



Why I am (even yet!) a United Methodist

By Will Willimon

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Each year thousands of United Methodists use a little book that I wrote a few years ago, *Why I Am a United Methodist* (Abingdon, 1990)... I called being born and bred into United Methodism an act of peculiar grace. Unlike some of you, I did not decide to be a United Methodist; I was put here before I had any chance to check out Presbyterianism or to respond to overtures from the Baptists. I call it "grace" because grace means "gift," something that God does rather than something that we decide or do.

Here are my present reasons for staying sometimes unhappily and sometimes happily United Methodist:

1. We are conversionist Christians. Wesleyans have, deep in our bones, the story of a priggish little Oxford don named John who was set aflame for Jesus. We believe that though Jesus takes us singing, "Just As I Am," he never leaves us just as we are. New Birth is at the heart of a Wesleyan witness to the gospel. The good news is not only that I must change, but that I can, by the grace of God, change. Our logo is the cross and flame. We are a great church for people who want more from their lives, from their worship, and from their discipleship than the same old tired path they have been walking... With Jesus risen from the dead, and the Holy Spirit loose, it is theologically impossible to deny the possibility of change... I really believe in the possibility of new life, radical reorientation, detoxification, and conversion. Don't tell me people can't be radically changed. I believe in mind-blowing, wild, born again conversion because it happened to me.

2. We are a gracious blend of the Catholic and the Evangelical, sacramental and biblical traditions. Wesley managed to mix, in his own theology and life, those polarities that make United Methodism a rich, diverse expression of the Christian faith. Our worship can be the best thing about our life together with its historic focus on the preaching and reading of Scripture blended with eucharistic practice. Our [music] enables us to experience theology as something we sing.

3. Christianity is about a relationship with Jesus Christ. Recently, I spent more than an hour with a student who is trying to decide whether or not Christianity is worth believing or only a bunch of superstitious hooey. I explicated for him our major beliefs. I contrasted this faith with some other faiths. I pointed to the centrality of Scripture. Finally, I told him, "Look, when it comes down to it, it's all about Jesus. It's about being summoned by Christ to work for him and with him in taking back the world for God. The rest of this stuff is ancillary, subsequent, and secondary. It's about trying to walk with Jesus." ... Jesus never said, "Agree intellectually with me." He said, "Follow me." John Wesley's heart-warming experience at Aldersgate is deep within our Wesleyan

imaginings. That teaches us that we are at the heart of this faith when we can say, with Wesley, that “I knew that Jesus had died for my sins, even mine....”

4. Clergy collegiality. For those of you who are not clergy, the fact that United Methodist clergy are members of annual conferences, that we have a laborious system of clergy accreditation and accountability may mean little to you, but it ought to mean more. I can show you denominations with more congregationalist polity than ours whose churches are in big trouble because their clergy have become floating free-agents, free to impose their own clerical imperialism upon a hapless congregation. Though our requirements for clergy collegiality don't always work as well as they ought, by God's grace they do work. At its best, our system reminds us that the Church is more important than we are, that my work is to be judged by how well I serve the mission of a congregation, and that the bishop and Annual Conference hold me accountable to standards higher than those of my own devising.

5. We are organized. Having sat through the unproductive tedium of two General Conferences, the expensive irrelevancy of three Jurisdictional Conferences, and the sheer boredom of more Annual Conferences than I can count, it pains me to admit this but I must: United Methodist polity is a gift of God.

When asked, by a seminarian, “Why have you wasted so much time in meetings and in writing books about church reorganization?” I replied, “I'm a United Methodist.” God forgive us when our organization, our modes of clergy deployment, and our missional funding mechanisms become dysfunctional and unproductive.

A peculiar genius of the Wesleyan movement was its penchant for organizing to beat the Devil. We have the means to raise large resources for benevolences, to get the message out to millions of believers, and to mobilize for mission. We are famously adept at creating new institutions for education and service. We actually believe that it is possible for the Holy Spirit to be incarnate in our institutional life.

If I grieve over the cutbacks by our Board of Global Ministries from mission, if I castigate the church bureaucracy for its waste and inefficiency, if I say, holding a copy of The Discipline in my hand, “If it doesn't work, then fix it!” my only defense is, “Forgive me. I can't help being United Methodist.”

So, if you see me at Jurisdictional Conference, if you run into me on the way down to the altar for prayer, or if you hear my voice joined with yours in “O For a Thousand Tongues,” don't look surprised. I am, even yet, United Methodist.