellowship with other believers, and to be a part of God's work of reaching out to the world.

You may have some questions that need answers before you become a member. In this brief study we will try to address those questions and give a solid understanding of who Methodists are.

When you join the church membership you will do so during a Sunday worship service. This is important because, not only are you making a public profession of your faith in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and a commitment to the local congregation, **but also** the congregation makes a commitment to you as they welcome you as a new member.

Membership Vows

Do you in the presence of this congregation profess your faith in God, the creator of all things?

Do you renounce the spiritual forces, of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of your sin?

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?

Do you believe that God calls us each into a personal relationship with Himself and with one another?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ as the revealing expression of God's love that dwells among the human family?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the sustainer and guide for your life's journey, by which we are brought into closer harmony with the will of God?

Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Old and New Testaments?

According to the grace given to you, will you remain a faithful member of Christ's Holy Church and serve as Christ's representative in the world?

Will you as a member of the Union Center UMC, faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayer, your presence, your gifts, and your service?

God

We believe that God is ultimately the Ruler of all things. That He is in control. NOT that He CAUSES everything to happen, but that He is not off napping in heaven somewhere unaware of what is happening. God is an active participant in the world, and in fact, God wants to be a part of your life. (*P.S. God knows the number of hairs on the top of your head, or the lack of hair, whatever the case may be*).

Holy Bible-Scripture

So, God is in control, He loves us, has a purpose for us, and is always with us, but how do we know what to do? Does God have an owner's manual for living? Well, as a matter of fact He does, the *Holy Bible*. Yes, the answers are really in there. I'll agree that there are some boring parts, but 99% will speak right to you, guaranteed! Wrestling with temptation? It's in there! Hopeless relative? Unfair boss? In there! Alone? Afraid? Hopeless? Frustrated? Betrayed? Don't know where to turn? The Bible is intended to help and guide us in life.

Reading the Bible isn't for wimps, but if you are serious here are some ideas. The first thing to do is to find a quiet place where you can be undisturbed. Then bow in prayer, and ask God to guide you. Open, NOT only your Bible, but a *devotional*. What's a *devotional*? A helpful tool to daily read the Bible, that offers some practical teaching. There are numerous daily devotions like *The Upper Room* at the church and *The Daily Bread*. There are also specialty devotionals for couples, moms, dads, seniors, teens, grief and loss, etc. that you can find at any Christian bookstore, like *Cokesbury, or Christian Book Distributors*. A devotional along with your Bible will help you better read and study Scripture.

The Bible is NOT a collection of ancient writings with no relevance for us. Exactly the opposite is true. The Bible is referred to as *God's Living Word* because God speaks to us through the Scriptures today just as He has for thousands of years. Thus, the Bible can never become outdated.

So, why not begin today? Just 5 minutes of quiet time with God. Start with a short prayer, then read the designated reading from a devotional and then the Scripture reading. Just see how useful God's Word can be in your life, in your marriage, in relationships, at work, with neighbors, your children, your friends, etc.

The Trinity: God the Father-Jesus Christ the Son-the Holy Spirit

So far, we have read the words; *God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit*. But who are they? What's the difference? Is there a difference? *Yes!* and *No!*

We have already discussed God as sovereign Creator and we have mentioned that the Holy Spirit is God's presence with us always, to lead, guide, and comfort us. And we hear a lot about Jesus, His ministry, teachings, and being our Savior. But we need to be clear about who each is.

God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all ONE! Now, this can get a little tough for human minds to understand, but God is three persons with one nature. This is called the *Trinity*, or "*Three in Unity*", *Father-Son-Holy Spirit*. So, in essence, God is three persons in One. God the Father is described as Creator and Sustainer of all; the Holy Spirit is God's presence with us in the world; and the Son, Jesus Christ-God in human flesh. Though each *person* of the Trinity is different, they are all of the same *essence*. All share the same divine attributes, and the same divine essence as One, yet each, still being one, have different and distinct work.

Again, this can become confusing. As humans we will never have the capacity to fully understand God's nature, but this concept of *Trinity* helps us better understand God. The concept of *Trinity* helps us put a handle on God.

As you read and study your Bible, attend Sunday School, listen to sermons and sing hymns, you will learn how *Trinity* is used to better know and understand God.

God the Father - God the Son - God the Holy Spirit.

Church Membership

Lesson 2

**Union Center UMC
Pastor J**

Salvation in Jesus Christ

In the Christmas message each year we hear of the Baby Jesus called *Emmanuel*, which literally mean, “*God with us.*” That is exactly who Jesus is! God with us, in human flesh! Jesus has always existed, because He is God. But when the time was right, God came down to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. This dual nature of Divine and human is why Jesus is referred to in the Bible as *Son of God* and *Son of Man*.

So, why did Jesus come? God chose to come to earth as both human and divine, for the purpose of being our Savior and Lord. The penalty of humanity’s sin is eternal death. In order for us sinners to live and not die, the penalty of our sins must be paid; justice must be done.

It’s similar to a young woman who came before a traffic court judge because of a speeding ticket she had received. The judge pronounced her guilty and that the penalty of her traffic infraction was a fine of \$100. At that point the judge stood up, took off his robe, stepped down from his bench, walked over to the bailiff, took out his wallet and paid the fine. You see, the young woman was the judge’s daughter, but because he was a just judge he could not ignore the violation by his daughter, he had to find her guilty, and then paid the fine for her.

Similarly, God has done the same thing for us. God requires justice. Thus the penalty of our sin must be paid, it can’t just be ignored. So, after finding us guilty of our sin, out of His love for us, God came down to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, as human, and then He paid our penalty of death, as He was crucified upon a Cross for our sins. Because Jesus took our place in paying the penalty of our sin, we are now freed from death. By *grace*, God’s free gift, we no longer fear death as we have been given eternal life.

This whole “thing” is called *Salvation*. Or as some Christians say, we are *saved*! Or we are *redeemed*! We are *free*! All are true descriptions. No longer do we have to worry or feel guilty about our sin, it has been taken care of by our loving Savior Jesus Christ.

However, we need to accept this free gift of Salvation. God offers this free gift, but He doesn't impose Himself upon us. Rather, we are given the ability to choose to accept OR reject God's loving gift of eternal life.

Now that you know that *Salvation* is a free gift, will you accept it? If you would like, take a quiet moment, now or sometime when you feel it is right, and simply read through these steps and take His gift for yourself.

Bow in prayer. Anywhere you want.

Admit to God that you are a sinner. We are all sinners needing forgiveness.

Ask God to forgive you for your sin. To wipe the slate clean.

Ask Jesus to be your Savior. To save you from death giving you Eternal Life.

Ask Jesus to come into your heart by His Holy Spirit.

To be involved in your life and help you face each day.

Ask God to give you freedom from your guilt and shame.

No longer live with the guilt and shame of your past.

Ask God to give you peace and joy.

Forgiveness brings freedom to live with a clear conscience.

Ask God to lead you in a new life, today. Leave the past and its' regrets behind.

Ask God to help you see the future He has planned for your life.

You're created with a purpose.

***And finally, thank God for all He has done for you,
and will continue to do in your life. Amen***

Grace

What is *Grace*? Well, the best general definition of *grace* is, "a free, unconditional gift". Thus, pertaining to the Bible, *grace* is defined as, "God's free, unconditional gift". And more specifically, "saved by grace" means, God has given us the free, unconditional gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, if we are willing to accept such a wonderful gift. No, you do not have to pay for it, earn it, nor work for it. Just accept it as a gift from God.

One way to describe *grace* is by using the analogy of free tickets to a movie, baseball game, or some other special event. The tickets (salvation) are

freely given (grace) from God's love for us, yet we still need to accept the "tickets - salvation" if we are to use or redeem them.

John Newton gave the favorite hymn "*Amazing Grace*" an appropriate title. Most people say, "*I'm not worthy to accept God's love, His grace.*" Often we have a natural tendency to want to "earn" something that is offered to us. But God's *grace* is truly amazing. It is freely given, nothing to earn or work for, just simple acceptance of God's wonderful gift of love and salvation.

God's grace is a part of our lives from the beginning to the end. *Prevenient grace* is just the beginning of the journey. Prevenient grace describes God's love and care for you even *before* you have ever acknowledged or responded to God. In the words of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, God says, "*Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.*" Even before we were born, God knew us, loved us, and was calling us to know Him. In fact, as God says to us through the prophet Jeremiah, God is the One who made us. In God's eyes you are beautiful, precious, and loveable and even before you could love Him, He loved you and saved you. That, in a nutshell, is *prevenient grace*.

If we could only learn to live in God's *grace*, then we would no longer wonder if we were loved. God's grace says "yes", God loves you. No longer worry about being worthy, because "yes" you are worthy. No longer question if your life matters, because "yes" God uniquely created a beautiful, purposeful person in you.

Justification

Justification is a term used in typing, "*to justify the margins*". Like up on the tool bar of Microsoft Word, the little button that makes each line even from margin to margin, correctly or straight. Similarly, we need to be *justified* before God. Our lives need to be "*right, straight, line up*".

There is just one problem, we are sinners. Our lives are out of whack and don't line up in the least. Therefore, how do we get right with God, and be in right relationship with Him? How can we be *justified*?

Don't worry, it's already been done for you. Yes, God has made a way to have our lives line up correctly, *justified* through Jesus Christ. As explained

above, we are all sinners. Thus, we need to be saved from death. However, we can't save ourselves. So, someone else must pay the price of our sin. Someone needs to save us. Someone else needs to die.

God then came to us in human form in Jesus Christ, to die upon a Cross, for the forgiveness of the debt of all our sin. And because of Him, our Savior, we are now *justified*. The penalty of our sin was paid with Jesus' sacrifice upon the Cross.

WAIT A MINUTE!!! That's NOT the end of the story. The Good News is that after three days in the grave, Jesus was resurrected to new life, thus death has been conquered for all time. Because Jesus is our Savior, we too are given new life in Him. As those who have accepted God's gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are now *justified*. We are made right with God. We are *justified*. And those who are *justified* can be assured of two things: 1. Assurance of a place in Heaven. 2. Assurance of God's presence with us now in this life by His Holy Spirit.

Sanctification

Okay, so now I am *justified, regenerated, saved, made whole, etc. ...*, so now what? Well, you are also *sanctified*! Sanctified means, "*to be holy*". *Holy or sanctified* means, "*to be set apart from the common, to be used for a special purpose for God*". In other words, because you have been saved, redeemed, justified, etc., your new life is now "*set apart from the common, to be used for a special purpose for God*". Yes, you! Your life is now to be something special for God.

Just like the *sanctuary* of the church is a "*holy*" place used for a special purpose to worship God, so your life also has a special purpose for God's use and glory. Like the sanctuary of the church, God has given you the gift of His indwelling Holy Spirit. Yes, God is with you. You are a sacred temple, a sanctuary for God.

To live a *sanctified or holy* life is to live your life according to God's will and purpose. How can you be holy? Well, you need to discover the will and

purpose God has created in you. A good way to start is to live your life as a reflection of God's love and compassion for others.

What kind of words do you speak? Foul, destructive, hurtful, argumentative, negative or kind, encouraging, uplifting, positive? How about your actions...at work...at home...the mall...driving? What kind of an example are you to others? Do you anger easily, dictate, growl at others or... are you generous, kind or compassionate?

Living a *sanctified* life doesn't mean that you have to enter pastoral ministry. It simply means living your life as a reflection of Jesus. To live out the life He desires, that He created within you. God created each of us for a purpose, and we are placed on earth for a specific period of time to fulfill that purpose in our lives. Think about that for a moment.... Now is the time that God has chosen for you to live. Today is yours to make a difference. In all eternity, now is your time to truly live life. Don't waste a moment, live each moment to the fullest!

Living a *sanctified* life is truly fulfilling, a life full of confidence, joy and purpose. Just try it!

The Church

Together, Christians are supposed to comfort, guide and help one another, hold each other accountable, etc. Basically, as a Christian you are no longer alone in life. You belong! And as a member you will grow, learn, serve, give, worship, cry, help, be loved and love others. It's great to belong, it's great to be loved, it's great to live and learn all here in the family of God, His Church, your family.

Just like there are many rooms in a house, there are many rooms in a church. Not the church building, I mean figuratively in the world-wide Christian Church there are various denominations, or "rooms" that you can choose. But regardless of which "room" you choose to reside, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, all Christians believe in:

*One Almighty God, our Heavenly Father and Creator,
Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our only Savior and Lord,*

*The Holy Spirit, our Comforter, Guide, Friend,
The Holy Bible as the inspired Word of God,
Holy Baptism,
The Lord's Supper*

So, if we all accept the same fundamental beliefs, then why are there different denominations? Well, once you get beyond the basic Christian beliefs, there are many differences in worship style, church organization and structure, role of clergy and laity, missions, outreach, political views, Christian teaching, music, etc. All of the differences are okay, just as long as we remain united as the Body of Christ, the one, "*catholic*" = *universal*, Christian Church.

Holy Baptism

Christian faith is often described as a *journey*. When did this journey begin? At the very beginning of all creation. Yes, God had you in mind, even then. And even before you were in your mother's womb, God knew the person you would be, He loved you, and offered His grace, His presence and love is a gift to you. So, the beginning of the journey is at your *baptism*, when you or your parents, responded to God's grace and love.

Baptism is our initial response as humans to God, and what He has already done for us. So, what has God done? Well, God created you. He has given you life. He has given us this world to live in. He has given us a purpose and will for the life He created in us. But most of all, God has forgiven us for our sin.

So, what about *Baptism*? Well, Baptism is our way of coming before God, and God's people, the Church, to publicly accept this free gift of salvation. Then we are "washed" of our sins and marked as a child of God. In Baptism God also gives the gift of His indwelling Holy Spirit to lead and guide us on our journey of faith as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

"It's no secret that I am not exactly a saint. So, do I have to get re-baptized when I sin again?" No, because what God has done will not fade nor does God take away His promise of eternal life, even if you sin. When you are baptized, you are marked for life as a child of God!! Like an indelible magic

marker, the mark of Baptism is permanent. You cannot rub it off! You only need to be baptized once, and it is good *forever*.

But what if someone is not baptized? Are they condemned to Hell? What about African children who never hear the Good News or go to church? Well, who goes to heaven or hell is only Christ's business not ours. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, then you have the assurance that you are going to heaven!!! If you are concerned about someone you know who may not have accepted Jesus as their Savior, why not invite them to church or Sunday School or Bible Study. Introduce them to hear the Good News – the message of God's love and grace. God will take it from there.

Though Baptism is a response to God's gift of eternal life, Baptism is not necessary for salvation. The Bible says that we are saved by *GRACE*. Meaning, we are only saved because of what God has done, His free gift of "*grace*" in Jesus Christ, but that is only half the equation. Though God offers us salvation through His *grace*, by *FAITH* we need to accept that gift of salvation. Thus, we are saved by both *GRACE* and *FAITH*.

We are NOT saved by *Baptism*. The thief on the cross next to Jesus expressed his *faith* in Jesus as his Savior, and Jesus said to him, "*You will be in paradise with Me this very day*", but the thief was not Baptized. (*Luke 12:43*)

Remember, Baptism is a response of faith within the church. From your time of Baptism you begin a journey of faith within the church, growing in your knowledge and love of God and others. Once baptized, you grow as a Christian surrounded by the love of the church family. By worship, Sunday School, Bible Study, fellowship and other activities within the life of the church, you grow and better understand the Christian faith.

But WHO can be Baptized and WHEN? Kids? Hamsters? Well, kids can be but sorry, no hamsters. Because Baptism is primarily about our response to what God has done and is doing, anyone can be Baptized at any age, young or old. The emphasis is upon God loving us more than us choosing to love God. See the difference? Thus, parents, out of a response of faith, bring their children to be Baptized. By faith they commend their children to the life of the church family, to grow and learn in the Christian faith. It is a response of faith

by the parents until the child is old enough to “confirm” (*proclaim true*) the vows of Baptism for themselves.

WHERE? Well, Baptisms should always take place in church before the congregation because they pledge to lead and nurture the person in love. Baptism is a time of celebration within the Church. Rarely should Baptisms take place privately outside of the congregation.

Holy Communion

Okay, so what is Communion? Eucharist? Lord’s Supper? The Sacramental Meal? Are they all the same thing, just different names? Is Communion more than just grape juice and bread? What is the significance anyway? Why can’t we have wine like the Catholics and Lutherans? Or why do we sometimes have a whole loaf and the chalice (the large cup)? Why does the table up front say “*In Remembrance of Me?*”

Many books have been written on the meaning of Holy Communion, but for this booklet let’s keep it short. The Lord’s Supper is a sacred time of worship and remembrance in the life of a congregation. It is supposed to mirror the time Jesus and His disciples were in the Upper Room having the Last Supper just before Jesus was arrested and crucified. Communion is also supposed to mirror the heavenly banquet meal when all Christians are present with the Lord. The Eucharist is a time for us to remember and reflect upon what God has done for us in Jesus as our Savior, His dying upon the Cross for the forgiveness of our sins. And Communion is to be a time of reunion – a gathering with all brothers and sisters in Christ.

When the pastor offers the Prayer of Consecration or the Great Thanksgiving, the bread is lifted up and then the cup, with the words that Jesus’ body and blood are offered as a “*new covenant*”. What is a covenant?

A covenant is an agreement between two parties. And with any covenant comes a sign. Like when Noah and his family and animals came out of the ark, God made a covenant, an agreement never to destroy the world again by water. After making this covenant God offered a sign, the rainbow. God has made a “*new covenant*” with humanity for our salvation. He offered Himself in Jesus

Christ, to take the penalty of all the sin of the world upon Himself, and die upon a Cross for our forgiveness. Then after three days, Jesus rose from the dead, thus victory over sin and death, giving us eternal life. Our only part is to accept this wonderful gift of God's grace and love by accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

The sign of this covenant is Holy Communion. It is a time for us to come and renew our pledge of faith. To seek God's forgiveness. And profess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

So, why not Pepsi and pizza? Didn't Jesus use the common food and drink of His day? Yes, that is true, but the elements of Communion (bread and juice) are supposed to remind us of the sacred meal of the Last Supper. Pepsi and pizza just don't do it. They make us think of Chucky Cheese not Jesus.

Why grape juice instead of wine? Well, back in the 1800's, a member of the Westfield Methodist Church in Westfield, N.Y., discovered that wine at Communion was causing recovering alcoholics to "fall off the wagon". So, Mr. Welch, of Welch's Grape Juice, developed a process of pasteurizing grape juice making it unfermented. He developed this process specifically to prevent Holy Communion from becoming a stumbling block to recovering alcoholics and also, so children wouldn't consume alcohol when receiving Communion.

Sometimes we receive Communion with a loaf and chalice which is believed to be more like how Jesus and His disciples would have received the first Communion. But sometimes we use individual cups. Back before antibiotics and modern medicine sicknesses were sometimes being transmitted throughout a congregation by contact during Communion. So, this more sanitary way was developed.

What about the table, "*In Remembrance of Me?*" Well, in the liturgy you will hear the pastor repeat what Jesus said to the Disciples at the first Communion Service "*Do this IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME*". The table is actually called the Altar Table, where we celebrate Holy Communion. And the focus of Communion is to "*remember*" what Jesus did for us on the Cross.

Who should receive Communion? ANYONE! Members or non-members, various denominations, young or old, all are welcome. The invitation is open to

anyone who wishes to come and receive, even children. Yes, even children. No, they don't fully understand Communion, but no one fully understands the mysteries of faith. We are simply called to come and receive. Just as we are welcomed to receive God's love and grace. No understanding required, no membership card to prove acceptance, just an open heart of faith.

Also, Holy Communion is a regular and important part of the life of the congregation. Children need to feel that they are a part of the church family. That they are worthy and welcome to come to Christ's sacred meal of grace and mercy. Haven't we heard Jesus invited children to come to Him before? (*Matthew 19:14*)

Communion is a sacred time for Christians to gather in Christ's presence and to remember His love.

Worship

Our worship service on Sunday morning contains various components. There is fellowship with one another, singing hymns, choir music, times of prayer, reading of the Scriptures, children's sermon, offering, responsive readings, Communion, Baptism, receiving new members, sharing of joys and concerns, and of course the sermon. But there is more within the worship service, such as the sanctuary, the stained glass windows, the altar candles, the Cross, the music, the Pastor's robe, the paraments (altar clothes), and other visuals.

Worship is just that, worship of God. We come to the sanctuary on the Lord's Day / Sunday as a time of Sabbath. Sabbath is to be a time when we rest from our regular jobs and worship the Lord our God. It is vitally important to our Christian discipleship that we take time away from our pursuit of the almighty dollar and focus upon Almighty God. Besides, we are given a time to gather together as God's people, to be nurtured and to encourage others. Living our lives totally focused upon ourselves is not only unhealthy, but sinful. We need to worship, we need to rest, we need to gather together as Christians, as the Church - the Body of Christ.

There are also various attitudes of worship. Sometimes we eagerly come to church on Sunday morning excited about being with our friends and fellow members of the congregation. We anticipate singing our favorite hymns, listening to the choir, laughing with the children, hearing the Pastor's sermon, and truly being filled with joy during worship. However, there are times when our hearts are heavy and do not feel like rejoicing. We suffer loss. We are discouraged. We are overwhelmed with despair. We come to the sanctuary with brokenness. We come with a heart seeking God's comfort and mercy. To be embraced with the care and love of others. Tears easily flow.

Worship is being in the presence of God in a holy – special place. A place where we can laugh and sing, cry and be comforted. A place of belonging as a child of God, among the people of God. Worship is our honest expression of gratitude and awe of God. A time to give praise and thanksgiving. A time to be filled with the Holy Spirit and readied for Christian discipleship.

Church Membership

Lesson 3

Union Center UMC
Pastor J

Christian Beliefs

For thousands of years scholars have written volumes of books trying to define Christian beliefs. In fact, since the beginning of the Christian Church until now, a method of teaching Christian beliefs has been used each Sunday during worship, *creeds*. When we recite the *Affirmation of Faith* (*Apostles' Creed, Modern Affirmation, Nicene Creed, etc.*) this is a method to teach what we believe as Christians. So, a good start to discovering Christian beliefs is to check out the Creeds or Affirmations of Faith used in the UMC.

The Apostle's Creed (*Traditional*)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;*
 the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven,
 and sitteth at the right hand of the Father Almighty.
 from thence he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic* Church,
 the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed (**United** Methodist Hymnal)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
 eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,
 true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.
 through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven;
 by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
 and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
 he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
 he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
 and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
Who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
 who has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic* and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Methodism

One of the “rooms” of the Christian Church is “*Methodism*”. *Methodism* has a long history, but I will try to give you a brief sketch. Methodism originated as a spiritual growth movement within the Church of England during the 1700’s. Basically, a group of seminary student pastors thought that the church was boring. So, this group of pastors met every day to pray, sing, study the Bible and do local outreach missions. In time, this group grew and grew. They were called the “*Methodists*” as they were *methodical* in meeting regularly.

Two brothers, John and Charles Wesley were the main leaders of this spiritual revival group called *Methodism*. Charles wrote nearly 6,000 new hymns during his lifetime. He thought that the old hymns were boring and outdated. John, the organizer of Methodism, wrote thousands of sermons, Bible studies, and theological notes for the Methodist study groups.

The only problem with this was that this group was critical of the Church of England for not including the poor and lower classes of society. The Church only catered to the rich and powerful of England and rejected the poor and outcast of industrial England. So, the “Methodists” started outreach missions to the widows and poor. They started orphanages for children in need. Yet this only made the church leaders mad.

Since its beginning, Methodism has always reached out to the poor and less fortunate in society. Even today, there are United Methodist missions in over 90 countries around the world. Local outreach is carried out by the ministries of our local churches in their local communities.

Along with missions and outreach ministries, Methodism has been instrumental in social issues such as Women’s rights, temperance movement, workers’ rights, child labor laws, abolition of slavery, etc. as Methodism challenges us to live out our faith to change our world.

John Wesley and Early Methodism

John Wesley

John Wesley is considered the founder of Methodism, yet he would not necessarily like to be considered the founder of the denomination of the United Methodist Church. It's important to note that he never intended to begin a new denomination, but rather to spiritually awaken the Church of England. John Wesley remained a priest in the Church of England until he died. In fact, the British Methodist Church, as a denomination, did not form until after John Wesley's death in 1791.

John attended Oxford University in England, and at age 25 was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. It was at Oxford that he and his brother, Charles, began the Holy Club that met daily for prayer, singing, Bible study, and fellowship. Later, others coined the name "Methodists" because they were methodical in their meeting together.

Methodist Movement - Renewing an old Church

The Methodist movement was intended to bring spiritual revival or awakening to the stagnant Church. John Wesley and the Methodists felt a need for personal accountability in one's Christian living as well as missions to the poor. Early Methodism was simply a movement within the Church of England where people would join together in smaller groups called Class Meetings. Those that joined a Methodist class meeting were still encouraged to worship and support their local parish. Surprisingly, one would have to purchase a "ticket" in order to attend a class meeting. The money would go towards missions for the poor and building orphanages.

Within the Methodist class meetings the members NEVER participated in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. They were encouraged to receive Communion during worship within their local church. However, they did celebrate a "Love Feast" meal, but this was deliberately different and not to be confused or substituted for Communion.

John Wesley and the Methodists were not well received within the established Church. Because John was barred from many pulpits, he began preaching outdoors to the masses of the poor within the industrial age of

England. Methodism was growing among the masses of England, yet the Wesley's were becoming outcasts within the Church.

Conversion - "I felt my heart strangely warmed....."

In his searching and struggle spiritually John went to a prayer meeting where the preface to the book of Romans, written by Martin Luther, was being read as a devotion. During this reading John had a spiritual experience that he explains as "*I felt my heart strangely warmed.*" This conversion experience, he described as his acknowledgement of God's grace. Before he had great passion for his service for Christ's church, yet he was not opening himself to be the Spirit filled leader God had called him to be. This conversion experience propelled him in an enthusiastic evangelistic movement within the Methodist movement sweeping England.

Passion for Evangelism - New ways to witness for Christ - Outreach

This experience by John Wesley turned his emphasis towards missions and outreach to the disadvantaged and an emphasis upon personal piety within one's walk of faith. Great advances were made in social reforms and outreach, such as, working conditions for factory workers in England, alcohol, gambling, women's rights. He also began great outdoor revival services that offered preaching that salvation was for everyone in Christ, not just the elite members of the church. Music also was of great importance to the Methodist movement. Charles Wesley wrote over 6,000 hymns in his lifetime.

Early Methodism in American Colonies - Evangelism in the frontier

As settlers went to the new world they brought Methodism with them. Just as they wanted to break away from their Mother Country, they wanted to break away from their Mother Church. During the Revolutionary War, some Methodists were suspect to being spies because they were still members of the Church of England. Most established denominations remained in the wealthy seaport cities along the Atlantic coast, but only Methodism was wide spread in the new frontier settlements as people moved westward.

There were many God inspired, "stump preachers". Many had no education and thus it was difficult to "harness" them and their theology. This caused an "out of control" situation where Methodists had a hard time

endorsing preachers, and where they didn't want to subscribe to the regulation of a denomination. Methodism in America was as pure and wild as the frontier itself. Methodism needed leadership.

Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, Thomas Rankin

John Wesley saw that Methodism was spreading like wild fire so he appointed Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, and Thomas Rankin to try and harness it in the new world. However, Wesley couldn't harness even these three. Against Wesley's wishes they began the new denomination known as the Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E.). In fact, it was Francis Asbury who proved to be the rebel that shaped American Methodism.

Christmas Conference - December 25, 1784 - M.E. Church

Formally, on Christmas Day of 1784, the separate denomination of the Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in the American Colonies at Baltimore, Maryland. Though John Wesley disapproved of a new denomination, he was present and gave his blessing upon it.

Deathbed "The best is this, that God is with us." - March 2, 1791

On March 2, 1791, John Wesley died with many friends around him. He was singing hymns, praying, and quoting scripture. This man of great faith and leadership of his time ended his earthly life with these last words, "*The best is this, that God is with us.*"

The United Methodist Church

Book of Discipline

So now that you know a little history of Methodism, let's talk about the United Methodist Church (UMC) of today. *"Is there a leader, pope, spokesperson, CEO, who runs the denomination?"* No. There is no one person who "runs" the UMC. Rather, it is a book. Yes, a book, the Book of Discipline speaks for the entire UMC denomination. The Book of Discipline contains some history, theological beliefs, policies, laws, and rules of the UMC. Every four years the Book of Discipline is reviewed by a General Conference. Amendments are petitioned to the General Conference to make changes, updates, revisions of the Book of Discipline. There is debate, discussion, and finally a vote. The Book of Discipline is the authority of the entire UMC denomination as it is the product of General Conference.

General Conference

Every four years delegates gather from every local Annual Conference to review and revise the Book of Discipline. The delegates to General Conference are 50% Clergy and 50% Laity. The clergy delegates are average local pastors and the laity are average church members, sent to represent the average local churches. General Conference is local pastors and laity seeking God's Holy Spirit to lead our denomination from a grassroots perspective.

Annual Conference

What's an Annual Conference? Well, this is a confusing term as it describes both a governing body as well as a yearly meeting of that body. The Union Center Pastor UMC is a part of the Upper New York Annual Conference, which is a geographic area that includes all of New York except the New York City area. We meet annually to worship, review ministry, discuss policy, debate petitions to General Conference. Our yearly meeting of Annual Conference is primarily a time of gathering together, worshipping, and celebrating the ministry of our churches together. Again, Annual Conference is 50% clergy and 50% laity, all from local congregations. Each Annual Conference is "pastored" by a Bishop, not run or controlled by, rather the Bishop a spiritual and administrative leader to the churches.

District

Our Bishop is assigned to the *Upper New York Episcopal Area* consisting of thousands of churches. It would be impossible for any one person to effectively care for and manage so many congregations and pastors. So, an *Area* is divided into Annual Conferences and then further divided into Districts. The Union Center UMC is part of the *District*. *Union ceSuperintendents* help the Bishop by serving as a “pastor to pastors” and as an administrator over about 50 churches. A Bishop is consecrated for life, but a District Superintendent only serves a six-year term, and then returns back to pastoring a local church.

Apportionments

A term unique to United Methodism is *apportionments (Shared Ministry)*, often referred to as “*Conference Taxes*”. United Methodists are “connected” together in ministry. Local churches are not alone, rather they are joined together in missions and outreach. Thus, local churches unify with our connected service, prayer, outreach, missions and financial support. Our collective resources are an important part of our *connectionalism*. The financial contribution that each church is asked to give is called an *apportionment*. Specifically this refers to each church’s responsibility for “*a portion*” of the Annual Conference budget. This budget is debated and voted upon by the Annual Conference each year by the local church delegates. Through *apportionments* United Methodist Churches together join in missions and ministry that could not be done individually.

Missions & Outreach

Along with evangelism and preaching the Good News, *missions and outreach* to the poor, grieving, orphaned, oppressed and the hurting of the world has been a primary emphasis within Methodism. Methodists have been involved in many social action movements such as, women’s rights, abolition of slavery, child labor laws, etc. Today, one million children are fed around the world through United Methodist missions.

UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) has been a vital resource for counseling; cleaning and construction materials; and hands-on labor following the attacks on the World Trade Towers, Oklahoma City bombing, hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, droughts, ice storms, and any imaginable disaster or need that may arise. Collectively and connectively, United Methodists reach out and care for millions around the world through various missions and outreach ministries. Check out the UMC website, www.umc.org .

Church / Charge Conference

As explained above, there is a deliberate emphasis within the UMC denomination NOT to have a hierarchical power structure. The power of the UMC is within the local congregations with authority divided between clergy and laity. The *Church or Charge Conference* is the local church's annual meeting. This annual *Church / Charge Conference* is very similar to General Conference and Annual Conference.

Church / Charge Conference is a time of celebration of ministry for the past year and a time of looking forward to future ministry in the coming year. Reports are received for accountability of the various areas of ministry of the local church. Also, a budget and officers for the coming year are nominated and voted upon. The District Superintendent or an authorized Elder presides over the *Church / Charge Conference* with the local Pastor, officers of the church, and in the case of a *Church Conference*, the entire congregation present.

Church Council

The *Church / Charge Conference* only meets once a year. The rest of the year, the *Church Council* has the authority to govern the local church. The *Church Council* is accountable to the *Church / Charge Conference*, and must carry out its intended wishes.

The *Church Council* meets monthly and consists of the leaders of all groups and organizations within the church. There are also *members-at-large* representing a cross-section of the congregation.

Committees, Groups & Organizations

As indicated above, there are many ways to be involved within the ministries of our church. As a church we worship together, we pray for each other, we encourage and learn together, and we reach out in ministry together in various ways. Christ calls us to reach out in love and care. There are various ways you can be involved in ministry, watch the bulletin and if you would like to serve on a committee, please let Pastor J know.

Ministry Budget & Finances

Within the United Methodist Church there are several “checks and balances” arranged in how finances are handled. Theologically we believe that everything is God’s, and we are only stewards (temporary custodians) of what is His. Thus as “stewards”, we as a church and as individuals are to make decisions regarding finances according to God’s will.

The Pastor has general oversight authority and responsibility, but never manages any of the monies or finances of the local church directly. There is a *Finance Committee* that directly oversees the finances. This committee reviews a monthly report and approves such handling of finances. The direct managers of monies are, *Finance Committee Chairperson, Financial Secretary, and Church Treasurer.*

The *Finance Committee Chairperson* directly monitors the transactions and managing of the *Financial Secretary*, who collects and deposits monies, as well as the *Church Treasurer*, who pays bills and expenses of the local church. This “checks and balances” system brings integrity to the handling of finances. Yet also, the financial books are audited annually, both internally and externally for further integrity of our ministry.

Accountability and Stewardship

As Christians, we believe all things come from God. All things are His and not our own. Not even our very lives belong to us. All we are, all we have, all we do belongs to Christ and we are simply *stewards* of what is His. As stewards, we are to live our lives according to His will. In a nutshell this is *stewardship.*

Along with stewardship comes *accountability*. As stewards, we are accountable to the Owner, Christ. We need to be held accountable in our personal lives and also in managing the resources of the local church. Thus, we have *annual reports* and *audits* to show accountability, and demonstrate our church's integrity.

Handling of finances is vitally important to integrity of any church, and all financial information is available publicly. Also, information on all United Methodist churches is published in a book called, *The Journal*. If you would like a copy of our church audit, a copy of *The Journal*, or any other information, please ask Pastor J.

Conclusion

The Union Center United Methodist Church is a wonderful place to worship God, learn of His Word, to be encouraged in discipleship, and belong to a loving church family. I pray that you will come to know the joy and love of this special congregation, people who love the Lord and love one another. May you grow in your faith, strive in your discipleship daily, and commune with God's Holy Spirit as you make your home here among us, until we all are seated at Christ's bountiful banquet table in the glory of His Heavenly Kingdom.