



Do No Harm, Do Good & Stay in Love with God

How Wesley's General
Rules Guide the
Oklahoma Annual
Conference in these
Troubling Times

3 session study

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How Wesley's General Rules Guide the OK Annual Conference in these Troubling Times

In order to assist United Methodists in understanding some of the current issues facing the United Methodist Church; this 3-part educational series was developed by the Office of Transitional Ministries of the Oklahoma Conference of the UMC. The series includes video and printed content. It is recommended that each participant be provided the printed material that includes what is said in the videos as well as the discussion questions.

This series can be used by individuals, small groups, and large groups. The Sessions are intended to be 30-45 minutes so that they can be utilized by Sunday School classes over 3-4 weeks. Another option for presenting this series would be in a larger group covering all 3 sessions in a morning or afternoon event. The series is recommended for adults however; some settings may choose to invite older teens to participate.

Session 1

A Message from Bishop James Nunn

Greetings, in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Thank you for participating in: *“Do No Harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God: How Wesley's 3 General Rules Guide the OK Annual Conference in these Troubling Times”*

I am Jimmy Nunn. It is my honor to serve as the bishop of the Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Indian Missionary, and the Northwest Texas annual conferences. I am grateful to the Denominational Transition Team of the OK Conference for creating this educational series to help our churches better understand some of the current issues facing the United Methodist Church.

Friends, we are in a challenging time as a denomination. Since the General Conference in 1972, when the first statement regarding homosexuality was placed in our Book of Discipline, every four years at the meetings of the General Conference the delegates have wrestled with where the whole United Methodist Church should stand on issues related to human sexuality. You know, to me 1972 doesn't seem like it was all that long ago but it was 50 years ago! We have been struggling with one another for 50 years and the time has come for us to determine the way forward that allows us all to faithfully witness to God's transforming love for the world.

God has blessed the United Methodist Church with people from many nations and cultures. We are a world-wide church with a rich history of reaching out to make disciples of Jesus. That is our mission. In fact, in the section of our Book of Discipline titled: “The Mission and Ministry of the Church” the very first statement is that: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs.”

Oftentimes, when we refer to our home churches we speak about those important places and people as our “church family”. Like a family, our congregations are filled with people of many ages and perspectives. And while we are different from one another in some ways; what we have in common is our relationships with each other through Jesus Christ. In our church families, just as in many of our own families, we come together to celebrate life's joys and uphold one another in our times of sorrow. Do we always agree with each other on all things? Of course not, but in many of our families we are able to accept one another even though we may not agree on all things and in fact, we can often learn from one another. Sadly, because of the differences of perspective regarding human sexuality as well as some other theological and structural concerns, some of the members of our United Methodist Church family today feel that it would be best for them to let go of the ties

we have shared. Simply put, over these last 50 years of strife, there have been several efforts made to resolve the growing division in our denomination but we've become stuck. It has been very difficult for us to be unified in our mission of making disciples while we continually focus on our differences and disagreements.

In this educational series you will learn about how God has used difficult times like these in the past to bring new forms of Christianity into being and God's world has been blessed. You'll be given a summation of the 50 years I've described and the efforts that have been made to help our denomination remain unified and fruitful. And you'll also learn the most current information available on what is happening right now in the United Methodist Church and how you and your congregation may be impacted.

You may be listening today and thinking... *"We're not fighting over this issue in my church. We know we have different ideas - but human sexuality is not our focus as a church. And now and again there are things about the United Methodist Church that we question but overall, we are glad to be United Methodist."* And actually, you are describing many of our churches today and they are wondering what they need to do about the current struggles in the denomination. The short answer to that question is that you should be doing exactly what you are doing by participating in this opportunity to learn about the current landscape of our denomination. But, the fact is that most of our churches do not need to make any decisions at this time and I believe most of our congregations will remain United Methodist and strengthen our denomination in the future. However, for those congregations and clergy that feel they must remove themselves from the United Methodist Church at this time for reasons of conscience; I want to be very clear that we will work together to assist you so that you can experience a graceful exit retaining important assets so that both the United Methodist Church and new expressions of Methodism can fulfill our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Here in the OK Annual Conference, in this time of transition our leadership is committed being cautious, contextual, fair, and most importantly to treating one another as Christians. Just as in our families, we understand that there are times when the most loving and healthy thing we can do for one another is to wish one another well and go our different ways; the reality is that some in our United Methodist Church family believe that in order to be faithful to God, they must go a different way. As you learn more about how we have come to this time in our history I urge you to wish one another well, to pray for one another, and to be a blessing by reflecting the love of Christ always and everywhere.

Let's pray together...

At the end of Bishop Nunn's message, pause the video for discussion and start it again when ready.

Discussion:

1. How did you come to be a United Methodist?
2. If you joined the UMC as an adult, what attracted you to the denomination?
3. Bishop Nunn speaks about our "church families" being made up of people that have different perspectives on some things but the most important thing we have in common is our faith in Jesus Christ. If you find that to be the case in your local church, is there an example you would share?
4. In your local church, how can you be "cautious, contextual, fair, and most importantly, treat one another as Christians" in these troubling times?

Some Background About Separations and Christianity

"But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the

children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.” – John Wesley, Sermon, “Catholic Spirit”

Throughout Christian history, many expressions of the Christian faith have developed. In this quote, John Wesley, the core founder of Methodism, affirms that while there are differences of “opinions or modes of worship,” that an ecumenical spirit or unity of all Christians is something for which to strive.

Jesus called for unity in his charge to the disciples when he said:

“I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.” (John 13:34-35 CEB)

Yet throughout the years, at times, followers of Jesus have failed to fulfill the commandment to “love one another.” And even in our beloved United Methodist Church, we find ourselves in disagreement and cannot seem to get along. We need to remember the commandment of Jesus to love each other. At the same time, we must attend to John Wesley’s guidance that “*although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent and entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection?*” As Bishop Nunn shared with us, the UMC has been in disagreement on where we ought to stand on issues related to human sexuality and particularly to homosexuality for 50 years and it appears that we have come to a time when some among us may choose to separate from the UMC for reasons of conscience. This is a very difficult and painful time for many in our denomination.

In 1987, the American rock group R.E.M. released a song titled “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” The lyrics list many challenges and criticisms of the world *and* reasons to still “feel fine”. When we are living through great change and loss it can often feel like “it’s the end of the world as we know it” but it’s important for United Methodists to know that there are many reasons for us to “feel fine” in the midst of the current transitions we are experiencing in our denomination.

For many of us, especially those of us who’s local church is considering disaffiliating from the UMC, it may feel like the end of the world...but it isn’t. In fact, over and over, when Christian denominations have separated; God has grown the Kingdom. Thanks be to God! Were those times painful? Yes, but God used those times to grow the Church!

Let’s look at a few examples.

Divisions of Early Christian Believers

In the New Testament we read the story of Paul and Barnabas. On their first missionary journey together, John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas accompanied them. Along the way, John Mark decided to return to his home in Jerusalem. The reason for his departure is not specified in the sacred text.

Later on, when a second missionary journey was planned, Barnabas proposed taking John Mark as a helper, but Paul resisted the idea. In Acts 15 we read that a “sharp contention” developed between them. They could not reach an agreement, and so Paul and Barnabas went their different ways.

It was certainly a difficult time but the world did not end, and because they went their different ways, their witness was blessed and Gospel of Jesus Christ spread to more regions and people.

The Great Schism (1054) came about due to a complex mix of religious disagreements and political conflicts. One of the **many** disagreements between the western (Roman) and eastern (Byzantine) branches of the church

had to do with whether it was acceptable to use leavened or unleavened bread for the sacrament of Holy Communion. (The west used unleavened bread, while the east used leavened bread.) Some other disputes were about the exact wording of the Nicene Creed and the Western belief that clergy should remain celibate.

It was certainly a difficult time but the world did not end and both branches of the Church were blessed. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches both continue to reach people for Jesus Christ and spread Christianity to the present day.

The Protestant Reformation began in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther, a teacher and monk, published a document he called Disputation on the Power of Indulgences, or 95 Theses. The document was a series of 95 ideas about Christianity that he invited people to debate with him. These ideas were controversial because they directly contradicted the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther and the Christians who joined him in protesting against practices they believed to be wrong in the Roman Catholic Church experienced trials and many troubles for their critique of the church.

It was certainly a difficult time but the world did not end. The Protestant Reformation was very painful for many but because of it, Christianity spread and has grown through Protestant expressions of our faith to this day.

One of those expressions was “the people called Methodist”. In Session 2 we will explore some times of separation and unification experienced by our Methodist ancestors.

At this point, stop or pause the video for discussion. This is the end of Session 1.

Discussion:

1. As you have learned about a few of the times of separation throughout Christian history; what strikes you as familiar to the times in which we live?
2. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has continued to be shared even following contentious separations among Christians? What can we learn from this?
3. *“But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?”*

How does the guidance given to “the people called Methodists” by John Wesley lead us toward “doing good” to one another now and always? What should “doing good” look like in our current situation?