



WESLEY FOR EVERYONE

Instilling United Methodist Identity in Young and Old

By Bishop Will Willimon

John Wesley made two enduring contributions to the church universal: First, belief in Jesus results in discipleship. Scripture is meant to be embodied, performed, and enacted in our daily lives (Wesley's "practical Christianity"). We're not talking distinctively United Methodist Christianity if we're not talking practical, incarnate, obedient Christianity. Randy Maddox characterized Wesley's theology as "responsible grace,"¹ an interplay between the loving work of God in us and the work of God through us.

Second, discipleship is for everybody, young and old, rich and poor. Wesley truly believed that it was possible for ordinary eighteenth century people, of every age and rank, to be transformed into saints—if they were disciplined, educated, and formed by Scripture. Early Methodists designed a score of creative means to enable the accomplishment of those two goals.

Uniquely Wesleyan identity doesn't come naturally, however. Randy Maddox showed me an exchange of letters between Wesley and Miss J.C. March that illustrates the twofold particularities of Wesley's practical Christianity. Miss March had written to Wesley about inadequacies in her spiritual life. Wesley replied, without noticeable sympathy for her plight, chiding her to give up her "gentlewoman" airs and be a disciple of Jesus. How? "Go see the poor and sick in their own poor little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! ... Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman; you bear a higher character. You are an heir of God!"

Two years later, in response to Miss March's continued whining about her sad spiritual state, an aggravated Wesley replied, "I find time to visit the sick and the poor; and I must do it, if I believe the Bible....I am concerned for you; I am sorry you should be content with lower degrees of usefulness and holiness than you are called to." It's vintage Wesley—nobody is too low (or in Miss March's case, too high) to be outside the reach of responsible grace. For Wesley, faith in Christ meant being busy in Christ's work, going where Christ goes, doing what Christ commands.

United Methodist pastors have a major responsibility to inculcate and indoctrinate our people, young and old, in distinctively Wesleyan Christianity, the kind Father John worked on Miss March.

Teaching Wesleyan Theology

We ought to love Wesleyan Christianity and our people enough to entice them into the joys of Wesleyan believing. Methodism is not synonymous with being a thinking, caring, average American. Everyone who joins a United Methodist congregation should be asked, "What do we need to give you that would enable you to participate fully as a Wesleyan Christian?"

The Wesleys taught that it is possible not only to come to faith in Christ but also to experience significant growth in faith in Christ, and Methodists were among the originating leaders of

the Sunday School Movement in Nineteenth Century America. That movement was, in great part, a creative attempt to get the Bible into the hands of everyone, particularly those who had been excluded from the educational systems of the day. One congregation in Birmingham offers a Disciple Bible study group for homeless persons—how very Wesleyan! Consider these other ways you can introduce congregants to Wesleyan theology:

- Implement a new member class. I recently visited a congregation that requires a four-week new member class, led by laypersons. One session is organized around the doctrinal section of *The Book of Discipline*. At the end of that session, each prospective member is asked, “Which United Methodist belief would you like to know more about?” The pastor and lay leaders then point that person to additional resources.
- Start a book study group. Our conference recently celebrated United Methodist Believing, urging every congregation to have lay-led learning opportunities organized around my book, *United Methodist Beliefs: A Brief Introduction* (Westminster John Knox, 2008). A downloadable study guide is available at northalabamaumc.org/resource_find.asp.
- Use *The Wesley Study Bible*, a new resource committed to biblical interpretation from a Wesleyan perspective. Adult Sunday school classes could work through the entire *WSB* in the course of a year, reading selected Wesleyan Core Terms and Life Applications found within the text of each biblical book as an exercise in Wesleyan hermeneutics. A downloadable discussion guide is available at www.wesleystudybible.cokesbury.com. Teachers of youth and children could easily adapt this study guide for use in leading even very young Christians into scripture.
- Teach hymns by Charles Wesley. I know a children’s choir director who, when I praised her for her choir’s stirring rendition of “Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling,” said, “We used to sing those silly little songs that you buy off the Internet. Then I said, ‘Wait! We’re United Methodists! We have some really good ways of praising God that we ought to be sharing with our kids.’”
- Study Wesleyan terminology. I recently met with a group of high school students who had a “Walking to School with Wesley,” class in which they explored key Wesleyan terms—justification, sanctification, New Birth, “almost Christian”—and wrestled with how these ideas could be put into practice in their lives as students.

Growing Wesleyan Community

Nobody is expected to be a solo United Methodist Christian. Discipleship is too difficult without the habitual, formed, and formal practices of discipleship that are taught in the church. Prayer, Bible study, sacraments, public worship, and the small group Christian conferencing that we methodical Wesleyans once cultivated with enthusiasm, may be taken up again by all age groups as essential to Christian believing. It is no small thing that Wesley’s greatest theological work was in his crafting of liturgies, hymns, and sermons—those practices that were near to the needs of actual believers and could be practiced in communal worship and study. Pastors today can nurture congregants’ spiritual growth by providing opportunities like these to grow in community:

- Start accountability groups. The first Methodists pioneered the use of small accountability groups where each person took responsibility for “watching over others in love.” In campus ministry, we formed “Holiness Groups”—small groups of

students who covenanted to hold one another accountable for five spiritual disciplines each day, including praying for one another at the same time each day, attending church together each Sunday, and studying the same biblical passages together once a week.

- Mentor young people in Confirmation. Pairing each confirmand with an older, experienced adult mentor is a wonderfully Wesleyan way of stressing that Christianity is not just a way of believing but a practiced way of living, a mode of apprenticeship in which we take responsibility for one another’s spiritual growth.
- Do missions together. I have high praise for the Volunteers in Mission from some of our congregations that pioneered the “Grandparents and Grandchildren” teams to Panama. That effort was so successful that they are now doing a team for “College Students and Grandparents” to Haiti. God has given a wonderful resource in the intergenerational nature of the church.
- Seek a better way. Last Advent, a group of young couples expressed dismay at the anticipated effect of Christmas commercialism upon their young children. “What can we do to rescue our children from this holiday onslaught?” they asked. A group of a half dozen older women in the congregation stepped up and offered a series of crafts workshops in which parents and children made Christmas gifts that simplified and made more faithful their celebration of Christmas.

In too many of our congregations, the way pastors utilize their time, the way educational opportunities are offered, and the way the congregation expends its resources, human and material, suggest that the congregation has limited itself to responding to the spiritual needs of one generation. There is a reason that the average United Methodist is about 58 years old!

Young people, however, are naturally suited for the Wesleyan way of faith. Recently I asked a successful youth minister, “What is the chief factor in the growth of your ministry with youth?” He replied, “the spiritual needs of students match up perfectly with Wesleyan Christianity. They want to be transformed and they yearn for connectedness with others in their walk with Christ. Methodists know how to do that!” Young people love to be worked over, turned upside down and transformed. The peaceful, sedate, placid life is rarely a goal of activist Wesleyan believing. Wesley taught that God’s grace is the power of God to live a transformed life.

So Miss March, take heart! New generations of Wesleyan Christians are putting our beliefs into practice and being transformed in the process. Discipleship is for everyone. Everyone. □

1 As discussed in Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace, John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994, 19)



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