

# THE #BeUMC MESSAGE –WHAT IS UNITED METHODISM?

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In their November 2021 meeting, the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church released a statement for the church under the title “a Narrative for the Continuing United Methodist Church.” The statement was prepared with the possibility of a split in the United Methodist Church between those who will choose a new expression of Methodism called the Global Methodist Church and those who would desire to remain with the Continuing United Methodist Church. The “#BeUMC Message,” prepared by United Methodist Communications, grows out of the bishops’ statement, and seeks to highlight that which unites us as UMs (and presumably The Continuing UM Church) and “what we are working for together.”

As a denomination, we have much going for us. But we need a re-set. We need a call to arms. We need the sound of bugles. We need a new vision. Perhaps a church split could provide the impetus for that vision. The Global Methodist Church, which reflects traditional Methodist doctrine and practice, will offer a re-set for evangelicals and conservatives. Could the #BeUMC message do the same for those who want a more progressive expression and will want to identify with the Continuing UM Church?

Let the reader decide. The following is a summary of the #BeUMC message. It presents four major themes and 13 core values of the UM Church.

1. Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World. A) Works for the creation of a more just and inclusive world; B) Is grounded in the teachings and example of Jesus Christ; C) Is anchored in Scripture and formed by tradition, experience, and reason; D) Live lives of piety and social holiness.

**Core values: *Disciple-making, Faithful, Deeply Rooted***

2. Belonging and Inclusive. A) Includes persons with different backgrounds, opinions, and gifts; B) Affirms the wholeness of everyone: LGBTQ+, people of many abilities, and people in many life situations; C) Dismantles racism; D) Includes everyone to the table in communion; E) Is diverse and does not expect members to think like everyone else.

**Core values: *Diverse, Justice-seeking, Resilient***

3. Influence, Connection, and Impact. A) Shapes the world and cares for all of God’s creation; B) Has given billions of dollars to affect healing to a broken world; C) Is where people look for inspiration and wisdom; D) Can do much more together than alone to change the world; D) Laments its failures and works humbly with God in healing a broken world.

**Core values: *Missional, Connectional, World-changing, Generous***

4) Experiencing God through the UMC. A) Is where I found my relationship with God; B) Helps my children; C) Has shaped my parents and grandparents; D) Is where I first experienced God’s love; E) Is where I can use my gifts and be part of a community.

**Core values: *committed, Jesus-seeking, Spirit-filled***

COMMENT: Perhaps these themes and values summarize well what the UM Church has become (I hope not) but it is weaker than I had feared. While I believe the UM Church has problems, I believe it is a much better church than what this statement suggests. I am not convinced that this is what is going to inspire, as #BeUMC suggests, “excitement, enthusiasm, and hope for the future.” I fear it makes the UM Church appear like a religious Rotary Club. There is hardly anything uniquely Christian. The messages could be summed up by we are good people; we are doing good things, and we will continue to be good people who do good things.

Many of us fear the Continuing United Methodist Church will move even farther to the left theologically and sociologically and lose sight of the gospel after very many of the evangelical churches leave to start the new Global Methodist Church. We see this appearing in the #BeUMC message. There is nothing about the good news that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him

should not perish but have eternal life." There is almost nothing about Wesley and hymn #1 in the *UM Hymnal*: "He breaks the power of canceled sin he sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean his blood availed for me" (Charles Wesley, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing."). Missing from the #BeUMC presentation are words like the *cross, salvation, salvation by faith, atonement, righteousness, heaven, hell, repentance, or judgment*. Disciple-making is so much more than just "grounded in the teachings and example of Jesus Christ for the creation of a more just and inclusive world" (the language of the #BeUMC presentation). Is it possible to believe that John Wesley or Francis Asbury would ever come up with a statement like that?

The #BeUMC presentation claims that its report is based on studies and research done on UM members. One could argue that very different conclusions could be drawn from the research quoted. For example, when UM members are polled about their theology, 44% identify as conservative/traditional; 28% identify as moderate/centrist; only 20% identify as progressive/liberal (8% don't know). I believe this poll was among American UMs and does not even take into account overseas UMs. And yet the leadership of the church is overwhelmingly progressive.

UM church members in one study report they are confused by the information in newsletters they receive from the denomination. What they want is information that helps them grow in faith. This means specifically: "What United Methodists believe" (69%); "What It Means to be UM;" (65%); "Encouragement in Daily Living and the Christian Journey (63%); Inspiring Stories about UMs (59%); "History of the UM Church" (53%). Subjects specifically not mentioned include "Global Warming," "Inclusiveness," "Sexuality and Homosexuality," and "Racism."

It is precisely because of "research" like this that groups like the Confessing Movement focus on essential beliefs of the church and what it is that UMs historically have believed. Most recently the Confessing Movement has been doing podcasts on beliefs (five have been released to date; check the Confessing Movement webpage for these at [www.confessingumc.org](http://www.confessingumc.org)).

UMs want a denomination with focus. The #BeUMC celebrates churches where "persons are free to ask questions so that they can form their own belief system." There is no focus in that kind of statement. People want a place where they can find answers, not just where they can ask questions. The apostle Paul was not emphasizing inclusivity and question-asking when he wrote things like: (if anyone) "should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8). One of the biggest failures of the UM Church today is its unwillingness to proclaim clearly the essentials of the faith. This includes doctrinal teaching like Original Sin, the Blood Atonement, the Trinity, Salvation by grace through faith, and holy living.

#BeUMC asserts that Continuing United Methodists will live lives of piety. But there is no attempt to define "lives of piety." Evidently, Continuing United Methodists can define that however they want. John Wesley would not be pleased. That's why he was specific in the General Rules about what "Doing no harm and avoiding evil" means: we do not take the Lord's name in vain; we do not profane the day of the Lord; we do not drink spirituous liquors; we do not support slavery; we do not engage in fighting, brawling, quarreling; we avoid unprofitable conversation; we do not put on gold and costly apparel, we do not lay up treasures upon earth; we do not take diversions that cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus; we do not sing songs or read books that do not tend to the knowledge or love of God. What we do is regularly attend worship; conduct family prayers; feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those in prison. And, contrary to the view that we accept all people as they are, the General Rules specify: If any among us do not observe these things, we call to account; we admonish and bear with them for a season. But" if they repent not, they have no more place among us" (from Wesley's General Rules).

I love the UM Church. It has been my spiritual family. I have invested much of my life in it. I pray for its future. But I am concerned about how it will fare after a denominational split. So, I pray for the emerging Global Methodist Church, but I also pray for the Continuing United Methodist Church.