

I am bad with directions—directionally challenged! I get lost easily. Without GPS and the exact address where I need to be, I don't start the journey because I know I get lost easily. However, sometimes my GPS acts up and does not guide me to the place where I need to be. So, occasionally I also get lost with GPS. In that case, I go back to where I started OR go to the place I know or feel safe OR ask people for the directions.

I did not want to get lost in ministry. So, from the beginning of the ministry under my leadership here at San Ramon Valley, I have been asking people around who they are, what they believe, where they are in their faith journey, and why they attend a Methodist Church. From visiting and asking, I've learned that we are a congregation with many different opinions and practices of faith. This pulls me in many different directions, and occasionally causes me to get lost in the midst of it all.

So, today I would like to dedicate time to revisiting our foundation briefly—who we are and what we believe as Methodist Christians. This exploration illustrates that we are not lukewarm Christians (Revelation 3:14-22), but we are passionate runners for Christ (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Let me start with my personal story of how I became a Methodist Christian. By my upbringing, I am a Presbyterian. I was brought up in a Presbyterian Christian family. My family went to a Presbyterian Church. My brother is a Presbyterian minister. I even went to a Presbyterian Seminary, San Francisco Theological Seminary! While I was in seminary, I met John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism. Actually more than John Wesley, the person who inspired me to become a Methodist is Suzanna Wesley, the mother of John Wesley. Her “methodical” or “systematic” approach of faith and life along with John Wesley's GRACE theology appealed to me so much and led me to become a Methodist Christian. I would like to be a “Suzanna Wesley” for the 21st century, so I can bring up many “John Wesleys” under my care to transform the world for Christ.

Methodists believe that all Christians are equal. This is the reason we have an open communion table. Everyone is welcome at this table. Methodists don't re-baptize because every Christian faith is valid and every baptism is valid. All Christians are equal for Methodists.

There are actually no doctrines or beliefs that belong exclusively to United Methodists. While we emphasize certain beliefs, such as GRACE, there is nothing that United Methodists affirm that are not also believed by other Christian groups.

Initially, John Wesley intended for Methodism to simply be a movement within the existing church that would motivate people to strengthen their Christian faith and to live it out more fully. Wesley had lived for many years with a pretty halfhearted faith, and he knew how empty that felt in comparison to fully living out the Christian faith. He wanted others to experience the fullness of the Christian faith as well, and Methodism started as a movement that would help people move toward a full and joyful expression of the Christian faith. He didn't want lukewarm Christians, but passionate runners for Christ! He wanted Christians who were on fire for God!

Getting that fire stoked meant having a certain balance between the extremes. Often, when it comes to our faith, we tend to focus on only one aspect or another. But really, to burn brightly, we need a balance between the various aspects of faith. I heard an interview with the United Methodist bishop Scott Jones. He was asked the question: "What distinguishes a Methodist from anybody else?" His response: there are people who are extreme right and there are people who are extreme left. Whether its style of worship or how we read the Bible or how we look at the issues facing the world, United Methodists tend to be people of the extreme center.

He felt that the United Methodist Church, at its best, is conservative in some areas, and very liberal in other areas. I always marvel that both George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton can both be United Methodists – we've got room for a wide variety of opinions!

That doesn't mean we're in the muddled middle, not caring about what we believe. In fact, the exact center is often a very difficult place to be because there are always people trying to pull you to the extremes. Sometimes it seems like it's a whole lot easier to hold an extreme position because then it's easy to be clear and forceful. But you find you're lacking the perspective of others who disagree with you. By occupying the center, we see both sides are important and we can discover a position that embraces the whole gospel better.

Methodists are people who are passionate about living the fullness of the gospel, trying not to shortchange one side or the other, but instead, embracing the fullness of the grace and life God has given to us. Rather than being an "either/or" people, we the Methodist Christians are a "both/and" people. Let us be so! Amen.