

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#5):
CONNECTED TO CHRIST”

(Acts 2:43-47)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 2-5-23]

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1. **[11am ONLY...]** Read CEB text: Acts 2:43-47 and Pray.
2. Today we're continuing our series Christianity the Wesleyan Way, in which we've been exploring our unique Wesleyan/Methodist heritage, beliefs & practices, and how our understanding of those can help us be great *Christians*.

A--And while up to now the things I've spoken about applies to nearly *all* expressions of Methodist / Wesleyan Christianity, today I want to talk about a few ways that you and I "*Connected to Christ*" through some of the unique practices of contemporary United Methodism. ¹

B--Now, we believe that these ways are rooted in the practices of the early church, as described in today's scripture from Acts 2:43-47.

1--[**9AM ONLY...** Listen to what it says there... "*43 A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. 44 All the believers were united and shared everything. 45 They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. 46 Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. 47 They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.*"]

2--Notice/remember Vss 44-45, where the early Christians shared what they had in common... they discovered that they could do more for Christ *together* than by doing things independently -- that the most *effective* way to do mission and ministry was to be networked *together* with each other.

C--In the 1700s, John Wesley built on this idea by networking the ministry of all his Methodists to *each other* and to Christ through a central "connectional system" -- a system we still have in place today in contemporary United Methodism, ² and out of which I want to share at least two examples today.

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3. The first example is the unique way that we United Methodists -- like the early Christians -- practice **A SHARING OF MINISTRY RESOURCES.**

A--In John 14:12, Jesus tells his disciples that "[*those*] who believe in me will... do *greater works than I*" -- have you ever wondered *how* that could be possible?

B--Well, it's not only *possible*, but happens every day through the shared resources of our United Methodist connectional system -- let me illustrate: ³

1--In the course of his 3 years of ministry here on earth, Jesus touched and healed probably hundreds of people. Well, did you know that through the network of 52 hospitals, 63 ministries for children, youth and families, 16 ministries for people with disabilities, and over 400 retirement homes and senior adult ministries founded and operated by United Methodist Christians, we touch and heal over 32 *million* people annually around the U.S.?!

2--During his life, Jesus traveled throughout Palestine preaching about the love of God, serving others, and meeting their needs. Well, through our United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, over 1400 missionaries, evangelists, relief and refugee workers, and over 125,000 "Volunteers In Mission" serve in 130 countries *around the world* doing the same thing.

3--During his ministry Jesus *taught* hundreds or thousands of people. Well, through the 117 schools, colleges, universities and seminaries founded and run by United Methodists (like Emory, Duke, SMU, LaGrange College, and others), and through over 700 college campus ministries, we teach and offer Christ to several *hundred-thousand* students each and every year.

4--And while Jesus used a single loaf of barley bread and a small fish to feed over 5000 people, through the nearly \$59 million contributed through our apportionment "World Service Fund" ministry (not counting *local church* missional giving in our 43,000 local churches around the world) we United Methodist Christians feed and clothe *millions* of people every year. ⁴

C--And I don't have time here to talk about the many *new churches* we help start (including our own here at Cornerstone nearly 30 years ago or Madras Church north of Newnan just this year!), *camps and retreat centers* for children, youth, and "special needs" adults, our *homeless shelters, transitional houses*, and our *food and clothing centers* for the poor – none of which are tied to the work of only *one* local church. ⁵

D--My point is that this unique United Methodist sharing of ministry resources is , in fact, a living fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy in John 14. ⁶

1--Through it, you and I are able to do more ministry for Christ *together* than we could ever do if we were only an independent / "non-denominational" church.

2--And through it, you and I not only you and I not only stay "connected" to Jesus' ongoing ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, and compassion, but we're also fulfilling his "Great Commission" to "*go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*" ⁷

4. But contemporary United Methodism also helps us stay "connected to Christ" (second) through our unique **SHARING OF CLERGY LEADERSHIP**.

A—Often called the “*Itinerant System*” / “*Itinerancy*,” it’s the unique way (not found in any other Christian tradition) that we United Methodists move around our 50,000+ pastors from church to church every so often. ⁸

B—It’s origins go all the way back to the early church, where Paul & other Apostles would preach & teach in a town for a period of time, then move to another after a while, with someone else following in that first place to pick up where they left off. ⁹

1—1700 years later, when the rapid spread of Methodist Christianity in England caused John Wesley not to be able to keep up with all his Methodists, he followed the example of the early church by establishing “circuits” for his lay preachers to travel.

2--They were called "Circuit Riders" when came here to America, and they -- like Paul -- would rotate around their circuit over a period of time, preaching and teaching at each place until they came back around to the first one again. ¹⁰

5. Even today, there is still great power, flexibility, and advantage in this “itinerant system.”

A—For one, both then (and today) it ensures that “***every pastor has a church***” and “***every church has a pastor***” -- there’s no awkward, long “interim” period where a church has to go “Pastor shopping” with “Want ads” (like in some Christian traditions). ¹¹

B—Another advantage is that it tends to ***lessen the likelihood that a pastor-centered scandal can wreck the entire church*** (as I and I’m sure you have seen happen over the years with many independent and non-denominational churches). ¹²

1--Pastor-centered churches like these are “a dime a dozen”, but *our* experience is that it is neither biblical, healthy, nor prudent to build a church around the personality and charism of a particular *pastor*.

2--Churches instead should be built around *the people* (& itineracy fosters that). ¹³

C—One final advantage is that *at its best*, the “***itinerancy***” ***matches the gifts & graces of a specific pastor with the needs of a specific church at that given time.***

1--My daughter once explained this by saying that you wouldn't to build a house with just a plumber, or electrician, or carpenter; but that you'd want ALL of those to contribute their skills to the building of your house.

2--And so it with the church: some pastors are gifted in preaching and “soul-saving,” others in administration and organization, others are gifted teachers, or have great pastoral-care skills.

3--No *one* pastor has all of those skills, so we rotate them every so often to help the church be more effectively built up, biblically balanced, and well-rounded in its ministry -- making this system of ours a literal fulfillment of Paul's 1 Corinthians 12 teaching on “spiritual gifts”.¹⁴

D--My point here is that our sharing of clergy leadership through the “itinerant system” helps us “connect to Christ” & to each other by providing our churches & people with the leadership they need to become mature, biblically well-rounded followers of Jesus.

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6. Now, there's certainly more advantages I could share about how our United Methodist "connectional system" is unique.

A--But for the sake of time, these two (our *Sharing of Ministry Resources*; and our *Sharing of Clergy Leadership*) highlight *our* belief (from the Bible) that we can do ministry more effectively for Christ if our churches are bound *together* than if we try to do it *alone*.¹⁵

B--Most importantly, it shows our passionate commitment to being "*Connected to Christ*" by being connected to *each other*, and we believe that THIS is the *best* way today to live out the Christian community that Jesus invites us to have.¹⁶

7. [PRAY]

8. [11am Closing: "Bind Us Together, Lord" OR Hymn#557, "Blest Be The Tie That Binds"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ I'm not saying that other Christian traditions *aren't* “connected to Christ”-- just that the *way* we United Methodists do it is rather unique.

² In Wesley's day, every Methodist was part of “Class” within a larger Methodist “Society,” and each of these “Societies” was linked to other “Societies” through Wesley’s Methodist “*Connexion*” (*the English spelling*). Wesley himself was a strong believer in the biblical concept of “Christian fellowship” as a “means” or “tool/vehicle” of God's grace. His organization of the Methodists into small groups (Societies, Classes, and Bands) for mission, ministry, spiritual growth, and accountability was his way of ensuring that this biblical “fellowship” took place. And in this way, his Methodists (like the early Christians) could accomplish more for Christ than if they tried to do it alone as individual Christians, or even as independent (what we would today call) “non-denominational” churches.

³ The following facts and data are taken from "*United Methodists At A Glance*" at <https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodists-at-a-glance#>.

⁴ World Service Fund receipts for 2019-2022: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/world-service-fund-annual-conference-gifts>

⁵ You see, whether we realize it or not, when we're a United Methodist Christian, we're part of a ministry for Christ that's *larger* than what goes on at our own local church level (as important as that is). So, in many ways, these United Methodist "denominational" ministries that I've mentioned (and others) are actually merely an *extension* of the ministry Cornerstone United Methodist Church, and consequently they're extensions of my ministry and yours!

⁶ *How*, you may ask, is all of this shared ministry possible? How do we as United Methodists share our resources with each other? Well, the primary way is through something we call "**Apportionments.**" It's a very boring and non-descript word, to be sure, but the concept goes all the way back to the early church described in today's scripture, where the financial resources of all local congregations were linked and shared *together* to enable the entire church to do more for cause of Christ than if individual congregations tried to do it alone. 1700 years later, John Wesley built on this idea and asked each Methodist to contribute "*a penny each week*" to help the poor through their local Methodist "Class." For him, this contribution *wasn't* voluntary, but was expected of each and every Methodist. Those who couldn't afford this "penny per week" would have their portion paid by more well-to-do Methodists. Consequently, we United Methodists today continue this method of asking each church to contribute to God's work through the worldwide ministry of United Methodism through monthly contributions based upon our church's financial situation and status. We call them "Apportionments" (sometimes referred to as "*a portion meant for others*"), and they are our unique United Methodist way of funding our shared ministry together.

⁷ Mark 16:15 and Matthew 28:19.

⁸ Paragraph #329 in our United Methodist Book of Discipline explains this system in detail, in which all clergypersons of a United Methodist Annual Conference (such as our own North Georgia Annual Conference) are subject to annual appointment by their bishop. Being part of the United Methodist itinerancy (at least as an "Elder" in our tradition) means that an "Elder" clergyperson is willing to go where sent by their Bishop (and *when* sent).

⁹ For example, read Acts 15:22- 35; Acts 15:41; Acts 18:18-23; Acts 19:21-22; Acts 20:1; Acts 21:17-26; Titus 3:12; Romans 15:24; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Corinthians 12:17-18; Colossians 4:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; and others.

¹⁰ One historian has summed it up this way: "*In this way Methodism supplied the wants of a sparse population which was unable to support a settled pastorate. It was its itinerant work which gave to early Methodism its great power*" (--From the Encyclopedia Of World Methodism, Vol. I, p. 1430).

¹¹ This is true even in tough situations. For example, in one of my pastoral appointments, this system worked when our Bishop removed my predecessor. Even though I was content to be in my church at that time in Augusta another year, my Bishop appointed me the new Pastor of that church in the middle of the year so that that church would not be without one.

¹² I can't tell you you how many times I've seen this happen over the years in the communities in which I've served: a new, independent, non-denominational church pops up and is the "flavor of the month" for a season in that community -- its where everybody wants to go. But then, some scandal happens to the pastor, they resign from the church and from ministry, and that church collapses. I've seen it happen time and time again. So another advantage related to this one is that at its best, this rotation of pastors can encourage members to "stick with" their church even when they don't personally like or care for their pastor -- as is often said in United Methodist circles "*pastors come and go, but the people remain.*"

¹³ It is true that sometimes the long tenure of some United Methodist pastors makes it appear that exceptions are being made to the "rule" of itineracy (i.e., for example, when a U.M. pastor stays at his or her church appointment for 10 or more years). In these cases, there are usually specific reasons the Bishop has chosen to keep the pastor at that appointment for longer than usual. However, even when this is the case, it does tend to foster all the same "problems" and "disadvantages" that any non-itinerant system has -- the church tends to become "pastor-centered" and is no longer truly "Wesleyan/Methodist" in the historical sense.

¹⁴ For example, throughout a church's life, there are times it *needs* the evangelist-type of pastor to be able to grow into God's vision for itself, while at other times it will need the leadership of a pastoral care pastor, while at still others it will have need for a great administrator, or teacher, etc. If a church doesn't receive a new pastor every so often, what tends to happen is that that church gets stuck in the "rut" of that particular pastor's "pet" issues and spiritual emphases (or at least the ones he or she is gifted in). What's more, is that through this rotation, churches and members have the opportunity to experience the wonderful variety and diversity of God's own love and grace through the varying personalities and giftedness of differing pastors. A related advantage in this rotation is that it also keeps visioning and ministry fresh and alive through the regular influx of "new blood" in their pastoral leadership (i.e., receiving a new pastor every so often allows God to introduce new ideas and fresh ways of serving and ministering). It also helps challenge the people to think in ways they haven't previously, and can help highlight things that need to be changed, modified, or eliminated about that church's ministry. So then, itinerancy (at its best) brings a more objective spotlight from God onto a church and its ministry in its community. John Wesley once said of the itineracy, "*We have found by long and consistent experience that a frequent exchange of preachers is best. This preacher has one talent, that another; no one whom I ever yet knew has all the talents which are needful for beginning, continuing, and perfecting the work of grace in a whole congregation*" (--From the Encyclopedia of World Methodism, Vol. I, pp. 1242-1243).

¹⁵ We believe that this system actually helps us better "connect to Christ" than if we *didn't* have it and practiced "un-connected" ministry as merely independent / non-denominational churches.

¹⁶ In Spring 2022, noted Wesleyan scholar, author and pastor Paul Chilcote shared in a Facebook post his "*Five Reasons to the Stay in the United Methodist Church.*" It was his response to some Methodist Christians who went on to splinter off from United Methodism to form what is now called the "Global Methodist Church." For me, however, Chilcote's article here this is one of the most compelling articulations of what it means to be a UNITED Methodist Christian, and I share it with you here in case you're interested:

"My roots are deep in The United Methodist Church. Like most "preachers' kids," I went through a period in which I questioned my inherited faith tradition, but I came through that process with a deeper appreciation and love for the UMC and all it represents. Jay Therrell, President of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, Florida Chapter, has recently reposted his earlier "Ten Reasons Why I'll Join the Global Methodist Church." If you read through that document closely, the portrait of the GMC he paints is congregational in polity (not connectional), creedal in orientation (not oriented around "faith working by love"), and essentially exclusive (not inclusive in vision, despite its "global" title).

I co-chaired the World Methodist Council/Baptist World Alliance Dialogue, and the ten reasons document "feels" like something my Baptist colleagues may have drafted. I do not mean that pejoratively in any way. I love my Baptist brothers and sisters, but the UMC offers a different vision of Christian faith and practice. What concerns me most about this blog is the way in which it diverges sharply, in my humble opinion, from a genuinely Wesleyan vision.

As May 1 (2022) looms large for many of us who are United Methodists, here are my five reasons to stay in the UMC.

1. *The UMC has a wide, gracious, and loving embrace. The church I think most people yearn for is a community of faith that puts love at the very center of its life and vision. This openness to all people as unique brothers and sisters deeply loved by God characterizes the UMC I know. All God's children are invited to put their gifts to use in the service of God's reign of reconciliation.*

2. *The UMC aspires to be Christ-like in practice. Countless surveys over the past decades demonstrate that the majority of people in the United States view the church as judgmental. Jesus gives us a different model of relating to the world and others. The UMC seeks to cultivate disciples of Jesus who are like him – merciful, compassionate, forgiving.*

3. *The UMC is shaped by a dynamic view of scripture. The UMC is strongly biblical in its orientation. The Bible is the bedrock upon which the faith of United Methodists is built. But its view of the Bible is not simplistic; rather, like Wesley, it embraces a dynamic conception of scripture as the "living Word." Antithetical to literalistic views of scripture, the United Methodist view offers a rich, robust, but yes scriptural foundation for life in the triune God.*

4. *The UMC is deeply concerned about growth in grace. Not so much invested in believing the right things, its primary passion is translating God's love into action in life. It elevates the importance of practices of piety, like prayer, but also advocates acts of mercy – compassion and justice for all. The UMC offers a holistic spirituality that refuses to separate the spiritual from the concrete realities of life.*

5. *The UMC is missional in character. The UMC does not live for itself, but for others. It is missional in its design to partner with God in God's great work of love in the world. Its fundamental orientation is outward, spun out in the life of the world to wage peace, work for justice, and to emulate the "beloved community" God desires for all."*

(--Rev. Dr. Paul Chilcote, cited from his Facebook post April 9, 2022 at <https://www.facebook.com/pwchilcote/posts/10224421017485874>)