



OUR MEMBERSHIP VOWS

in THE UNITED
METHODIST CHURCH

Mark W. Stamm

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The United Methodist Church

By Mark W. Stamm

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this discussion of membership vows in the United Methodist Church. Perhaps you are considering joining this church by publicly professing your faith in Jesus Christ. You may be transferring from another Christian communion or perhaps you have been a United Methodist for many years. In either case, reflection on these vows is important because they give us an outline for our common work of Christian discipleship.

According to *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, members make covenant to do the following:

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of their sin;
2. To accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression;
3. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord;
4. To remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world;
5. To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in their power to strengthen its ministries;
6. To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service, and their witness;
7. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.¹

We will discuss each of these in turn.

These membership vows express God's call to discipleship. God bids us to fulfill that calling wherever we go, whatever we do. Like the founder of our movement, John Wesley, we believe that "the

¹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2012 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), paragraph 217, page 153. Used by permission.

world is our parish,”² which means that we should build no fence around our gathering place and put no barriers on the scope of our outreach. The church participates in God’s mission and witness and neither stops at the church doors. We accept these implications about our ministry to the whole world, but we also know that Christian discipleship is a profoundly local reality. We are called to embody our faith in the midst of a very specific local congregation and community, in the midst of people with real problems and peculiarities, in the midst of people who know about our eccentricities and weaknesses. The task of loving God and all humanity begins with the challenge of loving our sometimes-cranky neighbors and the members of our local church. These membership vows call us to practice both the universal and local aspects of discipleship.



That we ask people to undertake vows should remind you that church membership is a serious discipline. From time to time, you may be tempted to forsake this calling. Be reminded, however, that you do not bear the burden alone. You take these vows in the context of God’s grace, assured that the Holy Spirit strengthens you and makes obedience possible. Remember where you normally hear these vows. I quoted them from *The Book of Discipline* because the vows hold legal standing in our church. For legal reasons, it is important for us to be able to say who is a member of the church and how one attains that status. Be that as it may, most United Methodists do not read *The Discipline*, generally preferring to read something more exciting, like their dishwasher manual, or perhaps, John Wesley’s sermons. Normally, we hear these vows in the midst of our services of the Baptismal Covenant, those liturgical rites

² From “Journal from August 12, 1738, to November 1, 1739,” by John Wesley, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume I (Zondervan Publishing House, reproduced from an 1872 edition), page 201.

we use for baptism, confirmation, reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, and membership transfers.³ That is the traditional context for these vows. Let us reflect on the meaning and importance of that baptismal context.

VOWS ROOTED IN THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT

God's Gift

An important theological and spiritual presupposition is reflected in the United Methodist services of the Baptismal Covenant: All of our covenant commitments to God and one another are rooted in the gift of baptism. We love God and one another because God first loved us (1 John 4:10-11). When children are brought for baptism, their sponsors are asked to affirm (or reaffirm) an expanded form of the first three vows (see page one). Then, the entire congregation, sponsors included, professes their Christian faith through reciting the Apostles Creed. Prayer is offered at the font, during which the congregation remembers God's saving acts in history and then asks for that work of redemption to continue in and through the church's baptizing. Then follows the baptism itself. According to our service, these children should be admitted to Holy Communion that very day, even though they may be years away from uttering their first word of personal commitment to Jesus Christ.⁴ We United Methodists believe that our children should commune with us in the

³ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), pages 32-54. For changes to the ritual mandated by the 2008 General Conference and reflected in this booklet, see "New Membership Vows and Ritual (Revised and Corrected)" <http://www.gbod.org/lead-your-church/membership/resource/new-membership-vows-and-ritual-revised-and-corrected> Accessed August 29, 2013.

⁴ See the final rubric in "The Baptismal Covenant II, Holy Baptism for Children and Others Unable to Answer for Themselves," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), page 43.

body and blood of Christ, which (according to the Scriptures) makes them a part of the church (1 Corinthians 11:23-12:30). We call these children “baptized members.” Granted, we do not yet call them “professing members,” that is, persons who exercise governance in the church and are expected to carry out its various ministries, nevertheless we insist that these children are already part of God’s covenant family.⁵ Such status is “God’s gift,” we insist, “offered to us without price.”⁶

If the vows of their sponsors are well kept, these baptized members will be raised within the context of the church’s life, where they will learn the biblical narrative and be formed in the life of prayer and service. We hope that they will come to see the Bible as their family story, prayer and service as their way of life. We hope that they will be brought to Communion, where they will learn to give thanks and receive God’s gift. We hope that their experience in the worshiping community will help them to develop a sense of godly wisdom, compassion and justice. In time, we trust that they will enter a period of formation that culminates in their confirmation, at which time they will profess the vows their sponsors took on their behalf along with those vows that relate to membership in the local church (*see pages 24-27*). Even when they affirm those vows at their confirmation, they will be reminded that the ability to make and keep such vows is rooted in God’s grace.

All of our vows are rooted in this grace given in and through baptism. In the course of time, perhaps two of these confirmands will return to a United Methodist altar to exchange marriage vows. On that day, our ritual will remind them that they “enter into union with one another through the grace of Jesus Christ ... acknowledged

⁵“By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism,” *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church, 2012* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), pages 937-38. Used by permission. See also *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2012*. (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), paragraphs 214-26.

⁶*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 39. Baptismal Covenant I from Baptismal Covenants I, II ©1976, 1980, 1985, 1989, United Methodist Publishing House.



in your baptism.”⁷ Perhaps one of them will one day hear a call to ordained ministry and begin moving through the process of discernment and formation that eventually culminates in the Annual Conference ordination service. Before she is ordained that day, the bishop will remind her and the whole congregation to “remember your baptism and be thankful.”⁸ Indeed, baptism is the foundation for every gift of ministry. When, finally, one of them dies, their family, their friends and the rest of the church will be reminded that their eternal hope lies not in any list of accomplishments, but in the gift of God freely offered in baptism. When we commend a sister or brother to God at the time of their burial, we say, “As in baptism *he/she* put on Christ, so in Christ may *he/she* be clothed with glory.”⁹

Taking our membership vows in the context of the baptismal covenant reminds us that all Christian commitment is rooted in God’s grace. We insist that human beings are deeply flawed—our

⁷ “A Service of Christian Marriage” from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 865, © 1989, The United Methodist Publishing House.

⁸ *Services for the Ordering of Ministry in The United Methodist Church, 2013-2016 as Approved by and Further Revised in Accordance with Actions of the 2012 General Conference*, Prepared by The General Board of Discipleship, The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The General Commission on Christian Unity and Inter-religious Concerns in collaboration with The Council of Bishops. (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 20. <http://www.gbod.org/content/uploads/2013-2016OrdinalFINAL.pdf> Accessed August 29, 2013.

⁹ “A Service of Death and Resurrection” from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 870, ©1989 by the United Methodist Publishing House.

relationships are a mess; we're not thankful for what we have and we covet what we don't have; we misuse much of our inheritance, including Creation and God's very name. Try as we might, many of our efforts to fix these problems end in failure. Sometimes we make matters worse. As St. Paul wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15). But, we do not give up in despair. Following John Wesley, we Methodists believe in prevenient grace, literally the grace that goes before us, making our discipleship possible. We insist that the Spirit is at work drawing us and others toward God, planting holy dreams in our hearts. We possess the freedom to resist this grace, but if we cooperate with God's work in our lives, many good things can happen. Thus, we believe that we can (and should) keep these membership vows, yet we realize that we do so undergirded by God's mercy and the faithful prayers of the church.

The Vows Are Taken in Community

We need these prayers. That we take these membership vows in the context of the baptismal covenant reminds us that we do not take them simply as individuals, but with other people. In United Methodist understanding, the Service of the Baptismal Covenant is held in the context of the regular corporate worship of the church. The vows are made in public, witnessed by other Christians who are asked to support the new member in his/her commitment while holding him/her accountable to the same. The congregation members renew their own vows.

Some congregations offer alternative, semi-private occasions for taking the vows and joining the church, but it seems to be a misguided practice. The baptismal context of the vows suggests that Christian vows should be professed in the public assembly with the whole church looking on. That is at least part of what it means to participate in God's work through our witness. Public profession can be difficult, even dangerous, but the church promises to support us, and the great cloud of witnesses cheers us on (Hebrews 12: 1-2).

The Service of the Baptismal Covenant has deep historical and ecumenical roots, reminding us that we make these vows in continuity with Christians of ages past and in concert with our brothers and sisters in other branches of the church around the world. We will now turn our attention to those vows that reflect our common Christian inheritance.

DISCIPLINES HELD IN COMMON WITH THE ECUMENICAL CHURCH

Renouncing Sin and Resisting Evil

The first two membership vows address the problem of sin and evil. Members are called to do the following:

To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of their sin; and

To accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice and oppression.¹⁰

According to an early church order known as *The Apostolic Tradition*, with roots “perhaps as early as the mid-second century,”¹¹ when persons desired to join the church (through baptism) the process of pre-baptismal formation began with a sharp demand for repentance. Gladiators, idol makers, and adulterers, among others, were told to forsake sinful patterns immediately, or, if they would not, to

¹⁰ *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, paragraph 217, page 153. Used by permission.

¹¹ Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips. *The Apostolic Tradition, A Commentary*. Edited by Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002), 14.

come back when they were ready to do so.¹² So much for the slow, pastoral approach. John Wesley, working in eighteenth century England, made a similar demand of Methodist seekers. While early Methodism had no membership vows per se, they did have the “General Rules,” and they were to be followed by all who desired “to flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from their sins.”¹³ The first of these rules called the seeker to do no harm and avoid evil of every kind. Wesley proceeded to name some common forms of evil—slaveholding, usury, and uncharitable conversation, among others.¹⁴ His list is by no means exhaustive, but it illustrates the need to be specific when going about the work of repentance.

Some think this mention of sin and evil sounds judgmental and primitive, yet an emerging consensus insists that renouncing sin and evil is a foundational part of the church’s work. Baptismal rites ancient and modern include similar vows, some of them much more complex than ours. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church’s *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) calls for “scrutinies” to be observed on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. In these rites, the congregation prays that the candidates for baptism may be freed from all that stands in the way of faithful life in Christ.¹⁵ The scrutinies are the liturgical descendants of the exorcisms practiced by the ancient church. Properly administered, no strange physical manifestations occur in the scrutinies, but rather there is a quiet acknowledgement that sin and evil are named and confronted in and through the prayers of the church.

After the bloody twentieth century, with its World Wars and multiple acts of genocide, it would be incredibly naïve of us to assume that there are no evil powers. The recent history of terrorism—the

¹² Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips. *The Apostolic Tradition, A Commentary*. Edited by Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002), 88-93.

¹³ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, paragraph 103, page 72. Used by permission.

¹⁴ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, paragraph 103, page 73.

¹⁵ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, study edition (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), pages 80-87, 94-109.

September 11, 2001 attacks and the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City—drives the point home. So do continuing revelations about the sexual exploitation of children, often perpetrated by those whom we thought were doing good. Such sin and evil destroys people, defaces the Creation, and stands against the vision of God’s reign. To ignore it is to consent to it, so God’s people are called to name sin and evil, to renounce it and resist it.

How does the church do this work of resistance? Does our way differ from what those outside the church may do? When Americans think of resisting evil, our thoughts may be drawn to battling Nazi fascism by sending waves of young soldiers onto the bloody beaches of Normandy. We may think of New York City police officers and fire fighters who rushed into the chaos of the World Trade Center, giving themselves up to save as many persons as possible. These actions did say “No!” to evil; doubtless, some of those who served saw their grim work as an expression of their Christian discipleship. Regardless of the motivations, lives were saved as the result of these sacrifices, and that is a good thing.

Resisting evil may require the use of force. For that reason, the church needs to continue reflecting on the just use of force, and our church has done so. As our United Methodist Social Principles assert, “we deplore war and urge the peaceful settlement of all disputes among nations.” We also remind ourselves that many Christians have decided that use of force “may regretfully be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny, and genocide.”¹⁶

We have failed to hear the Gospel, however, if we think that force is the only way to resist evil. The baptismal and liturgical context for these membership vows suggests another way. According to the ancient church order mentioned earlier, one moved directly from the baptismal font into the assembly of the faithful, where one participated in the intercessory prayers of the people, the kiss of

¹⁶ *The Book of Discipline*, 2012 (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), paragraph 164.I, page 138. Used by permission.

peace, and the Eucharist.¹⁷ This order reveals that baptism and these other worship acts are deeply related. Intercessory prayer is a way of resisting evil. When people practice the discipline of reconciliation embodied in the passing of the peace, enmity is rooted out before it can mature into bitterness and violence. When people gather around the Lord's Table, offering themselves and their gifts to God while giving thanks for God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ, they learn how to exercise dominion over Creation in the right way. When the bread and cup are freely given and received, the bondage of selfishness is broken and a new vision of community takes shape. The Eucharist resists evil by forming us according to a different vision.



These liturgical actions will shape our lives as we move beyond the gathered church into our community and world. As hearers of the Word, we become people who speak the truth in love. Through our service with and for the poor, we become a prayer of intercession spoken with feet and hands. Those who pass the peace will seek to live in peace with all neighbors. Those who celebrate the Eucharist learn to give thanks for all God's gifts, and they share widely. Such witness rooted in worship resists evil, stopping much of it long before measures of last resort are needed.

¹⁷ Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips. *The Apostolic Tradition, A Commentary*. Edited by Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002), 120-23.

Confessing Christ as Savior, Trusting in His Grace, and Serving Him as Lord

Having addressed sin and evil, the third vow calls us to take the positive turn toward Jesus Christ. Members are called “To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as Lord.”¹⁸ Of course, neither movement—toward sin or grace—is done once and never repeated. That word confession means more than a simple intellectual consent to the Gospel. It means speaking the truth aloud in word and action, in plain view. St. Paul spoke to this dynamic when he said,

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved (Romans 10: 8-10).

Such a confession identifies us with the covenant people and their way of life, and that identification can be risky because calling Jesus Christ “Lord” threatens the status of other would-be lords. Some have suffered, like Maximus “The Confessor” (C.E. 580-662) who gained his title for defending the doctrine of the two wills of Christ against a heretical ex-patriarch of Constantinople (Pyrrhus). According to the terms of his sentence, they cut off Maximus’ tongue and his hand was mutilated.¹⁹ In like manner, that small minority of German Christians who opposed Adolph Hitler’s Nazi regime took the name Confessing Church. They confessed Christ publicly and at considerable risk. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, their most famous martyr, reminds us that when someone is called by Christ, it is a call to come and die.²⁰

¹⁸ *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, paragraph 217, page 153. Used by permission.

¹⁹ *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, edited by Jerald C. Brauer (Philadelphia: The Westminster press, 1971), page 537.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 89.

Most likely, our confession of Jesus Christ will not cost us life or limb, but our lives will be changed, if not turned upside down. Jesus reminds us that following him means denying ourselves and taking up the cross. Thus, confessing Christ may mean dying a number of smaller deaths—setting aside our desires for the sake of others—yet always knowing that we find ourselves in the midst of our service. In our United Methodist membership vows, we commit ourselves to life within this baptismal dynamic of death and resurrection.

We cannot, however, confess Christ in our own power. Thus, we promise to trust in his grace, in God's forgiving, healing, and strengthening presence. For United Methodists, trusting in God's grace has always involved a commitment to use "the means of grace," privileged places where we can encounter God and receive the help that we need. As John Wesley taught, "all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside."²¹ What are these means? According to Wesley, God promises to meet us in the fellowship of the church as we share Word and Sacrament. God meets us as we pray and as we search the Scriptures. Even fasting is a means of grace. This grace is not automatically received, however. Wesley believed in the freedom and sovereignty of God; that is, that God is free to relate to us as God chooses. He also urged us to remember that love is the end toward which the means of grace point, and that we should come to them with a heart open to God's vision for the world. Nevertheless, the conclusion is clear. Those who want to receive God's grace will make full use of these means.²²

Calling people to use the means of grace is like reminding them to eat well, take proper exercise, and rest adequately. One might assume that people would desire the benefits of those good habits, but it is easy to lose one's way, working too hard and subsisting on

²¹ John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 1, Sermons 1, 1-33*, Albert C. Outler, editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), page 384. See also *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, paragraph 104, pages 77-78.

²² John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 1, Sermons 1, 1-33*, Albert C. Outler, editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), page 378.

junk food. In like manner, Christians sometimes forget the source of their strength in Word and Table, instead craving the junk food of an unbiblical and non-sacramental pop spirituality. Sometimes, they become so involved in their busy-ness that they forget to nurture themselves at all. This vow to trust in God's grace reminds us to take a balanced spiritual diet.

Committing to the Church and Its Scriptures

All of this work is done, of course, in the midst of the covenant people. As Christians, we are given a covenant family, the church, and a family album of stories, the Bible. We commit ourselves to live with both. The fourth and the seventh vows address these covenant concerns. United Methodist members commit themselves to the following:



To remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world.

To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.²³

While separated in the *Book of Discipline* list, in the Baptismal Covenant the vow about biblical faith follows the vow about faithful membership.²⁴ They are closely related.

²³ *The Book of Discipline* 2012, paragraph 217, page 153.

²⁴ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 34-35.

As noted, the church is our family, and we need vows to keep families together. Face it—life is tough and those closest to us can be exasperating; thus, we might think of many reasons to give up on those relationships. That’s why marriages and families are built on the foundation of vows:

*...for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
until we are parted by death...²⁵*

Like all other vows, marriage vows themselves are founded on the grace of God and we believe grace makes it possible not only to keep them, but also to flourish in them. We need a similar vow to keep us committed to the church, and remember, when we speak of church, we are talking about the only church we know—the one that we can see, touch, hear, and even smell. And, believe me, there are times when the church looks (and smells) better to us than it does at others.

Some will point out that the church can be hypocritical and short sighted. Others will remind us that the church has hurt people, sometimes quite seriously. They are right on both counts. The church is sinful, yet also full of grace. Some folks will insist that they feel closer to God sitting by a mountain stream than they do in the church sanctuary on Sunday morning. Who can argue that point? I might want to substitute “the ballpark” for the “mountain stream” piece, but the sentiment remains. Some religious and spiritual expressions require no one else but myself and my private ruminations, but the Christian faith is not one of those. The God we read about in the Scriptures works with families and tribes, as imperfect and disappointing as they may be. God works with groups of disciples and churches, with the twelve, the seventy, and the one hundred and twenty (Luke 9:1-6, Luke 10: 1-12, Acts 1: 15-26). God is one—yes!—yet three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

²⁵ “A Service of Christian Marriage” from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 867, © 1989, The United Methodist Publishing House

Thus, even the God of Christian faith is, in a sense, a community. So, if you want a God who doesn't work in and through groups, then you'll have to find another narrative than the one we have been given. The God we read about in the Old and New Testaments insists that you commit to God's covenant people, warts and all.

What are the benefits of such a commitment? The primary benefit is the presence of the living Christ. Indeed, he promises that we will greet him in the midst of the faithful—"...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). The church continues to insist that our hearts are warmed as we hear the Scriptures read and proclaimed (Luke 24: 32), that the Risen Christ is known in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24: 35). Indeed, the mystery of the Risen Christ is present in the midst of my sisters and brothers. They hear my confession and proclaim God's forgiveness. They embrace me, they laugh and cry with me, and God heals me in and through all of that. My brothers and sisters know my shortcomings, and so they keep me honest, but they also know my potential, and so they call forth my gifts. They share their heritage and their wisdom and give me people to teach. I need their commitment to me, and they need me as well.

Our life together in the church involves us in commitment to continue wrestling with the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments. As the church is a family given to us, warts and all, so these Scriptures are given to us. Again, one can think of the Scriptures as a family album, an uncensored album at that. The stories about the thieves and the adulterers have not been excluded. Sometimes, the rogues—like King David—are also the heroes. The Scriptures provide us with our foundational stories and we remind ourselves that our story as church and as members of it will not make sense unless we know the Scriptures and continue to reflect on them. Nevertheless, while each story helps us understand something about the covenant family, not all of them are central to our identity.

The Apostles Creed, which stands at the heart of the Service of the Baptismal Covenant, functions as an important organizing principle. Thus, when we invite baptismal candidates and confirmands to

“join together in professing the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments,”²⁶ we respond with the Creed. In doing so, we follow a liturgical pattern with ancient roots.²⁷

Using the Creed to answer the question about the Scriptures is a wise strategy, for it reminds us that the Scriptures are not primarily a list of rules for conduct, or principles about God, or promises to be redeemed, or even odd and tragic stories about flawed individuals and families. The Creed helps us understand what the church holds most important about the biblical narrative. The Scriptures witness to a God known in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God is Creator of all things. At the heart of the biblical narrative is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are given life in and through this Christ, and his ministry continues in the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such is the heart of the narrative.

The Creed does not address every question. It does not tell us exactly what to do about international terrorism, nor does it tell us how to structure our health care system or do education reform. It does not mention abortion or homosexuality. It says nothing about the proper age for baptismal candidates or the mode for baptizing them. It insists that Christ will come again, but does not say when or how. We should discuss these issues and others like them with our Bibles open and our minds engaged, and United Methodists commit themselves to doing such work. We should continue to take our questions to the Scriptures, even though such study often provides more questions than direct answers. Even as we have such discussions—and arguments—around the biblical canon, we should remember what lies at the heart of that narrative. That the Creed is proclaimed by most of the world’s Christians reminds us that, despite our differences, there is a broad ecumenical consensus about the essential core of the church’s proclamation.

²⁶ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 35. Baptismal Covenant I from Baptismal Covenants I, II ©1976, 1980, 1985, 1989, United Methodist Publishing House.

²⁷ Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips. *The Apostolic Tradition, A Commentary*. Edited by Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002), 114-17.

We have discussed the vows and commitments that we hold in common with most of the world's churches. Now, let us turn our attention to commitments that pertain particularly to our calling as United Methodists and as members of a local church. The fifth and sixth vows address these concerns.

VOWS THAT RELATE TO OUR PARTICULAR CALLINGS

Our Calling to Serve As United Methodists

Our members commit themselves “To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in their power to strengthen its ministries.”²⁸ Please note the changes in this statement from that printed in *The United Methodist Hymnal*,²⁹ with the new language adopted by the 2008 General Conference. Where previously our members had promised loyalty to The United Methodist Church, now we promise loyalty to Christ through our denomination. This language provides an important clarification and it should be used in this revised form. It remains a strong and distinctive statement.

As we know, the Christian faith is embodied in a wide variety of churches and fellowships. Each witnesses to the truth as they have known it in Jesus Christ, and each seeks to serve the one God in the power of the Holy Spirit. Each reflects a response to the admonition of St. Paul who wrote, “...work out your own salvation with fear and

²⁸ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, paragraph 217, page 153. Used by permission.

For use in our ritual, see “New Membership Vows and Ritual (Revised and Corrected)” <http://www.gbod.org/lead-your-church/membership/resource/new-membership-vows-and-ritual-revised-and-corrected> Accessed August 29, 2013.

²⁹ The original language was “As members of Christ’s universal church, will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 38.

trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2: 12-13). Each denomination bears its particular gifts and calling on behalf of the greater church and the world. As with individuals, so it is with the churches: God gives grace to each, yet none is perfect. Thus it is important for churches to converse with each other, to study and pray together. I have learned valuable lessons about worship from my friends in the Episcopal Church and from Pentecostals. I have learned about baptism and the disciplines of Christian initiation from my sisters and brothers in the Catholic Church, and from my Baptist, Mennonite, and Lutheran colleagues. Besides my numerous United Methodist mentors, I learned much about preaching from a wise Presbyterian teacher and from a friend in the National Baptist Convention. All of this interaction is valuable and I hope that my circle of ecumenical contacts will widen all the more. Nevertheless, one cannot be a member of several different churches, but each of us is called to bear a particular ecclesiastical identity. We are United Methodists, and we serve Christ through this church. This particular identity is part of the gift that we offer our ecumenical colleagues.



When we promise loyalty to Christ through The United Methodist Church we are not saying that ours is the best church or that we have exclusive theological insights. Nor are we saying that everybody in our neighborhood ought to become a United Methodist. We are happy when people join our fellowship, but we should be equally happy when someone answers God’s call to serve faithfully as a

Presbyterian, a Roman Catholic or as a member of the Assemblies of God. This vow about loyalty to Christ through The United Methodist Church says nothing negative about the validity of other churches. Rather, it is our way of acknowledging that The United Methodist Church is the best place for us to live out our commitment to Jesus Christ. It acknowledges God's particular call on our lives to a particular way of being church. To live as a disciple of Jesus Christ through The United Methodist Church means that we support our connectional system of ordering ministry and mission. We do not view ourselves as a loosely related association of local congregations, but rather as one church manifested in a variety of contexts. This unity does not mean that all of our churches should look exactly the same, perhaps something like the ecclesiastical equivalent of a fast food chain. We do, however, believe that there is a unifying center in Jesus Christ, in our understanding of God's grace and the shape of the church. We are connectional for the sake of mission to the community and the world, to the end that we and others are formed as disciples of Jesus Christ. Remember the vow—we are loyal to Christ through this church for the sake of strengthening its ministries.

As an ordained elder in this connection, loyalty to Christ through The United Methodist church means that I consent to work within its itinerate system of appointing pastors, that is, that I am willing to consult with my bishop and others about my appointment and then trust the church's discernment about the best place for me to serve.³⁰ As a part of this branch of Christ's church, I will study its history and heritage, doing my best to understand and embody its particular understanding of God's grace and mercy, as well as its understanding of accountability. I will learn about John Wesley's theology and his practices for making disciples. I will learn the hymns of Charles Wesley. As a United Methodist, I will study the church's doctrinal commitments and wrestle with its Social Principles. I will use the church's approved liturgical rites. I will seek constant communion, and when I serve that communion I will use grape juice in the cup until the church decides otherwise. I may not agree with all of our

³⁰ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, paragraphs 425-28, pages 337-42.

church's positions, but when I disagree I will do so respectfully and I will use the established channels for change. For the sake of Christ and the Gospel, I will do all that I can to strengthen the ministries of The United Methodist Church and help them flourish.

From an ecumenical perspective, this language about loyalty to Christ through our particular denomination is somewhat unusual, even in its revised form. It is not, for instance, part of the ritual tradition of our close ecumenical cousin, the Episcopal Church.³¹ The meaning and ecumenical significance of our United Methodist vow is illumined by its historical context. It is a holdover from earlier Methodist rites, having appeared in its previous form—"Will you be loyal to The Methodist (or United Methodist) Church and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service"—in our official hymnals and books of worship throughout the twentieth century.³² It reflects Methodism's counter-cultural roots, a reminder that Wesley's movement began as a society within the Church of England. It was a high commitment movement, akin to a religious order, meant both to support and critique the rest of the church. One joined it by an act of volition, by making commitments over and above those expected by the state church. In Wesley's time, one took on the discipline of the class meeting and its General Rules. When it is true to its roots, Methodism remains such a high commitment movement. This vow can remind us of that higher expectation. If United Methodism were to move back into full communion with the Anglican Communion or even with Rome, this sense of church as a counter-cultural order of missionaries would be one of its primary gifts to a wider church.

Some wonder if this vow of loyalty to Christ through The United Methodist Church means that they have promised to remain a United

³¹ See *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), pages 310, 418.

³² *The Methodist Hymnal*, 1905, Psalter and Ritual section, page 94. *The Methodist Hymnal*, 1939, page 543. *The Book of Worship*, 1944, page 402. *The Book of Worship*, 1964, page 13. *The Book of Hymns*, 1966, page 829-6. *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989, pages 38 and 48. *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 1992, pages 93 and 109.

Methodist for their entire life. Not exactly. It does mean that one is committed to life as a United Methodist Christian for the foreseeable future. Of course, we believe that God is our sovereign, and in respect to that sovereignty, one should never absolutely say what one will be doing in five, ten, or twenty years. Only God knows. I may decide some day that God has called me to serve Christ in and with another communion. This vow does not preclude that possibility. It would, I hope, keep me from making such a decision hastily, in a moment of anger or disappointment. If, however, upon mature reflection I would discern that The United Methodist Church was no longer the best place for me to answer my calling to serve Christ, this vow would call me to withdraw in peace. Even in withdrawing, I would be supporting the ministries of The United Methodist Church, doing no harm, and affirming this church as a place where God's work is done.

Our Calling to Serve Christ As Members of the Local Congregation

Members of the United Methodist Church commit themselves “to faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service, and their witness.”³³ In the Service of the Baptismal Covenant this vow is used for reception into the local congregation,³⁴ and we will discuss it according to this congregational context. As with the previous vow, the updated form (including “witness”) should be used when this service is celebrated.³⁵

This vow carries the logic of particularity a step further by insisting that one's Christian commitment be lived within a particular local

³³ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, paragraph 217, page 153. Used by permission.

³⁴ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 38.

³⁵ “New Membership Vows and Ritual (Revised and Corrected)”

<http://www.gbod.org/lead-your-church/membership/resource/new-membership-vows-and-ritual-revised-and-corrected> Accessed August 29, 2013.

community. By the grace of God, one moves toward sanctification—“on to perfection”³⁶—within a web of specific relationships, problems, and challenges. Wesley’s famous line quoted earlier, “I look upon the world as my parish,”³⁷ was intended to communicate his commitment to missionary evangelism, to a broad ranging Christian witness. It was never meant, however, to deny the relational dynamics and responsibilities inherent within the life of a local parish.

Christian life involves specific and concrete commitments. As Christians, we are called to love God and our neighbor. We believe that God calls us to “do justice and love kindness” (Micah 6:8). We may be moved by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream of racial equality. We may speak passionately about the need for an inclusive, hospitable church. As Christians who live and work in particular places, we witness to these commitments in particular, embodied ways. Imagine that a person who must use a wheelchair begins attending your church. Maybe she has come already; yet, there is a problem. You believe in the practice of hospitality, yet your building is a forbidding maze of stairways and the bathroom stalls will not accommodate a wheelchair. Her arrival is humbling; even frightening. It is no longer so easy to adopt a tone of superiority toward that seemingly inhospitable church that you visited on your last vacation because now you realize that your church has its own problems with hospitality.

What do you do? A meeting is called and you begin to discuss the problem. You realize that making accessibility renovations will be expensive and time-consuming. Your lay member of the Annual Conference says, “The Conference office wants us to be inclusive. Perhaps they will give us some grant money.” Someone is assigned to investigate the availability of such funds. At the next meeting

³⁶ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, paragraph 330.5.d (2), page 250. Used by permission.

³⁷ John Wesley, “Journal from August 12, 1738 to November 1, 1739” in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 1 (Zondervan Publishing House, reproduced from an 1872 edition), page 201.

he reports that some funds are available, but they are too limited to build all of the ramping necessary, much less an elevator. The challenge is difficult. All the while, the woman with the wheelchair persists, becoming more and more a part of the congregation. You realize that there may be other persons living with mobility challenges who might like to come to your church, but they are not as persistent about dealing with the accessibility problems presented by your church building.

Finally, you and your fellow members realize that there is no one who can be faithful on your behalf. This need has been placed before you, and God has called your congregation to address it. Most likely, the key financial gifts will come from the very members of the Church Council who will vote to support the project. Many churches have faced situations like the one I describe as well as other circumstances of compelling need. In time, many of them have decided to do the right thing, by the grace of God. They have established preschool programs and other ministries to the children of their neighborhoods. They have developed Bible studies for youth and adults, support groups for the divorced and bereaved, and new worship services with special focus on the needs and perceptions of the unchurched. The Holy Spirit has challenged and stretched congregations in countless ways, and many have responded faithfully, witnessing to the mercy and justice of God. In concert with the other vows, this vow to support the local church in concrete ways reminds us that the mission field begins with our own neighborhood.

Of course, it is never confined there. The witness of the early Methodist circuit riders rebukes such shortsightedness. The needs present in our neighborhood do not give us license to ignore the A.I.D.S. epidemic in Africa as well as those who need anti-malaria nets, the pain and grief of refugees in the Middle East, all those who lack access to health care, and the various peoples of the earth who have not yet seen and heard the Good News of the Gospel. Yet, even these needs are best addressed along relational lines, in local ways, if you will. Money and goods may be given and sent, laws and resolutions passed, but ultimately, someone must go and be church in their midst, offering their prayers, their presence, their

gifts, their service, and their witness. As such, the United Methodist membership vows call us to make the world our parish one neighborhood at a time.

FOR FURTHER READING

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