

A TEACHING SERIES BY  
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# THE EXPERIENCE CENTER:

LIVING AS UNITED  
METHODISTS TODAY



# SESSION 1: WHO WE ARE AS UNITED METHODISTS

As we enter a new century, we United Methodists have a responsibility to place ourselves in the context of the world in which we live. We begin recognizing who we are by acknowledging whose we are, GOD's, and by defining ourselves in relation to the rest of the Christian world, the church. This is the picture that Bishop Scott Jones presents us.

Where we are historically, doctrinally and functionally in the Christian world makes a difference in our actions. United Methodist Christians have a particular world view that informs their faith. It's a world view that allows for diversity of opinions because it embraces the great underlying paradoxes of our faith: evangelism and social justice, preaching and the sacraments, justification and sanctification, worship and small groups, unity and diversity.

Holding together these apparently contradictory and yet essential facets of Christianity places United Methodists in the "extreme center" of the Christian world. We do this together, or connectionally, in order to best achieve the mission of the church, the making of disciples for Jesus Christ. Probably most importantly, we do this by the grace of God.

**EXAMINING THE CENTER:** Read the statements and scriptures listed below and answer the questions.

**When studying what it means to belong to God, I am reminded of Einstein's quote "*I want to know God's thoughts, the rest is details.*" These scriptures give us a sense of the enormity of the claim that we belong to God.**

**Read:** Genesis 1: 1-27    Creation  
Exodus 3:14        I am  
Jeremiah 31:33    I will be their God

1. How does being made in the image of God, the great I AM, challenge our view of ourselves and our place in the world?

2. What does it mean to your life to have God's law written on your heart and to belong to God?

**The children's song, "I am the Church, You are the Church, We are the Church together," starts us on our way to understanding the church as the vehicle of God's saving grace. In Colossians 1:18 we read that "He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church," we know from many of the New Testament scriptures that the Church, the body of Christ, has a special place in God's plan for salvation.**

**Read: 1 Corinthians 14:12 and Ephesians 5: 25-27**

1. What are the ways that we build up the body of Christ, the church?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Is the test, "does this build up the church, or tear down the church" a good one for determining whether to do a particular action or not? Why or Why not? [or "Discuss"?)

**We have a strong example in the early church of the connection of all Christians as Christ's body. John Wesley, Methodism's founder, proclaimed "The World is my Parish" as a testament to the teachings of the early church that all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Therefore, if we are one in Christ, then we are by nature connected. What happens to one person regardless of location, affects all of the others.**

**Read: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31 Many parts, One body  
Ephesians 4: 1-6 One Baptism**

1. How can we care in significant ways for our brothers and sisters around the world?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What are the shortcomings of a connectional denomination like ours?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What are the strengths of a connectional denomination like ours?

**The view of God as a missionary God, one who is about the task of saving the world, informs our call to be a missionary church. The people of God are called to participate in God's saving of the world. This includes both social action for justice and compassion and invitation to others to participate with us in this missionary call.**

**Read: 2 Corinthians 5:18-20      Reconciling the world to Himself  
Matthew 28: 19-20      Great Commission**

1. What are the ways that your church is a missionary church?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What things can you do to become more of a missionary in God's world?

**God's grace seeks to move persons from being sinners toward Christ-like maturity. We United Methodists talk about grace having different impacts, depending on where people are in their spiritual journey. God's grace comes to us before we are even aware of it. Grace is working in all our lives and leads people to acknowledge they are sinners.**

**Read: John 1:17      Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ  
2 Corinthians 12:9      My grace is sufficient  
Ephesians 2:8-10      By grace you have been saved**

1. When have you personally realized that it is truly only God's grace that sustains you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Do you see signs in the United Methodist Church of God's saving grace renewing our denomination?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How can you participate in or encourage your local congregation to become an instrument in renewal of God's church?

## SESSION 2: THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN AMERICA

**God came into our world in Christ, seeking the lost and reconciling us to him. But our American context for Christianity has changed radically in the past 50 years. Many issues tear our society apart. While the Bible is not silent on many of these issues, the church's place in this secular society has been called into question. How can we help society see the church has a role in resolving these issues?**

**Secularism is the philosophy that sees the world and human life apart from God. It says that God is irrelevant and humanity is better off with an atheistic or agnostic world view. How can our faith redefine this pattern?**

**Read: John 12:46-48 and Romans 12:1-3**

1. What is a faithful view of our responsibility to ourselves and to our world?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. In a nation that so vigorously separates church and state, is there a place for the church in the debates on difficult issues of the day?

**As a society, our social capital is dwindling. We no longer spend time in relationship with one another. But that is not God's plan for us. The scriptures are so full of "the church" as the primary unit of society that it is impossible to think of Christianity outside of community. Basic to our faith is a rejection of the notion of solitary Christianity.**

**Read: Colossians 3:12-16, Ephesians 2:19-20, and 1 Peter 4:8-11**

1. How have you reached out to those outside your Christian Community in order to be a "light to the world?"
  - a. What individual acts have you done?

b. What corporate or group acts have you participated in?

2. What are some ideas for you or your church to break down the isolation we find in our modern culture?

**The worth and dignity of all people is without question a foundational issue in Christianity, "for God so loved the world," not just blacks or whites, Jews or Gentiles, poor or rich but every person, each one. So that for every face we look into we are reminded that this one is made in God's image and for this one Christ died.**

**Read: Genesis 1:27, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, and John 3:16**

1. How is the church seeking to give dignity and worth to all of God's people?

2. How could we be using more diverse gifts of our brothers and sisters in ways that would serve to build up Christ's church in deeper and richer ways?

**Everywhere we look, we see invitations to sexual immorality. It is one click away on daytime soap operas. It is just two short clicks to hard-core pornography on our computer screens. It is in most magazine advertisements.**

**Read: Romans 13:13 and Matthew 15:19**

1. How can we keep our minds holy in this environment?

2. How could we change the sexual bombardment and promiscuity in our society?

**Along with sexual immorality, drunkenness and debauchery are mentioned in almost every scriptural list of “sins.” This passage in 1 Peter gives us the antidote for the sins of the flesh, that is: a life in Christ. This life is something we Christians have and can offer the world.**

**Read: 1 Peter 4:1-6**

1. How do we truly “live in the spirit” in ways that honor God?

2. Do we adequately share this antidote with the world?

**The stories of including and caring for the poor are throughout the scriptures. It is clear that the poor are among God’s chosen and beloved. Sometimes we take comfort in Mark 14:7 when Jesus says, “the poor you shall have with you always.” But in any serious read of the New Testament we must acknowledge that we are to care for the poor among us.**

**Read: John 21:15-17 and Mark 14:7**

1. What are you doing to share with those less fortunate?

2. What systemic changes could help?

## **SESSION 3: UNDERSTANDING THE E-WORD**

**We 21st century Americans have learned many things about other cultures, and at our best we value the gifts those cultures offer the world. We have learned that imposing our culture on others is not the loving thing to do. And yet, our faith in Christ, and our joy in the abundant life that Christ offers leads us to the hope of sharing that with the world. Indeed we are commanded to do so in the great commission in Matthew 28. The difficulty here is to share our faith with the world without imposing our culture on the world.**

**Evangelism is more than being welcoming when new people come into our churches. It's about making space in our ministries and in our hearts for people who are just beginning to know Christ.**

**Read: 1 Peter 3:15, Matthew 28:19-20, and John 10:10**

1. How do we reach unchurched people in our communities for Christ?
2. Can you think of ways we might reach people from diverse cultural backgrounds for Christ?
3. Have you told the story of your faith to anyone outside the church recently?
4. How welcoming is your church of newcomers?
5. How welcoming is your church if those newcomers are visibly different from them?
6. What does your church do to create space for new people to fit into its ministries?

## SESSION 4: **TRANSFORMING THE WORLD FOR CHRIST**

In John 21, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Christ's mandate to Peter, who answers "yes" each time, is "feed my sheep," "feed my lambs," "feed my sheep." From this experience, it is clear that Christ expects our response to loving Christ to be acts of mercy.

Acts of charity are required, but given Matthew 25, we can also be assured that it is our privilege to be able to serve "one of the least of these," because it is Christ himself whom we have served.

**Read: John 21:15-17 and Matthew 25:37-40**

1. How are you engaged in hands on ways to serve Christ by serving his flock?

**The story of the Good Samaritan challenges us to expand our ideas of "neighbor."**

**Read: Luke 10: 25-37**

1. How have you been called to help others that are normally outside your sphere of influence?
2. Are there ways that you can affect the world beyond you by affecting systems that make a difference in the lives of people you might not even know? What are some examples?
3. Does living a life that witnesses for a more humane and peaceful world feel like a possibility? Why or why not?

4. What are ways that you might participate in a greater witness than you can envision?

5. Are there parts of the gospel's mandate for justice and acts of charity that are bothersome to you? Why or why not?

**I once was in need on the side of the road and the people who stopped to help me did not look like me, or act like me. It turned my idea of who the good Samaritan really was upside down. I had presumed that the people who helped would be like me, but really they were not. They were people who knew what it meant to be in need and helped out of compassion. Sometimes our own prejudices keep us from helping and from being helped. God's grace crosses those boundaries in amazing ways.**

1. How have you witnessed God's grace working in unusual ways when the gospel is being lived out?



g. inviting others into the church?

4. If Baptism is the outward and visible sign of God's saving love for an individual, how is your congregation encouraging that step for the people in its sphere?

5. Teaching is an important part of the mission. What is your church doing to teach children, youth, young adults, adults and senior citizens?

6. Does your congregation actively call people to remember who they are and whose they are? How does this happen for you?

7. Are there ways your congregation could do this more faithfully?

8. Is your congregation a club or a church? What evidence supports your view?

## SESSION 6: SALVATION AS A JOURNEY

**The Good News is “God is with us, we are not alone.” (UM Hymnal #883) “His steadfast love endures forever.” (Psalm 118:29) We can bank on it. When we need God most, have faith in his promises and truly seek Him, God will reward us. (Hebrews 11:6). It’s a journey worth our life. It will take our lifetime, but what a great lifetime it can be, heaven on earth.**

**The description Bishop Scott Jones shares in this session of the house with the front porch as repentance, the front door as justification and the rest of the house as sanctification can be helpful in understanding the journey of salvation.**

1. Is this Wesleyan idea of the way of salvation a new one for you?
2. How does this vision of the process help in your understanding of your own salvation and propel you to spending your life on that process?
3. When you consider that you are made in the image of God, how does that influence you to be more loving toward God and neighbor?
4. When you are loving, how do you feel God as the source of your acts?
5. What are the struggles in your own life that make you realize the difficulty of overcoming your own brokenness, or separation from God?
6. Does repentance always mean a turning around or complete change in direction? What does that mean to you?

**Paul struggles with sin in Romans as we do. Read Romans 7:14-25.**

1. How do you struggle in your own life after the decision to repent, or turn?
2. Have you said “yes” to God? Have you walked into God’s house of salvation? If not, why not? Why not today?
3. Think about your experience. Was it a long process that you can’t particularly point to a moment, or was it a single strong experience? Please describe.
4. Do you know others for whom that experience has been different from yours? Describe one.

**After repentance and justification, sanctification then becomes the rest of the journey.**

1. Describe how you have grown in your ability to love others in the past year.
2. Describe how you are growing in the other fruits of the spirit as described in Galatians 5:22.
3. How will practicing the fruits of the spirit help you live out your Christian faith?
4. Can you think of a time when you have taken one of the fruit, say generosity, and made a conscious effort to improve that area of your life? Which one was it and how did it help?

5. How does the idea of being saved from guilt of sin (justification) and the power of sin (sanctification) help you understand your relationship with God?

6. Is this another way of talking about Christ saving us “just as we are” (free from the guilt of sin) but not leaving us “just as we are” (free from the power of sin)? How does this apply in your faith experience?

**I have a good friend who prayed diligently for patience with her 1 year old and she says, “God gave me twins.” When the twins were born as the 1 year old turned 2, she realized that patience was no longer optional, it would become her way of life.**

1. Describe a time in your own life that you’ve felt compelled to really work on one aspect of your discipleship.