

Why I Am a United Methodist – Part 2  
John 13:33-35 1 Corinthians 12:26  
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St. John United Methodist Church  
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Today is the second installment in a series entitled, “Why I Am a United Methodist.” In the first sermon the answer was because religion is of the heart. Bishop William Willimon wrote a book by this title. We don’t have time for all of his answers, but other reasons why we are United Methodist include: because the Bible is our book, because religion is practical, because Christians are to worship, witness, and grow. Today the answer to the question, “Why I Am A United Methodist” is because **religion is not a private affair.**

When you join a United Methodist congregation you are also joining the larger congregation known as the United Methodist Church. We are a connectional church. Many denominations are congregational, i.e., the individual congregation has more power to make decisions on its own. In our system every United Methodist Church is “connected” to every other congregation. Our churches don’t hire their clergy. A bishop appoints them.

Being connected with other people is built into the fabric of every human being. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. When we give our lives to Christ we give up the right to choose whom we will love and whom we will not love. In John 13:35 Jesus says to his disciples, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

There has been a sociological shift in our country from an emphasis on the group to the individual. You can see it in the laws we make when people who spill hot coffee on themselves can sue the restaurant that made it. You can see it in the architecture of our homes. Front porches used to be a very important part of our community life. From the porch we talked with our neighbors and watched our kids. You can see it in our dance. Originally we danced in circles, so that the whole community danced together around the center, then gradually we danced in threes and fours. Then we waltzed in pairs, and now we often dance alone.<sup>1</sup>

In his book, “Connectedness is Vital to Your Well-Being,” Dr. Andrew Weil writes, “Human beings are highly social, communal animals. We are meant to live in families, tribes and communities, and when we lack those connections, we suffer. Yet many people pride themselves on their independence and habitually distance themselves from others.”<sup>2</sup>

Are you aware of your need for others? Do you find it difficult to ask others for help? Do you pride yourself on not needing others?

Scott Russell Sanders is an English professor at Indiana University. In his book, *Writing From the Center*, he tells about a prominent builder in a small Ohio town who was asked to join the volunteer fire department. He politely declined. After all, what

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<sup>1</sup> --Jill Purce, *Re-Enchanting Our Lives in The Way Ahead: A Visionary Perspective for the New Millennium*, ed. Eddie and Debbie Shapiro (Rockport, Mass.: Element, 1992), 129.

<sup>2</sup> --Andrew Weil, M.D., *Connectedness Is Vital to Your Well-Being, Going Bonkers?*, December 1997.

could he get out of it? His home was brick, wired to code, and fire-resistant.

But one day his house caught fire. The volunteer firemen showed up with the pumper truck. But before turning on the water, they playfully asked the contractor if he still saw no reason to join. Without hesitation, he said he would be glad to join right then and there, and the fire was extinguished.

Sanders likes to tell this story because his dad was one of the volunteer firemen that day. He also likes to tell it because of what it says about being a part of a community. We should not have to wait until our houses are burning before we see the wisdom of facing our local needs by joining in common work. We had better learn how to live well together, or we will live miserably apart. <sup>3</sup>

Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (1 Cor. 12:26) Today we are observing One Great Hour of Sharing. This is a special offering where millions of United Methodists give to the ministry of UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief). The purpose of UMCOR is to "alleviate suffering out of Christian conviction." 100% of these offerings go directly to people affected by disasters such as famine, earthquake, and war. It is because of our United Methodist connection that we can respond to these mission needs. We may never leave Anchorage, but we are reaching out to people in need through our United Methodist connection right now.

I am not a coffee drinker but I want to talk with you about coffee. Author Billy Coburn wrote an article called "Cafes of Community: the Starbucks Principle." He cites the philosophy of Howard Schultz, founder and CEO of Starbucks coffee. Schultz believes that "American lifestyles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation, and a high price tag. America can point to many areas where she has made progress, but in the area of informal public life she has lost ground and continues to lose it."

There are basically two places where Americans experience community. Home and work. It's not just about coffee for Starbucks. They are trying to become our third place of community: an inviting, stimulating, soulful respite from the pressures of work and home. Coburn writes, "Wouldn't it be awesome if our churches were automatic "third space" places of community?"

We all know that radical hospitality is a key part of our church's mission and identity. But this depends on people coming to us. What if we were to go out beyond our building to create community in the marketplace? What would our church's ministry look like if we created such a "third place of community", perhaps leasing space in a strip mall to be a place where people could come and talk, read, drink coffee? If we are to be serious about reaching young people in their twenties such a third place coffee community would be worth exploring.

Don Graham tells the story of Linda, a young woman, was traveling alone up the rutted and rugged highway from Alberta to the Yukon in the fall. Linda didn't know you don't travel to Whitehorse alone in a rundown Honda Civic, so she set off where only four-wheel drives normally venture. The first evening she found a room in the mountains near a summit and asked for a 5 A.M. wakeup call so she could get an early start. She couldn't understand why the clerk looked surprised at that request, but as she awoke to

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<sup>3</sup> -- Steve Wilson, Cult of the Individual Weakens Sense of Community, The Arizona Republic, 15 September 1996, A2.

early- morning fog shrouding the mountaintops, she understood.

Not wanting to look foolish, she got up and went to breakfast. Two truckers invited Linda to join them, and since the place was so small, she felt obliged. "Where are you headed?" one of the truckers asked. 'Whitehorse' "In that little Civic? No way! This pass is dangerous in weather like this." "Well, I'm determined to try," was Linda's gutsy, if not very informed, response. "Then I guess we're just going to have to hug you," the trucker suggested. Linda drew back. "There's no way I'm going to let you touch me!" "Not like THAT!" the truckers chuckled. "We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. In that way, we'll get you through the mountains." All that foggy morning Linda followed the two red dots in front of her and had the reassurance of a big escort behind as they made their way safely through the mountains.

Caught in the fog in our dangerous passage through life, we need to be "hugged." With fellow Christians who know the way and can lead safely ahead of us, and with others behind, gently encouraging us along, we, too, can pass safely.

John Wesley knew this all too well. That's why he organized Christians into societies and class meetings. These small groups met weekly for prayer, Bible reading, and communal discipline. Remember the three kinds of grace? Prevenient. Justifying. Sanctifying. These societies were the "third place" where people experienced the sanctifying grace of God.

Bishop Willimon writes in his book, "Why I Am a United Methodist," "A congregation must constantly create new small groups. There is no such thing as a large church, only large numbers of small groups who happen to gather in the same building. As Mr. Wesley discovered, the church, no matter how big it becomes, is still primarily a face-to-face meeting of friends who know and care about one another."<sup>4</sup>

Willimon tells the story of a missionary from China visiting his little Methodist church in S. Carolina when he was a boy. He writes, "She met with all the children and told us that she was OUR missionary in China. She described to us how, when she was still a child in Iowa, at about our age, she gave her life to Christ to spread the Good News, in word and deed, around the world, wherever God would send her. Then she showed us a small, beautifully decorated black box full of cooked rice. She told us that this little box held the average daily amount of rice that was given to a Chinese child. What if we had to live on that amount of food a day?"

"But aren't those Communist children in China?" someone asked. "Well, perhaps that's what some of their parents might say," replied the missionary. "But you and I know that they're first and last, God's children, maybe someday even Methodist children."

Willimon writes, "I couldn't have been more than seven or eight. But that missionary made a deep impression on me. She was MY missionary, working for ME in a place I would never see, among people I would never meet, making them brothers and sisters. I began saving my pennies with the other children, and each month we mailed our gifts. I never thought about God's people in China the same way after that. I never thought of myself the same way either."

So, why are we United Methodists? Because religion is of the heart, because the Bible is our Book, because religion is practical, because Christians are to worship, witness, and grow. And because religion is not a private affair. We are not a perfect

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<sup>4</sup> William Willimon, Why I Am a United Methodist, Abingdon, p. 112

church, but there is much to celebrate about who we are. And there is much room for growth.

John Wesley wrote to his followers these words. This means he writes them to you and me right now. "Above all things, let your love abound. Let it extend to every child of man: Let it overflow to every child of God. By this let all know whose disciples you are because you 'love one another.'"