



A SEASON FOR RENEWAL AND A JOINT COMMITMENT TO OUR WORLDWIDE CONNECTION

A STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is based on the joint statement issued by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, “A Season for Renewal and a Joint Commitment to Our Worldwide Connection,” issued June 28, 2023. It is designed to promote discussions about how we in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition can move forward in mission and ministry as a worldwide, ecumenical, and intercultural connection. It is divided into four sections, which can be used as four sessions for discussion or merely as four moments within a single session.

Introduction

The United Methodist Church and the worldwide Methodist fellowship find themselves in a season of change and renewal. In these times, we reflect on our spiritual roots as followers of Jesus Christ and renew our social commitment to a worldwide connection, inspired by John Wesley. We should use this time to reflect on our own struggles, explore new possibilities, and express new hopes. We commit ourselves to engage in this task, reflect on our spirituality, put our faith into practice, and continue the theological, missional, and educational work initiated by the Wesleyan and Methodist movement.

Reflecting on Our Wesleyan-Methodist Roots and Identity

Methodists from around the globe celebrate the legacy of John Wesley and his experience of renewal and awakening. 2023 marks John Wesley's 320th birthday. He was born on June 17, 1703, according to the Julian Calendar. In the Gregorian Calendar adopted in England in 1752, the date is June 28, 1703. It was on Whitsunday, May 21, 1738, that John's brother Charles Wesley had a conversion moment and wrote in his journal that the Spirit of God "chased away the darkness of my unbelief." A few days later, on May 24, 1738, John Wesley had a similar experience, famously writing in his journal, "I felt my heart strangely warmed."

These were not isolated experiences, but they reflect contextual, relational, and intercultural realities such as the education provided by Susanna Wesley, the partnership with George Whitefield, Peter Böhler, and other leaders, and the input of many other people who contributed to the Methodist movement worldwide.

We have many reasons to reflect on the Wesleyan legacy and its emphasis on the centrality of God's grace. John Wesley had his challenges and doubts, but he was able to overcome them due to his faith in Christ and recognition that, from the beginning, the Methodist movement had a social and dynamic nature that depended on contribution of women and men from many backgrounds.

Questions:

1. What aspect of John Wesley's faith journey, or the faith journey of those models around him – Susanna Wesley, Peter Böhler, George Whitfield, Charles Wesley, inspires you the most? Why?
2. How would you describe or define the significant theological concerns of the Methodist and Wesleyan tradition, in Wesley's time and since then?
3. What unique insights can the Wesleys offer us about the nature of grace, conversion, and the life of faith that can shape our contemporary practice of faith?
4. How can John Wesley's emphasis on spiritual experience (in addition to knowledge and theology) inform our collective theological discernment today?
5. How can John and Charles Wesley's description of love and holiness point us towards the goals of discipleship in our own contexts?

Naming Guilt, Failures, and Struggles in Our History

While we celebrate our Methodist beginnings, we also must consider John Wesley's original impact in the 18th century, personal shortcomings of many leaders, colonial implications we now recognize in hindsight, and the need to adapt and implement this legacy to the new conditions of the 21st century.

Moreover, we now witness challenges and opportunities that are very different from those experienced by the earlier Methodists. We are still dealing with the effects of a global pandemic, a lingering war and the threat of nuclear weapons, devastating impacts of climate change, artificial intelligence making decisions for humans without any ethical input, growing poverty, hunger, and homelessness while we experience a growing lack of solidarity, and divisions among families, churches, and nations due to political polarization.

The United Methodist Church and other churches in our worldwide connection are facing their own struggles. Churches worldwide feel the pain and sorrow of division emerging in many contexts, even if they are not directly affected by them. The sadness, loss, and pain in one part of our worldwide connection reverberates across the whole Church, especially due to the ecumenical nature of the Wesleyan tradition.

We lack clarity about how to respond to these complex issues and how to apply the teachings of Jesus Christ and the renewal of Christianity provided through the Wesleyan and Methodist movement. Yet we can come together as a connectional community, promote dialogue, and confer with each other about our challenges and opportunities, deliberating and declaring our resolve to move forward – even if in different ways – in order to respond to God's calling.

Questions:

1. What concrete examples of “personal shortcomings” and “colonial implications” from the Methodist tradition do we most need to confess and take action to address?
2. The statement lists many challenges in the broader society. What challenges posed to the church by broader society are most pressing in your context?
3. How has the church experienced “the pain and sorrow of division” in your context?
4. What do you think could be John Wesley's message to us now as a church that faces struggles of division and conflict?
5. How can the concepts of connexionalism/connectionalism and conferencing support the work of “confer[ring] with each other about our challenges and opportunities,” both theologically and practically?

Discovering Ways for Renewal and Reconciliation

As we reflect on the present situation and consider the positive lessons of the Wesleys' multifarious legacy, we see future opportunities for healing and renewal. We witness signs of hope, motivation, and opportunities for action. As general agencies of The United Methodist Church, we have seen our worldwide ecumenical connection at work!

For instance, in April 2023, Higher Education and Ministry joined Global Ministries as they partnered with bishops, clergy, lay leaders, and young adults in Africa for a consultation to discuss and decide on the missional priorities for the continent – in a process that emphasized listening rather than talking, action rather than speculation, intercultural dialogue rather than cultural imposition. Global Ministries joined Higher Education and Ministry and IAMSCU in a gathering that brought together educators and church leaders from around the world to the birthplace of Methodism and to celebrate the 275th anniversary of the school founded by John Wesley in 1748, Kingswood School. Participants renewed their commitment to the education of children, scholarships for diverse students, repentance for the sins of racism and colonialism, wellbeing for young adults, spiritual formation for churches and communities, and training for clergy and lay leaders worldwide.

Questions:

1. How do you feel your heart being “strangely warmed” at this time of our life as a church as we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?
2. How do you think John Wesley is leading us to embrace grace and hope amidst the many realities mentioned in the previous section that confront us as one body of Christ?
3. How can looking at global, contextually diverse responses to and impacts from challenges and opportunities be helpful in identifying and initiating pathways of reconciliation and healing?
4. What roles do local churches, conferences, and denominational agencies have in the task of promoting “healing and renewal”?
5. What would it look like for the church to more thoroughly embrace “listening rather than talking, action rather than speculation, intercultural dialogue rather than cultural imposition”?

Identifying Steps to Act with Hope

With these and other actions that build on existing ways of belonging, recognize ecumenical relations, and promote intercultural connectionalism, we as general agencies of The United Methodist Church have deepened our resolve to partner in mission and ministry as well as to focus on real contextual needs, to mobilize existing local gifts and contributions, and to share our resources to address the challenges we face around the world. Together, we are serving as a support to our common task of making disciples of Jesus Christ and contributing to the transformation of the world.

As we remember and honor the founder of Methodism, we also reaffirm our renewed commitment to theology and human rights, mission and education, spirituality and social justice, innovative ministry and healthcare, wellbeing, and relief to the poor. During this season, our general agencies vow to work together to support our worldwide connection as we move towards the future, open our mind, spirit, and body to God, and unite in our faith in Jesus Christ as well as our Wesleyan and Methodist spiritual heritage.

Questions:

1. What “existing local gifts and contributions” can we “mobilize,” and what “resources to address the challenges we face around the world” do we have to address “real contextual needs” in our contexts or in international partnerships?
2. What possibilities for evangelism, healing, liberation, and social engagement flow from the Methodist understanding of education as at the heart of mission?
3. In what ways might the decision to work more closely together enable GBHEM and Global Ministries to focus and strengthen their collective contribution to our worldwide connection?
4. What “existing ways of belonging”, “ecumenical relations,” and “intercultural connectionalism” can point us towards concrete next steps, as agencies, members of theological institutions, church members, etc.?
5. How do all these actions fit within the church’s main task of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”?