

# A Beginners Guide To The United Methodist Church

## Welcome!!

This booklet is aimed at people who've are new to the United Methodist Church, or who are entirely new to Christianity. Perhaps you've walked past a church and wondered what goes on inside, or perhaps you've heard a lot about Christianity from the media and you're wondering if what you've heard is representative of Christianity as a whole. (A lot of it isn't. The extremists at both edges get most of the publicity.)

This booklet isn't meant as a comprehensive guide to Christian belief. It's intended to give you some background information so that - we hope - you'll feel comfortable enough to come to a church service and begin finding out more about us. We welcome ALL People as visitors; coming for a look doesn't commit you to anything.

## Introduction

Currently, the United Methodist Church has approximately 12 million members world wide, and we are the largest single protestant denomination in the United States.

The United Methodist Church was formed when the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged in 1968. But we trace our heritage back to the movement begun in 1729 in England by The Rev. John and the Rev. Charles Wesley, who were priest in the Anglican Church (Church of England/Episcopal Church).

Below, you will find a brief list of some of the distinctive characteristics of our denomination. The United Methodist Church is:

- **Global:** Today we speak many languages and live in many countries—with different cultures, ethnic traditions, national histories and understandings of Christian faith and practice.
- **Connectional:** Every United Methodist congregation is interconnected throughout the denomination via a unique, interlocking chain of conferences. The United Methodist Church practices representative democracy in its governance. Conferences elect delegates who are authorized to act and vote.
- **Inclusive:** All persons are welcome to attend our churches and receive Holy Communion, and are eligible to be baptized and become members.
- **Grounded in Scripture:** United Methodist trust free inquiry in matters of Christian doctrine. Our faith is guided by Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason. Of paramount importance, however, is Scripture as the witness of God's creating, redeeming and sustaining relationship with God's people.
- **Wesleyan:** The United Methodist Church's world view is rooted in the teachings of Jesus and filtered through the lens of John and Charles Wesleyan, and as such, places an emphasis on mind and heart (knowledge and vital piety) and putting faith and love into practice (life).
- **Concerned about social justice:** For more than 200 years, The United Methodist Church and its predecessor bodies have expressed concern for God's children everywhere — the poor, the orphaned, the aging, the sick, the oppressed and the imprisoned. Methodist were among the first to ordain women, and we fought for civil rights as well as suffrage and equal pay for women and we are still working for justice today
- **Mission-oriented:** Our mission is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." In uncomplicated terms, this means we strive to nurture followers of Christ who then reach out and teach others about the love of Jesus.
- **Ecumenical:** United Methodists consider dialogue and missional cooperation between United Methodists and other Christians as a valid witness to the unity of the body of Christ.

## **United Methodist Worship**

Much of United Methodist worship, like that of many other churches, is based on traditions stretching back for centuries. United Methodist worship can either be very traditional or very contemporary or fall somewhere in between.

Often newcomers can find traditional worship practices intimidating with all the singing, standing, following along in the bulletin.

### **What is the Church for? Why not be a Christian in private?**

The Church fulfills three important functions. Worship is one of them. We don't worship God because we have to, or because we're afraid of what God might do to us if we don't. We worship God because we believe that God is a being who fully deserves our respect and love. Worshiping God is simply the most appropriate behavior for the beings God has created, and a church service is an effective and time-honored way of carrying out this behavior.

The second purpose of the Church is teaching. Partly this is something we do to each other; passages from the Bible are read out in church, and sermons comment and enlarge on them and other issues, and relate Christianity to real life. But Christians also have a responsibility to make their own insights about God available to the rest of the world, and an organized Church can attempt to do this in ways that individual Christians cannot through shared experiment, shared worship and shared discussion.

Our third purpose is fellowship; we are a community of people with a common goal, supporting and strengthening each other as we work towards that goal. An important part of Christian teaching is the need to have compassion for others. The Church provides material support for those in need, and it attempts to promote social justice to the rest of society.

### **Who can come to a United Methodist Worship service?**

Anyone! You don't need to be a Methodist or even a Christian to come along. Attending a worship service doesn't commit you to anything. We will (hopefully) try to be friendly, but that's all. You can become a Christian at your own pace.

We don't charge membership fees. (We're always accepting donations, but how much you contribute is up to you, and entirely private.) There's plenty of ceremony in a typical United Methodist church, but we don't have secret initiation rites or anything else scary or sinister. We don't even have a dress code – wear whatever you are comfortable wearing!

Participation in a United Methodist worship service isn't particularly strenuous. The words of the service are provided, either in the bulletin, the power-point or the hymnal. If you're not familiar with the service, just sit wherever you like and do what everyone else does. ALL people are invited to receive Holy Communion, but you don't have to receive the sacrament if you don't want to.

## **1: What do Christians Believe?**

There are two important parts to Christian belief. Firstly, Christians believe in a God who is an all-powerful intelligent being, existing independently of the physical Universe, and responsible for its creation. We also believe that God cares deeply about the Universe and all of its inhabitants.

This belief is common to many major religions. Jews, Muslims and Christians all worship the same God, in different ways.

Secondly, Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth (c. 6 BC to AD 27) was a manifestation of God on Earth as a human, and that His teaching as recorded in the Bible is therefore a direct insight into God's wishes for humanity.

Lots of people have claimed to be gods. Why do Christians believe Jesus really was God?

There are several good reasons. Firstly, He taught a path of self-denial and caring for others, and followed these teachings Himself, and as a result He was executed by the Romans. This is hardly the behavior you'd expect from a person claiming to be the Ruler of the Universe – unless He was telling the truth.

Secondly, He was clearly not a construct of people's expectations. The Jewish people of the time had prophecies concerning a Messiah, but they were expecting an Earthly ruler - although with God's authority - who would kick out the Romans and make Israel great again. Jesus was not at all what they had expected. And yet - without once commanding an army or possessing any material wealth - Jesus became the most influential person in recorded history.

Finally, Jesus rose from the dead shortly after His execution, and appeared to hundreds of his followers before ascending/returning to God. Whether you believe this or not depends on how much weight you give to these eyewitness accounts, and to the simple fact of Jesus' continuing, dramatic influence on history through the people who had known him.

### **So what did Jesus teach?**

Jesus came not to form a new religion, but to reinforce and improve people's existing relationships with God. His main commandments were to worship God, and to care for other people. He said that God has very high standards - but that God understands that we usually can't live up to them, and loves us nonetheless. God is always willing to forgive, and let us make a clean start, as long as we keep trying.

The very presence of Jesus shows that the God who created the universe, and who probably knows the position and state of every subatomic particle, also cares deeply about individual humans, and wants us to love Him and live fulfilling lives in accordance with good moral principles.

*Christians believe that when Jesus became human, He opened the door for us to become more closely connected with God. He revealed to us a God who wants to be in close personal relationship with everyone – including YOU!*

## **Where does the Bible come in?**

The Bible is the record of humanity's gradually increasing knowledge of God, culminating in the Gospels - four accounts by different writers of the life of Jesus. It is humanity reflecting on its experience of God.

Is every word of the Bible true? Do Christians believe that the Earth was created in seven days?

Some do, but this is not a common view in United Methodist churches. Christians believe that the Bible was inspired by God. However, different parts of it were written for different audiences and not all of it is intended as literal history. Christians take the teachings of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, very seriously indeed.

## **Is Christianity incompatible with science?**

No. It can't be, because science is a self-correcting method of finding truths about the Universe, and we believe that Christianity is one of these truths. As a general principle, science tells us 'what' and 'how' and religion tells us 'why'.

## **What about life after death?**

Christians believe that human consciousness doesn't cease when we die. We don't know what Heaven is actually like; it's probably something well beyond our current capacity for understanding. We believe that we will have a permanent existence in the presence of God, in a form fuller and richer than our current physical one.

## **What is the Trinity?**

The short answer is; we don't know. Christians see God as having three aspects; God the creator, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Holy Spirit, which is the manifestation of God which we believe can still interact directly with human beings. We do not believe that God is a sort of committee; the idea is more that a single God appears in different forms for different purposes. In the past, theologians have attempted to explain and codify the idea of the Trinity, but in fact it's something which we don't fully understand.

There are many differences between United Methodist Churches, but we hold some things in common:

- The Bible as a basis of our faith
- The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, basic statements of Christian belief
- Recognition of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and
- An emphasis upon living out faith through service (missions/volunteering) and sharing the good news of Jesus.

It has been said that the United Methodist Church rests on the four pillars of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

## **2: What Happens in Church?**

The core of many United Methodist worship services is Holy Communion, also known as Eucharist. This is a ceremony derived from the supper which Jesus held with his followers on the night before his arrest and execution. Christians believe that this ceremonial meal connects us with God, which helps to strengthen us as Christians.

### **What actually happens?**

Holy Communion involves the giving out of “bread and wine” which has been consecrated, or made holy, with special prayers. In some parishes real bread is used; others use special wafers which look like slices of glue-stick. Normally the congregation walk up to the front of the church and receives the bread from a pastor in cupped hands. The chalice, the ceremonial goblet containing the wine, is usually served by an assistant.

### **Won't I catch horrible diseases from sharing a cup?**

Probably not, as most people choose to dip the bread into the chalice. If you are concerned, you may receive just the bread, which is also perfectly acceptable and is considered complete.

### **Does anything weird happen when you receive Communion?**

Some people do often experience a strong sense of emotion or a strong closeness to God. In general, Communion strengthens your relationship with God in the same way as you can get to know people well by spending a lot of time with them over many years. Communion is food for your soul just like what you had for breakfast is food for your body.

### **Can anyone take part in this ceremony?**

The United Methodist Church welcomes all people to receive communion and welcomes all people into the life of the church because we believe that God loves all people, after all that was the entire point of Jesus coming to live among us.

### **Will I go to Hell if I don't receive Communion regularly?**

We sincerely hope not! Holy Communion, like most of the Church's activities, is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. However, the United Methodist Church believes that Communion is a valuable component of our relationship with God.

### **What else happens in a church service?**

United Methodist worship services are extremely varied and flexible. There is much variation in style between individual parishes, and some parishes use different services on different Sundays.

There are specific words to accompany Communion, and the Lord's Prayer will normally find its way into a service. There will often be a Creed, a formal statement of basic Christian beliefs. Most services include hymns, which may be either traditional or modern. There will be prayers; some of these will be in set words, but we also pray about current issues. Services also include readings from the Bible.

## **And a sermon?**

Quite often. We're fully aware that sermons have a reputation for inducing sleep. This doesn't have to be the case. Some preachers are very good speakers, adept at making Christianity relevant to everyday life.

## **And . . . ?**

Yes, we admit it. There will normally be a collection. We need to meet running costs and pay salaries, and the United Methodist Church is also a major social service organization. No one will pay attention to how much you're dropping in the basket, and you don't have to make a contribution at all. If you see any value in what we're doing, you'll probably want to help if you can. We collect money because ministry costs money.

We don't believe people give to the church – they give through the church to touch the lives of people in need.

## **Why do the Pastors wear funny clothes?**

Like many of the details of our worship, this is a historical accident. A pastor's robes are based roughly on the garments worn by those in the early days of the Church. We've added Christian symbols to them, but we haven't actually changed anything much.

## **3: Where do I Go from Here?**

Newcomers are always welcome at Hayes Memorial United Methodist Church. There are no membership fees and you don't have to fill in any forms. Anyone can attend any Anglican service and see what happens.

## **Where and when?**

Worship is at 8:30 and 10:30 on Sunday mornings.

Check us out on the web [www.hayesmemorialumc.org](http://www.hayesmemorialumc.org)

Find us on Facebook or Youtube

## **What if I like what I see?**

There are two ceremonies relevant to becoming a Christian. The first is Baptism, and the second is Confirmation.

Baptism is a ceremony representative of spiritual cleansing, 'renewing' a person upon entry into the Church. Originally the recipient was fully immersed in water; a modern baptism in the United Methodist Church involves a ceremonial sprinkling of water on the head, and special prayers.

Some people are baptized as babies. This is an indication that the parents have decided to bring up their child as a Christian. In this case, people can be Confirmed when they are old enough to make their own decision to be part of the Church.

You can take part in most of the activities of the Church without going through either of these procedures, and there are no rules about how soon, or how late, you should make a formal commitment. Talk to one of our friendly pastors about it some time.

## **What can the Church do for you?**

The Church can bring you closer to God. We believe this is more important than anything in 'ordinary' physical existence. It can also help teach you to become a better person by living in a more 'God-like' way. The Church answers the human need for something greater than themselves in which to believe, and gives our lives a sense of meaning.

The Church also provides community with fellow humans, all working towards a common goal.

## **What can you do for the Church?**

Many Christians become involved in the life of their Church in ways other than simple attendance. The first step is often getting involved on a small group that meets on Wednesday nights at 6:00 for dinner and small group discussion at 6:30. However, many functions in a church service, such as reading lessons from the Bible, can be undertaken by any member of the congregation. Or you could volunteer to be a part of a choir or music groups. We always need volunteers in the kitchen, or fixing things around the building.

There is also youth groups, children's ministry, boy scouts, girls scouts, cub scouts and daisy scouts.

Christians can also become ordained as ministers. Becoming a pastor starts with prayerfully discerning God's will for your life. It requires several years of study, and a deep commitment to Christianity. However, all Christians have a part to play, using their own individual talents in their everyday lives to further the work of the Church and bring the world a little closer to the way God wants it to be.

## **Glossary of Terms**

**Baptism:** the ceremony of cleansing used when a person becomes a member of the Christian Church.

**Confirmation:** a conscious reaffirmation of baptismal vows, for those baptized as babies.

**Congregation:** the group of people who attend a church.

**Creed:** a formal statement of Christian belief.

**Conference:** a regional grouping of churches and clergy under the direction of a bishop.

**Eucharist:** another term for Holy Communion, or the service containing it.

**Gospel:** one of the four accounts of the life of Jesus in the New Testament.

**New Testament:** the part of the Bible dealing specifically with Christianity, and containing the Gospels.

**Old Testament:** the part of the Bible predating Jesus, and containing Jewish religious laws and traditions. Also called the Hebrew Scriptures.

**Parish:** an individual church, and the area for which it has responsibility.

**Sacrament:** one of the core ceremonies of the Church, defined as 'outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace'.

**Theology:** Traditionally defined as "Faith seeking understanding" and perhaps best understood as "reflecting upon our experience of God" either as an individual or as a community of seekers.

**Theologian:** a scholar who studies questions of God and religion.

**Trinity:** the combination of the three recognized aspects of God, known as Father, Son (Jesus of Nazareth) and Holy Spirit.

We hope that this booklet was of some help to you in better understanding our United Methodist Church. If you have further questions that have not been answered, please feel free to contact us.

**Peace Be With You!**