

# What's so special about the United Methodist way?

*By Pastor Bob Phillips*

## #1 The Name

“Advertising your denomination is the kiss of death.” This is the popular wisdom for church growth. In one sense, it makes sense. Folks no longer have institutional loyalty, often because they feel the institution has let them down or because loyalty to the Lord of the institution is what matters more.

But in another sense, denying or downplaying connection with any of the great Christian church traditions is like meeting a person who introduces himself as “Bob” but won’t give you a last name, and maybe denies having a last name. So, our first name is “First,” simply because people called Methodists started this family of God in Peoria 176+ years ago...the first on the scene. “United Methodist Church” is our last name. Behind that name is a rich and living tradition of faith, worship and service for Christ. For example, a central reason in our decision to remain in downtown Peoria is because of the theology and biblical convictions that come with that Methodist-Wesleyan last name. So if you have wondered about this label of “United Methodist,” or why we keep it, or why we highlight it, keep reading.

## #2 The Attitude

I saw a poster of snowflakes. The title was “Individuality.” The subtitle read, “Always remember that you are unique...just like everybody else.” One of the distinctions of the United Methodist way is the embrace of all that we share with everybody else who affirms the historic Christian faith. So, we don’t re-baptize those who were baptized in other Christian churches, since biblically it is impossible to “re-baptize” and since we are happy to acknowledge that Jesus is alive and well in all sorts of Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and independent churches. For the same reason, United Methodists actively partner with other Christians of all types in meeting shared or community-wide spiritual and human needs. We don’t limit our cooperation to those who pass a selective spiritual sniff test when cooperating to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and obey God’s call to care. John Wesley said, “At all opinions that do not strike at the heart of Christianity, we think and let think.” Jesus said, “There is one fold and one shepherd,” and we take His words seriously in our relationships with others who profess Jesus Christ as Lord.

## #3 Women

Where do women stand in the United Methodist way? Anywhere God Almighty calls them to be! In 1766, an Irish Methodist named Barbara Heck, who had come to the colony of New York with her husband, learned that another local immigrant named Philip Embury was a Methodist preacher, though he was keeping that identity private. Barbara gave Philip “Heck” until he agreed to start preaching. A Methodist fellowship formed in New York City and out of that grew the start of the American Methodist movement.

Women today serve in all ministry areas of the church: bishops, pastors, missionaries, chaplains, deacons, teachers, worship leaders, members and leaders of every board and team in a local church. In the example of the Old Testament prophet, Deborah, the New Testament deacon, Phoebe, and the promise of Joel fulfilled in Acts 2, “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,” women are free and empowered to serve wherever the Spirit leads. The ministry of women as pastors and spiritual leaders in the Pentecostal churches, the Salvation Army and the Assemblies of God (among others) is a direct consequence of a spiritual tradition and example formed through their birth in earlier Wesleyan ways. We respect the conscience and integrity of brothers and sisters in Christ whose churches exclude women from these levels of spiritual leadership (see #2 on Attitude), but the Spirit and the Word have said to many women, “Come” and the United Methodist way replies, “Yes, and Amen.”

#### **#4: Science and Evolution**

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The Bible focuses on the profound questions of who and why. Science delves into the questions of how. The United Methodist way affirms the link of what the Wesley brothers called, “Knowledge and vital piety.” Deep faith in Christ need never fear knowledge, since “all truth is God’s truth,” and the disciplines of knowledge in science and the arts need never fear healthy Biblical faith, for those disciplines reflect God’s work and natural witness in the world. United Methodist students are not warned away from higher education or universities where evolution is part of education in biology, psychology or botany. Many deeply committed followers of Christ see no threat to faith or salvation in scientific discoveries and theories that accept evolutionary theory in the process. That said, the United Methodist way welcomes and encourages ongoing learning, discussion and growth in knowledge of scripture and faith as part of becoming a mature Christian in a world that is “no friend to faith.” The church has no official position on evolution, simply a strong history and stand on discipleship and the intellectual life as joined at the hip to nurture confident followers of Christ.

#### **#5 Culture and Evolution**

Hunter’s Civic Biology was the textbook at the center of the famous Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925, where the teaching of evolution in high school was debated. The trial came to stage and screen years later in the deeply flawed and historically inaccurate play and movie, “Inherit the Wind.” (As Edward Larsen pointed out in his Pulitzer Prize winning history of the trial, “Summer for the Gods,” the opposition of William Jennings Bryan to evolution was not opposition to teaching the scientific theory but to evolutionism or social evolution and its implications on human dignity.) The high school textbook, nationally used, called for the forced sterilization of “defective” human beings as a concession to the fact that current public morality would not allow evolution’s survival of the fittest practice to play out through the elimination of the mentally retarded, physically handicapped and others labeled as a detriment to society. Eleven years later, Hitler implemented just such a program in Germany, with over 100,000 “defective” children and adults killed, justified on grounds of social evolution.

The United Methodist way is clear: When any scientific theory is used to justify the denial, dignity or rights to any human being, legitimate science has given way to an illegitimate false religion. When the

science of evolution is spun to argue the theology that life has no intrinsic meaning and no ultimate right or wrong, false conclusions are coming from bad data. Again, knowledge and vital piety combine to walk a healthy way that embraces the insights of science and nature without giving way to idolatry.

## **#6 The Bible**

John Wesley said, “Let me be homo unius libri, ‘man of one book.’” Of all the sources of authority in the United Methodist way, the Bible is central. What it says matters, matters. What it says doesn’t matter, doesn’t matter. The Bible is God’s unique and inspired word, “profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness,” that God’s people may be “complete, fully equipped for every good work.” Preaching, teaching and living the message of the Bible are at the heart of the Wesleyan way. The Bible is not a rabbit’s foot, a lucky charm, or a crystal ball. It is God’s written word to his people and to the world that speaks to the deepest issues of the heart and daily living. So United Methodists, consistent with the larger Christian tradition and the Jewish tradition from which Christianity began, are “People of the Book.”

## **#7 Tradition, Reason and Experience**

While the Bible is the foundation for discerning and living the Christian life and faith, other elements play into the process. Jaroslav Pelikan, Orthodox Christian professor of history at Yale for many years, defined tradition as the living faith of the dead and “traditionalism” as the dead faith of the living.

*Tradition*, the living wisdom of Christians who have gone before us in other centuries and places, remind us of how God’s Spirit has led the church in the past, how believers have understood scripture in the past, all of which enriches our current efforts to be faithful to our common Lord.

*Reason* is the commitment to “love the Lord our God with all our mind,” and the recognition that “God gave us a lot of leading when he gave us a brain,” as Dawson Trotman once said. Experience is the test of common sense applied to what we hear folks telling us what “the Bible says.”

Taken together, tradition, reason and experience provide wise background and insights in understanding and applying the scriptures to life. No one ever reads the Bible in a purely objective spirit; the United Methodist way reminds us that the reverent use of tradition, reason and experience offer honesty and guidance as we seek truth from the Word that is the “lamp unto our feet.”

## **#8 Modern Psychology and Counseling**

The Bible and the Christian faith offer rich and true insights into human nature and the struggles we have as men and women living in a real world. Love, trust, parenting, marriage, grief and failure are only some of the issues that can require counseling support when times are tough. The United Methodist way freely claims the wisdom of modern psychological insights in seeking to assist those in personal turmoil, without casting aside the foundation of Christian faith and teaching. Not every idea advanced in the name of modern psychology is a good idea, as many secular modern psychologists freely admit!

Faithful United Methodist Christians have their secular world ministry and service as clinical social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and mental health professionals, bringing the healing power of Christ to bear in assisting troubled people and relationships. The Wesley way does not approach such disciplines with innate hostility but in a spirit of cooperation rooted in clear, historic Christian wisdom on human nature, sin, grace, and healing.

## **#9 War and Peace**

Some Christian traditions, the “historic peace churches,” have borne faithful witness to Christ in standing back from participation in war in any way, a tradition appreciated within the Wesleyan heritage but not accepted as the norm for United Methodists. The church affirms the priority of the individual’s informed Christian conscience in discerning the level of one’s involvement or non-involvement in war or military or police service, but fully supports those who in Christian conscience choose to serve God and country in military or police service.

In practice, one of the largest sources for civil and military service has been from active United Methodist laity, just as a major source of military chaplains in American history has come from the Wesleyan branch of Christian faith. The United Methodist church includes pacifists and Medal of Honor recipients, all of which is consistent with the tradition of affirming and informing the conscience and call of United Methodists to be good citizens of whatever nation is their earthly home.

## **#10 Abortion**

The Social Principles of the church are available online at the denominational website ([www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org)). United Methodists have differences among themselves on certain specifics of this difficult issue that has polarized our society. The Social Principles sees the issue as a tragic conflict of “life with life.” Abortion for gender selection or population control is repudiated, as is “partial birth abortion.” Many United Methodists and churches (including our congregation) provide support for crisis pregnancy centers that seek to offer alternatives to abortion for women facing huge emotional or financial challenges with a pregnancy.

The focus of the church is on encouraging women (and men!) to act with Christian responsibility in the creation of new life and to know the church is ready to walk beside them in difficult times. The United Methodist Church has not taken a position calling for the outlawing of all abortions but chooses to work toward the elimination of the reasons for abortions. You will find in United Methodist congregations those who reflect in their Christian conscience various attitudes toward the practice but unity in the church’s effort to minister to all who face this hard issue in real and practical ways.

## **#11 Service to the Community**

First United Methodist Church has chosen to maintain a vigorous presence in downtown Peoria. Yes, we have vibrant programs for children, youth, young adults, families and older adults of all ages, economic and social backgrounds. Our continued presence in the city is a vote of confidence in the future of Peoria and a way to live out the Wesleyan understanding that the Gospel of Christ always reflects

practical care and commitment to justice and hope for all. We are honored to be a congregation where other Christian congregations point their members for engagement in community needs through our Loaves and Fish soup kitchen, programs with local elementary schools and sports activities focused on children in need. We are not the only ones who have chosen to remain downtown and are grateful for the spirit of cooperation among many churches to mutually support ministries to the needy in our midst. John Wesley taught that biblical holiness always has an indispensable social dimension to the poor, the underserved, the powerless and dispossessed. So our witness remains in the city to the people, the school district and the families who need what we are positioned to give.

## **#12 Politics**

“The church should stay out of politics.” The Wesleyan way in sorting out this gooey subject is a resounding yes...and no. Bishop Gerald Kennedy told the true story years ago about a devout church member dying of cancer who mustered the strength to worship one last Sunday in her church. She heard a sermon mostly given to denouncing a government policy and bill recently passed by Congress. Looking for the Bread of Life in her last experience of worship in the church, she was handed a political stone. In that sense you will not hear “politics” from the pulpit.

Bluntly, the fact I have a relationship with the One who made the stars doesn't qualify me to teach astronomy at Princeton. And I have heard too many religious types who act as though they have the answers to world peace, hunger and economics but who are unable to organize a three-car caravan in real life. That said, the Wesleyan way, consistent with scripture, history and the spirit of Christ and the prophets, calls Christians to wisely engage injustice, to “care for the orphan, plead for the widow,” and to “seek peace, and pursue it.” So Methodists have been involved in civil rights issues of war and peace.

So the church has a set of Social Principles, not binding doctrine on members but statements on various social issues to enable Christians to bear witness for Christ amid real world issues. We are a church that includes George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton as active members, with civic leaders all over the political landscape of views. The Wesleyan way sees this as a good thing, as we apply our faith both to the personal and the social dimensions of life.