

“What it Means to Be United Methodist: Our Mission”

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1 John 4:19-5:5 CEB

19 We love because God first loved us. **20** Those who say, “I love God” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don’t love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! **21** This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born from God. Whoever loves someone who is a parent loves the child born to the parent. **2** This is how we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and keep God’s commandments. **3** This is the love of God: we keep God’s commandments. God’s commandments are not difficult, **4** because everyone who is born from God defeats the world. And this is the victory that has defeated the world: our faith. **5** Who defeats the world? Isn’t it the one who believes that Jesus is God’s Son?

What does it mean to be United Methodist? Our Mission

What does it mean to be United Methodist?

For the Past few weeks we’ve be talking about some of the basics of what it means to be a United Methodist:

- What we Believe
- The Methodist History of Mother’s Day and the Methodist Tradition to “love alike, even when we don’t think alike”
- Methodist Polity - Polity being the churchy word for governance style

Today, for our last sermon in this series, we’re talking about Our Mission

The official Mission Statement of the United Methodist Church is:

“To Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World”

This mission statement is actually a wonderful reflection of the United Methodist Church - our beliefs, our controversies, our polity, and our practices.

First our Beliefs.

Our mission statement reflects the both/and theological position that the Methodist Movement has held from our beginning. While most U.S denominations are more

focused on either evangelism or social justice, John Wesley, our founder, and the United Methodist Church are doggedly focused on both Discipleship and Social Justice.

The reason for this dual focus is because we see this dual focus in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Today's scripture lays this dual mission out very clearly.

John 4:20 reads: "Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! "

It's not enough to just make disciples who love God, we are called to disciple people to obey what Jesus taught us, which is, to love our neighbors.

And lest we get caught up in the question of, "who are my neighbors," Jesus already answered the question of "who is my neighbor?" with the parable of the Good Samaritan, by turning the question around. Jesus told the story of a man who was mugged and beaten and having a good Priest and a respectable Church staff person avoid the beaten man, and instead the member of the weird Samaritan cult stopped to help. Then Jesus asked the question, "Who was a neighbor to that man?" So the question is not, who is my neighbor, the question is: "To whom am I willing to be a neighbor?"

If we say we love God, and God has commanded us to love one another, then being a Christ follower, means being a good neighbor to those we encounter.

And being a good neighbor requires more than thoughts and prayers.

I could make an explanation of my own regarding this, but the author of James, already did, in James chapter 2, verses 15-17

15 Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. 16 What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? 17 In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.

The point being that when we make disciples of Jesus Christ we need to teach them what Jesus taught. What Jesus taught is that love is a verb that changes people's lives for the better.

That's where the second half of our mission statement comes in:

If we actually love our neighbors, especially our neighbors who are in need, then our faith compels us to transform the world. To transform the world one person at a time by practicing compassion on a small scale and to transform the world systemically by carrying out our Baptismal vows to "resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." (UMH p34)

This, of course, is controversial because the United Methodist Church is a Big Tent Church, where as John Wesley wrote, we agree to, "think and let think" on "all opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity."

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N20188.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

So while most Methodists agree that we are called to both practice discipleship and love our neighbors we do argue about exactly what that means.

"To Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World"

For example:

Some Methodists object to the language of "making disciples," because it sounds like we are trying to force people to believe and implies a lack of free will in the process of becoming Christian. And they have a point. That forceful language has been used to justify colonialism and racism.

Other Methodists object to the language of "transformation of the world," because they feel that neighbor-love should consist of personal acts of compassion, rather than taking any sort of political action to change policies and laws that cause harm. And they have a point. Because while the gospel is political - the word politics being derived from the Greek word Polis, referring to the body of citizens in a community and how they are cared for -- the gospel is political because we are called to care for the community, but the gospel is not partisan - meaning the church should not be on any particular political party's side. The church should influence politics for the sake of neighbor-love, but the church should not be influenced by politicking, lest we become a tool of the empire.

Controversies like this make one wonder why we didn't just phrase our Mission Statement differently?

Why not say something like:

The Mission of the United Methodist Church is to disciple people into following Jesus and practice neighbor-love?

Because, according to our Polity, The Book of Discipline

“The only body that can set official policy and speak for the denomination is the General Conference.” <https://www.umc.org/en/who-we-are/structure/general-conference>

The General Conference meets every 4 years and consists of no less than 600 and no more than 1000 members of Churches in Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States. Half of the members are clergy and half are laity.

General Conference votes on matters that affect the whole United Methodist Church, globally, and our Mission Statement is one of those things that this very large, diverse, and multilingual group had to find common ground on.

The fact that everyone would tweak something about our mission statement and yet we all mostly agree with its intent actually makes it a very good mission statement for such a large and diverse church.

There's enough that we agree on and enough room for interpretation to keep us practicing as both evangelical and social justice oriented faith together.

Perhaps the most important aspect of our both/and Mission is the way that discipleship and neighbor-love complement one another in practice.

Especially here in the Pacific Northwest, the largest and fastest growing category of religious affiliation is none - that is the people who check the box next to the word none - meaning no religious affiliation. The most recent data for Portland, Oregon from 2020 is that 64% of Portlanders have no religious affiliation, and early data suggests that number has only increased since the pandemic.

The good news is that most “nones” are not hostile towards religion, or consider themselves atheists, it's just that attending worship doesn't interest them.

People are interested in volunteering to help those in need, working for social justice and generally transforming the world to be more just and compassionate.

So when churches practice what Jesus preached. And when we invite others to come practice neighbor-love and pursue the transformation of the world with us - that is something that the vast majority of religiously unaffiliated people want to be a part of.

But in order to keep the practice of neighbor-love and world transformation going, we need to teach people what Jesus taught - that is we need to disciple people in the Way of Jesus.

And once we disciple people, they should be even more interested in transforming the world by practicing neighbor-love and inviting more people to become disciples of Jesus.

Discipleship and transformation really feed into one another very symbiotically!

It's also important to look at what happens when churches only focus on one part of the mission and not the other.

When churches only focus on evangelism, then church becomes a numbers game. How many people are in the pews? How many baptisms and professions of faith have we "made?" How do we keep them coming back? Which is good, but what about teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded? Too often when the only goal is numbers, we forget all the things that Jesus taught us being a Christian is about... and then, all too often, churches become willing to hide or justify any amount of bad behavior to protect charismatic leaders who can bring in the numbers.

When churches only focus on justice and compassion, then church becomes all about work. How many people can we feed or clothe, or influence to pass more just legislation. Which is good, but without Grace, without Sabbath, without taking the time to disciple more people to join us in the good work and make space for how new people will change who we are and how we do things, churches typically dwindle down to a very small group of elderly people who eventually cannot bear the burden of serving the whole community anymore.

Most churches don't go all the way to either extreme, but the healthiest churches take a strong both/and approach. An approach that asks both:

- **What do we need to do to effectively disciple new people of every generation?**
- **How is God calling this local church to practice compassion and social justice WITH our neighbors?**

- What do we need to do to effectively disciple new people of every generation?
 - Since we know that most Portlanders are more interested in serving than attending worship, how do we organize and invite more opportunities to serve together?
 - Then how do we offer and invite people into conversation about the teachings of Jesus?
 - And what changes do we need to make to the way we have always done it before, to be more effective at discipleship for those without a church background?
- How is God calling this local church to practice compassion and social justice WITH our neighbors?
 - We can't do every good service project, so how do we identify what Spirit is calling us to do and not do?
 - It's also important to serve WITH our neighbors rather than for our neighbors. Not only because invitations to serve are good evangelism, but because we will be more effective and have more capacity if we listen to and work WITH our neighbors.

These aren't easy questions because they ask us to shift out of the mid-twentieth-century institutional culture that the 1968 merger that created the United Methodist Church was designed for. A culture where most people were already Christian and we just needed to convince them to attend our church instead of the one down the street. A culture where the church was large and had plenty of people and resources to do things FOR the community so we didn't have to think about doing things WITH the community.

That mid-twentieth-century world is gone.

But our Methodist Mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, is still a good both/and mission for the 21st century.