

Vision Statement by the Discipleship Council in Response to Legislation Enacted During the 2019 General Conference

Grounded in Love

“I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” (Ephesians 3:16-17 NRSV)

The Apostle Paul’s prayer for the church in Ephesus reminds us that God’s people grow in faith and love toward God and one another when we are firmly rooted in the love of God made known to us through Jesus Christ. This is true for all seasons of life, but especially so in this present moment of challenge and distress for The United Methodist Church.

As the birthplace of Methodism in the United States, the people of the Baltimore-Washington Conference seek to ground ourselves in God’s love through the Holy Scriptures and our commonly held Wesleyan beliefs.

We grieve the deep sorrow and pain we have caused one another by failing to love one another as God has loved us, and all the ways we have neglected to place love, justice and mercy at the forefront of our walk with God.

We lament that differences over interpretation of Scripture have resulted in brokenness in our denomination and conflict over our understanding of Christ’s call to include fully the marginalized and oppressed in the life of the Church.

We recognize that our conference and our churches hold a myriad of views on the issue of human sexuality and many other issues. And yet healthy congregations have figured out how to flourish together in spite of that and have found value in worship, studying and serving together.

Remembering Our Shared History

We know that the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church — for all the good it has done and will do in the future — is no stranger to policies of exclusion and discrimination. Though called to a higher calling in Christ to a ministry of reconciliation, we have yet to overcome the sins of racism, cultural privilege, sexism, ableism, economic and sexual exploitation.

- We know that during the first 80 years following the founding of our denomination — on Christmas Day in Baltimore in 1784 — some members of our church owned other members as slaves, as if our brothers and sisters in Christ could be bought, sold or inherited as chattels. Moreover, African American Methodists remained relegated to racially segregated annual conferences until 1965.

- We know that it was not until 1956 that the denomination's General Conference was finally persuaded to grant full clergy rights to women.

We are fully aware that, even though the Church has modified the *Book of Discipline* to prohibit discrimination on the basis of “race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition” (*Discipline* ¶ 4), vestiges of racial and gender discrimination continue to burden the Church, inflicting new and continuing harm on many of its own members, and undermining the effectiveness of the Church's witness and ministries.

And, most acutely now, in this particular moment of the Church's history, we are not only aware, but saddened, that our denomination's chief legislative body has narrowly voted to not only retain, but to enhance and impose mandatory minimum penalties for violating disciplinary provisions that *require* the Church to discriminate against some of our LGBTQIA+ family members in Christ.

It is against that backdrop, and in this moment, that we, the Discipleship Council of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church, make the following statement — a statement that expresses our vision of the Church that we firmly believe this Conference is called to be, both by Scripture and by an informed understanding of the bedrock principles of Wesleyan polity and theology.

Rooted in Our Shared Wesleyan Experience

- We believe — as stated in the preamble to our General Rules — that United Methodists are *"no other than a company of [men and women] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."* [2]
- We believe that what distinguishes Methodists — again as framed by John Wesley — is principally this: *"They do not impose, in order to their admission, any opinions whatever. They think, and let think. One condition, and one only, is required, — a real desire to save their soul. Where this is, it is enough: They desire no more: They lay stress upon nothing else: They ask only, 'Is thy heart herein as my heart? If it be, give me thy hand.'"* [3]
- We believe that our founder's vision on all these points is now comprehensively embodied in the Inclusiveness provision of Article IV of the Constitution, which commands as follows: *"The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection. In The United Methodist Church, no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any*

constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition."[4]

- **When it comes to the government of our church — our polity — we believe:**
 - The United Methodist Church and its General Conference are not one and the same, just as the United States of America and the US Congress are not one and the same.
 - The General Conference's power extends solely to legislative matters.
 - Our Constitution, using terms that were in place at the outset and remaining fully operative today, makes clear that the General Conference's purely legislative authority, however expansive, does *not* extend to defining church doctrine or “Christian teaching” — that such matters constitute the *organic* law of the Church, which the General Conference is neither authorized nor competent to define.
- **When it comes to deciding which persons are called and qualified to be ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in The United Methodist Church:**
 - We believe that one of our Constitution’s most resolute commands is that such decisions are reserved exclusively to the clergy members of each annual conference.
 - We believe that John Wesley's historic examination of clergy is good enough for today's church. (§ 336 “Historic Examination for Admission into Full Connection”) [5]
- **When it comes to Christian marriage and marriage ceremonies:**
 - We take John Wesley at his word when he declared in 1756 that “[a]ll the children of God may unite in love, notwithstanding difference in opinions or modes of worship.” [6]
 - We take seriously Article XXII of our Articles of Religion, which states that “[i]t is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and . . . manners.” [7]
 - We believe, as our Discipline has long held, that the decision on whether to perform a marriage — any marriage — belongs to our pastors alone. (§340.1-§340.2(a)(3)(a)) [8]

Claiming Our Vision

We dream and work for a church where the whole church acts in accordance with these bedrock principles, loves God and neighbor, seeks justice, cultivates disciples, welcomes all and bars none.

We dream and work for a church that acts now, not later, in accordance with Scripture, with the Articles of Religion, with the Confession of Faith, with the General Rules, and with the Constitution of The United Methodist Church. We will adhere faithfully to the legislative

enactments of the General Conference, but only insofar as our consciences permit us to conclude that such legislation is consistent with those higher authorities.

We dream and work for a church where no candidate for ordination in the Baltimore-Washington Conference will be disqualified based on any legislated litmus tests that short-circuit the exclusive constitutional prerogative of the annual conference's own clergy to vote on all matters concerning the ordination of clergy, or that violate the Constitution's command of inclusiveness by excluding persons from becoming clergy members based solely on status.

We dream and work for a church where clergy members will not be prosecuted for "chargeable offenses" that turn solely on whether any given General Conference has unilaterally "declared" that a particular "practice" is "incompatible with Christian teaching."

We dream and work for a church where our clergy members retain the right and responsibility to determine which couples to join in marriage, and where our congregations may decide for themselves whether to allow same-gender marriages in their sanctuaries.

Being rooted and grounded in God's love and vision for all of God's creation, we are hopeful that the Baltimore-Washington Conference will be a means of grace and witness of Christ's love for the world.

[1] John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," in John Emory, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, Vol. V, 240 (New York 1831).

[2] *2016 Discipline* ¶104, page 78 (*quoting* John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists" in John Emory, "The Works of the Reverend John Wesley," Vol. V, 176; New York 1831).

[3] John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon a Late Phenomenon," Nottingham, July 13, 1788, found [here](#).

[4] *2016 Discipline* ¶4.

[5] *2016 Discipline*, ¶336, "Historic Examination for Admission into Full Connection." See footnote 27: "These are the questions that every Methodist preacher from the beginning has been required to answer upon becoming a full member of an annual conference. These questions were formulated by John Wesley and have been little changed throughout the years." p. 271

[6] John Wesley, "A Letter to the Rev. Mr. Clarke," July 3, 1756; [link](#).

[7] *2016 Discipline*, ¶104, page 71.

[8] *2016 Discipline*, ¶104, page 70.