Charles Wesley (1707-1788):
Poet of the United Methodist Way
*Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., 2007*

Several years ago Frank Sinatra had a hit recording. One of his most popular renditions, it was considered his signature song and is still heard. The title of the song is, “My Way.” The lyrics tell the story of someone at the end of life reflecting on how he has lived. One verse reads as follows.

*And now, the end is here*
*And so I face the final curtain*
*My friend, I’ll say it clear*
*I’ll state my case, of which I’m certain*
*I’ve lived a life that’s full*
*I traveled each and ev’ry highway*
*And more, much more than this, I did it my way.*

......

*For what is a man, what has he got?*
*If not himself, then he has naught*
*To say the things he truly feels*
*And not the words of one who kneels*
*The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!*

These lyrics celebrate a life unwilling to be submissive to anything or anyone else.

Contrast this song, so typical of the spirit of the dangerously narrow individualism of our culture – nobody tells me what to believe or how to act! – to the earliest Christian community, which willingly accepted the name given to it. It was called, “the Way” (Acts. 9:2; 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). They were disciples who submitted to the One who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Earliest Christians understood “the Way” as a journey, a path of life, a mode of conduct – a manner of thinking, speaking, and living. They followed a Leader, a Guide, who by his words and acts – by his life, death, and resurrection – was the pioneer and perfecter of “the Way.”

As the church developed over the centuries, different interpretations of “the Way” evolved. There was a Roman Catholic understanding of “the Way,” an Eastern Orthodox “Way”, and various Protestant views – Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican (Church of England). The one which we embrace is the United Methodist “Way.”
This paper focuses on Charles Wesley, Poet of the United Methodist Way. In particular, it discusses how the behind-the-scenes writings of Charles Wesley both inform and embody “The United Methodist Way TO Discipleship” and “The United Methodist Way OF Discipleship.”

THE UNITED METHODIST WAY TO DISCIPLESHIP

While proposing a Wesleyan model, we are not forgetting the EUB side of our community. The Evangelical United Brethren Church has made enormous contributions to who we are, what we believe, and how we live the United Methodist “Way.” The Evangelicals, founded by Jacob Albright, openly confessed their Wesleyan roots – Jacob Albright was nurtured in a Methodist class meeting. Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm, founders of the United Brethren Church, were likewise influenced by Wesleyanism – although Reformed and Mennonite roots also lay in the background of their thought and practice.

Methodists were guided by scriptural principles formulated in the ministry and writings of John Wesley and the hymn-poems of his brother, Charles, whose 300th birthday we observed in 2007. Charles Wesley (1707-1788) wrote approximately 9,000 hymn texts – the words, not the music, even though he was an accomplished musician – and about 65 of them appear in our United Methodist Hymnal. The Wesleys laid out a map of the way to Christian discipleship. This map includes six stops along the way – all of them deeply rooted in Scripture and illustrated by hymn texts of Charles Wesley.

I. The universal problem of sin.

The first stop on the United Methodist way to Christian discipleship deals with the problem of sin. That’s the bad news! We were made for fellowship with God and harmonious living in human community, yet we yield to the temptation to turn away from God. We exchange trust in God for trust in ourselves. Too many say they are believers in God, but they are practical atheists – living as if there is no God, and refusing to worship and serve the only One worthy of our worship.

We were made by God to live in a community of respect and loving care that desires the best for all people, yet human relationships are marred by infidelity, jealousy, animosity, violence, and an endless catalogue of additional offenses. We were made to be faithful stewards of the world of nature, within which we live and without which we cannot exist, yet we willfully deface and destroy creation – another evidence of insurrection against the Creator.
We even refuse to love ourselves, abusing the bodies and minds of souls, made by God, for whom Christ died and was raised from the dead. People think, say, and do what they should not. People fail to think, say, and do what they should. There is a great gulf between what God intends humans to be and what they really are.

The Bible calls this sin, “missing the mark.” It is the most serious problem humans face – a universal problem, which robs them of the blessings God intends for all. Charles Wesley’s hymn, “SINNERS, TURN, WHY WILL YOU DIE,” warns of the consequences of universal sin. It is #346 in the UM Hymnal, but it is published without music, in text form only – an unfortunate decision that keeps many congregations from becoming familiar with the hymn. In general, we are not as familiar with as many Wesley texts as were our United Methodist ancestors. The 1880 Methodist hymnbook, for example, contained 315 Charles Wesley hymn texts, while the current UM Hymnal, as previously mentioned, includes only about 65.

Consider the first three stanzas of this invitation hymn, and notice in particular the strong Trinitarian emphasis.

1. Sinners, turn: why will you die? God, your Maker, asks you why. God, who did your being give, made you himself, that you might live; he the fatal cause demands, asks the work of his own hands. Why, you thankless creatures, why will you cross his love and die?

2. Sinners, turn: why will you die? God, your Savior, asks you why. God, who did your souls retrieve, died himself that you might live. Will you let him die in vain? Crucify your Lord again? Why, you ransomed sinners, why will you slight his grace, and die?

3. Sinners, turn: why will you die? God, the Spirit, asks you why; he, who all your lives hath strove, wooed you to embrace his love. Will you not his grace receive? Will you still refuse to live? Why, you long-sought sinners, why will you grieve your God and die?

The final stanza reinforces not only the fact that there can be no doubt as to God’s love, but also that there can be no doubt regarding the spiritual death brought about by the universal problem of sin.

8. Can ye doubt, if God is love, if to all his mercies move? Will ye not his word receive? Will ye not his oath believe? See, the suffering God appears! Jesus weeps! Believe his tears! Mingled with his blood they cry, why will you resolve to die?

II. God’s universal grace.

The first stop on the United Methodist Way to Christian discipleship was the bad news of the universal problem of sin. The second stop is God’s universal grace. This is the good news! And it is good news for all.
The Wesleys called it “preventing” grace – but that’s preventing in its literal sense of “coming before” or “going before” (see, for example, the King James Version of Psalm 59:10 or 1 Thessalonians 4:15). Today we call it “prevenient” grace. It is the title given in upper left hand corner of the UM Hymnal to the section for hymns #337 to #360. Perhaps a better term would be “preparing” grace.

But the important facts about this universal preparing grace are: (1) that it is indeed grace; and (2) that it is universal. One old preacher liked to say that mercy is not getting what you do deserve, and grace is getting what you don’t deserve. That’s true, for grace is certainly God’s unmerited, unearned, and undeserved love. The fact that this grace is universal means that it is available to all. God’s unearned love is free to everyone – Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Sikh … even the agnostic and the atheist.

Prevenient grace prepares us for a new relationship with God and others. It gives a vision of hope and frees us to accept God’s offer for the universal problem of sin. This is one point on which the Wesleys differed from Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others who believed there was no free will because of sin. The Wesleys, however, taught that God’s grace restores free will.

Charles Wesley’s great invitation hymn, “COME SINNERS, TO THE GOSPEL FEAST,” #339 in the UM Hymnal, is a call to all those given hope by God’s preparing grace to respond by their own free will. Notice especially the universal appeal in every verse to “all.”

1. Come, sinners, to the gospel feast; let every soul be Jesus’ guest.
   Ye need not one be left behind, for God hath bidden all mankind.
2. Sent by my Lord, on you I call; the invitation is to all.
   Come, all the world! Come sinner, thou! All things in Christ are ready now.
3. Come, all ye souls by sin oppressed, ye restless wanderers after rest;
   ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind, in Christ a hearty welcome find.
4. My message as from God receive; ye all may come to Christ and live.
   O let his love your hearts constrain, nor suffer him to die in vain.
5. This is the time, no more delay! This is the Lord’s accepted day.
   Come thou, this moment, at his call, and live for him who died for all.

III. Justification by faith.

The third stop on the United Methodist way to Christian discipleship is justification by faith. This is a good biblical term that appears in many contexts – especially in Paul’s letters to the Romans and the Galatians. “The just shall live by faith” is a truth that appears in both the Old and the New Testaments (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38).
The image evoked in Scripture is that of a court of law. Unrighteous, law-breakers stand before the judge. How can the unrighteous be judged righteous? Not on the basis of their deeds. While they have done much good in keeping the law, they have also broken it. Therefore, judgment is based on the grace of the judge who pardons them and sends them on to new life. This is reflected in the words of Jesus in John chapter 8, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.”

If this sounds like more grace, that’s because it is. Justification by faith is God’s justifying grace made possible by God’s preparing grace. It is forgiveness, salvation, and new relationship with God. While the offer is to all, it must be received by faith. As God’s justifying grace follows God’s preparing grace in the United Methodist way to Christian discipleship, so the section on “Prevenient Grace” in the UM Hymnal is followed by one labeled “Justifying Grace” for hymns #361 to #381.

While justification, like creation, is the work of all Three Persons of the Trinitarian God, its focus is the atoning work of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Wesleys spoke of Jesus as our Prophet, Priest, and King. As Prophet, Jesus delivered God’s word – but more than speaking God’s word, he was the embodiment of that word (see the prologue in John chapter 1, where “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”). As Priest, Jesus’ death once-for-all transcended the sacrificial system of ancient Israel – his death being the ultimate atonement for human sin. As King, Jesus has conquered evil and invites all to follow his way of right living – for which he provides empowerment through the Holy Spirit.

Charles Wesley’s hymn, “BLOW YE THE TRUMPET, BLOW,” #379 in the UM Hymnal, based on Leviticus 25:8-17, speaks of God’s justifying grace which brings freedom and new life. The year of Jubilee brings freedom and new beginning. While the year of Jubilee may never have been fully realized in the practice of ancient Israel, the image resounds in the chorus of the Wesley text as follows.

*The year of jubilee is come! The year of jubilee is come!*  
*Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.*

The verses of the hymn reinforce the theme of justifying grace – underserved redemption.

1. Blow ye trumpet, blow! The gladly solemn sound  
   let all the nations know, to earth’s remotest bound:  
2. Jesus, our great high priest, hath full atonement made;  
   ye weary spirits, rest; ye mournful souls be glad:  
3. Extol the Lamb of God, the all-atoning Lamb;  
   redemption in his blood throughout the world proclaim:  
4. Ye slaves of sin and hell, your liberty receive.  
   and safe in Jesus dwell, and blest in Jesus live.
IV. New birth.

The fourth stop on the United Methodist Way to Christian discipleship is the new birth. There are a number of places in the Scriptures where the biblical writers speak of new birth or new creation. The two most notable, but by no means the only, references being Jesus’ words to Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again,” in John chapter 3 and Paul’s “new creation” statement in II Corinthians chapter 5.

Justification, forgiveness, is what God does FOR us. The new birth is what God does IN us. The two (justification and new birth) always come together – you can’t have one without the other – although for purposes of speaking about them, justification precedes new birth.

New birth brings about a real change in both our relationship to God and our relationship to our neighbors. John Wesley’s understanding of the new birth is given in his sermon on “New Birth,” which is available free on the Northwest Nazarene University website http://wesley.nnu.edu. In fact 125 of Wesley’s 151 published sermons, including those on “Original Sin” and “Justification by Faith,” are also available on the same website.

John Wesley noted three marks of the new birth: faith (“sure trust and confidence in God”), hope (belief in the ultimate triumph of God’s will, that God’s purposes cannot ultimately be thwarted) and love (for God and neighbor). Those who have been born of God give evidence in their faith, hope, and love.

What is perhaps Charles Wesley’s most enduring hymn, “O FOR A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING,” #57 in the UM Hymnal, was written to celebrate the first anniversary of his own new birth. This and other Wesley hymns continue to be a great gift to the entire Christian Church, as they may be found in the hymnals of a wide variety of denominations. Next time you visit a church, any church, check the author index in the back of the hymnal to see how many Charles Wesley texts appear. No matter the church label, Roman Catholic, Mennonite, or another, the name Charles Wesley is almost certain to appear.

The Charles Wesley text which most dramatically describes the new birth is, “AND CAN IT BE,” #363 in the UM Hymnal, based on the story in Acts chapter 16 when Paul and Silas were miraculously released from prison. The first four stanzas reveal both Wesley’s theological understanding of the new birth and the experience of new believers who receive the new birth.

1. And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood!
   Died he for me? Who caused his pain! For me? Who him to death pursued?
   Amazing love! How can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me?
   Amazing love! How can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me?
2. ’Tis mystery all; th’Immortal dies! Who can explore his strange design?
   In vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.
‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; let angel minds inquire no more.
‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; let angel minds inquire no more.

3. He left his Father’s throne above (so free, so infinite his grace!), emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s helpless race.
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me!
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me!

4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

V. Assurance.

The fifth stop on the United Methodist Way to Christian discipleship is assurance. Saint Paul affirms in Romans 8:16 that, “God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit, witnesses with our spirits that we are children of God.” Whose child are you? A child of God, or a child of the Devil? How can you be sure?

The best-loved of all hymns on assurance is probably, “BLESSED ASSURANCE, JESUS IS MINE.” You undoubtedly know that this was not written by Charles Wesley, but by the blind poetess Fanny Crosby. She was a Methodist, a member of the denomination’s John Street Church in New York City, and her hymn underscores the importance of assurance in the United Methodist Way to Christian discipleship.

Charles Wesley’s equivalent statement on assurance may well be the final stanza of, “AND CAN IT BE.”
5. No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine;
   Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine.
   Bold I approach th’eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.
   Bold I approach th’eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.

To the Wesleys, assurance is not spiritual egotism, which is something totally foreign to the way of Christ. Assurance, rather, is the firm basis on which we live faithfully under God’s love, direction, and power. Assurance is that which convinces us that “nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. ... We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Not even in the most dire circumstances will God abandon us, nor can God’s plan for us be overpowered.

In “HOW CAN WE SINNERS KNOW,” #372 in the UM Hymnal, Charles Wesley attempts to explain how sinners can have the assurance of sins forgiven. It’s a hymn not often sung, perhaps because it wrestles on a deeper level with such a momentous question.
1. How can we sinners know our sins on earth forgiven?
   How can my gracious Savior show my name inscribed in heaven?
2. What we have felt and seen, with confidence we tell, and publish to the ends of earth the signs infallible.

3. We who in Christ believe that he for us hath died, we all his unknown peace receive and feel his blood applied.

4. We by his Spirit prove and know the things of God, the things which freely of his love he hath on us bestowed.

5. The meek and lowly heart that in our Savior was, to us that Spirit doth impart and signs us with his cross.

6. Our nature’s turned, our mind transformed in all its powers, and both the witnesses are joined, the Spirit of God with ours.

VI. Holiness of heart and life.

The sixth and final stop on the United Methodist Way to Christian discipleship is holiness of heart and life, also referred to in Scripture as sanctification. Although not preached about as much as it used to be in Methodist pulpits, sanctification is a recurring biblical theme. Saint Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthians with the words, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ...”

Sanctification, holiness of heart and life, is the goal of the Christian, and therefore of the United Methodist Way. John Wesley compared Christian religion to a house.

The Porch – repentance.

The Door – justification by faith (salvation, new birth).

The main structure itself – holiness of heart and life.

Just as one must go onto the porch to get to the door, people have to experience repentance before they can enjoy salvation. And just as the door is only the entrance to the house itself (the ultimate goal) and not the place at which one stops, so salvation is the gateway to the Christian’s ultimate goal of holiness of heart and life.

While holiness, or sanctification, is the final goal to which the other five steps are merely preliminaries, exactly what is sanctification? Quite simply, it’s LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR HEART, SOUL, MIND, AND STRENGTH – AND OUR NEIGHBOR AS OURSELVES. And “neighbor,” the Wesleys remind us, is everyone else – not only those most like us, but also those most unlike us.

Christianity is nothing but the religion of love, God’s love living in us and demonstrated in our thinking, speaking, and acting. Holiness of heart and life is meant to lead us to Christian perfection. Every year United Methodist bishops, following the practice started by John Wesley, ask the candidates for ordination a series of questions that includes, “Are you going on to perfection?”
Most preachers who have had to answer that question find it to be deeper and more challenging as the years go on. If persons are not going on to perfection, then what are they going on to? And why is that question asked only of the clergy? If holiness of heart and life is the true goal of the Wesleyan believer and the final stop on the United Methodist Way to Christian discipleship, shouldn’t that question be posed to all who call themselves United Methodist?

Holiness of heart and mind, entire sanctification, Christian perfection, is where, by God’s grace, love becomes the controlling force in our lives. A large section of the UM Hymnal, hymns #382 to #536, bear the title “Sanctifying and Perfecting Grace.” While that section does include several Charles Wesley texts, some of those that best proclaim his understanding of the goal of the United Methodist Way to Christian discipleship are found in stanza 5 and 6 of, “JESUS! THE NAME OVER ALL,” #193 in the UM Hymnal.

5. His only righteousness I show, his saving truth proclaim;
   ‘tis all my business here below to cry “Behold the Lamb.”
6. Happy, if with my latest breath I may but gasp his name,
   preach him to all and cry in death, “Behold, behold the Lamb.”

Yes, there is a “United Methodist Way TO Discipleship.” It recognizes the universal problem of sin, God’s preparing and accepting grace, new birth, living faithfully in the confidence of God’s loving kindness, and following God’s way of holiness of heart and life.

THE UNITED METHODIST WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP:

Recall John Wesley’s image of the porch, door, and house. The porch is repentance, the door is justification by faith (i.e., salvation), and the house is holiness of heart and life. Just as one must pass through the porch and the door to enter the house, a person must experience repentance and salvation to enter into holiness of heart and life. And just as entering the house (and not stopping at the porch or the door) is the ultimate goal, so is holiness of heart (not merely repentance or salvation) the ultimate goal of the Christian life.

But the holy thinking, speaking, acting which God intends is not created and developed by our efforts alone. It is prompted and nurtured by God’s grace in gifts that God offers. Now we consider the gifts of God for cultivating faith and bringing holy living to maturity. The Wesleys called them the “means of grace” and identified at least five of them: reading and studying Scripture, prayer, fasting, Christian fellowship, and the Lord’s Supper. Received as gifts from God and practiced as spiritual disciplines, these five “means of grace” inform the United Methodist Way of Discipleship.
I. Reading and studying Scripture.

John Wesley called this “searching the Scriptures.” It is done, of course, not to answer questions on “Jeopardy” or to outsmart “the mob” on TV’s “1 vs. 100,” but because the Bible contains the basic message of our faith. United Methodists affirm that the Bible is the “primary source” for what we believe and do. It is the book through which God informs, inspires, and encourages our faith. In the words of the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith, one of United Methodism’s four Doctrinal Standards, the Bible is “the rule and guide for faith and practice.”

John Wesley liked to refer to himself as homo unius libri, “a man of one book.” This is a deceiving statement since Wesley was widely read in literature, science, history, philosophy, and other areas. What Wesley meant was that the Bible took precedence over all other books. He published extensive commentaries which he called “explanatory notes” on the Old and New Testaments. The complete text of these notes is available on the Northwest Nazarene University website previously cited at http://wesley.nnu.edu.

To aid the people called Methodists in their Bible study, Wesley offered six guidelines. These appear in the beginning of his Explanatory notes upon the Old Testament.

1. If possible, set aside a little time in the morning and evening for Bible reading.
2. It is advisable to read one chapter from the Old Testament and one chapter from the New Testament.
3. Read with a single purpose – to know the will of God.
4. Look for the connections between the Bible passage and fundamental ideas of the Christian faith.
5. Prayerfully seek the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit as you read.
6. Resolve to put into practice what God teaches you in the reading and study.

Notice the emphasis on reading from both the Old and New Testaments. Too often Christians tend to neglect the Old Testament, thus impoverishing their understanding of the New.

We are truly the most privileged of all generations of Christians. Resources available to today’s Bible readers and students include innumerable translations, commentaries, dictionaries, maps, tapes and disks, and other aids. But paradoxically, this generation has also experienced the dramatic decline of the Sunday School – the mainstay of the church’s educational program for children, youth and adults.

History often credits Robert Raikes with originating the Sunday School in Gloucester in 1780, to instruct children in reading and church catechism. In fact, Methodist lay woman Hannah Ball first introduced the Sunday School for those
purposes in Buckinghamshire eleven years earlier, in 1769. The Sunday School
has always been an integral part of United Methodism; it is where many of us
were first taught the Bible’s message. But since the 1968 denominational union
that formed The United Methodist Church, 2004 statistics indicate Sunday School
enrollment is down 56%, and attendance 44%.

While Disciple Bible Study and other programs are reaching many and
make up for part of the decline, we need to re-focus on reading and studying the
Scripture as a means of grace that nurtures holiness of heart and life. The “Our
Theological Task” document in the Book of Discipline puts it this way: As we
open our minds and hearts to the Word of God through the words of human
beings inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our understanding
is deepened, and the possibilities for transforming the world become apparent to
us.

Two Charles Wesley hymn texts on the importance of the Scripture are
given on a single page in the UM Hymnal. Unfortunately, they appear without
music – which severely limits their congregational usage. The first of those is
“COME, DIVINE INTERPRETER,” #594 in the UM Hymnal.

1. Come, divine Interpreter, bring me eyes thy book to read,
   ears the mystic words to hear, words which did from thee proceed,
   words that endless bliss impart, kept in an obedient heart.
2. All who read, or hear, are blessed, if thy plain commands we do;
   of thy kingdom here possessed, thee we shall in glory view
   when thou comest on earth to abide, reign triumphant at thy side.

II. Prayer

The second gift of God’s grace to nurture faith and holy living is prayer. John Wesley described prayer as our “grand means of drawing near to God.” Prayer keeps us connected to the One who steadfastly loves and sustains us, and Wesley wrote that the absence of prayer is the single most serious source of spiritual drought in a Christian’s life.

But let’s be careful that we don’t unduly limit our concept of prayer. Beware of the false argument that except for prayers from the Bible (e.g., the Lord’s Prayer), to be authentic, prayers must be of our own making – not read from a book as composed by someone else. Wesley understood the folly of this reasoning. In truth, it is extremely difficult to carry on a vital prayer life without using the great prayers of the church and its deeply committed devotional leaders.

Some of those printed prayers are impressed on our memories. Consider, for example, the following prayer from our communion liturgy. Can any of us who has grown up with this prayer deny its effectiveness in bringing the soul into the very presence of God.
We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under thy table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to partake of this memorial of thy Son Jesus Christ, that we may grow into his likeness and may evermore dwell in him and he in us.

Of course there needs to be a balance. N. T. Wright, in Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense, issues the following warning.

Old forms and traditions of worship and prayer can indeed be a way of fueling genuine prayer, of enabling people to come with humility into the presence of God and to discover that, bit by bit, prayers that have served other generations well can become their heartfelt outpourings, too. But living traditions can turn quite quickly into deadweight. Sometimes last year’s deadwood needs to be cleared away to make room for new growth.

Nevertheless, we are privileged to have a vast treasury of prayers in books and on the internet to enhance our spiritual life. And while United Methodists and their ancestors have always faithfully said their prayers, they have also sung their prayers. Our hymnal is full of them. One of Charles Wesley’s most familiar is addressed to God in the words “LOVE DIVINE, ALL LOVES EXCELLING,” #384 in the UM Hymnal.

1. Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down; fix in us thy humble dwelling; all thy faithful mercies crown! Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart.

2. Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast! Let us all in thee inherit; let us find that second rest. Take away our bent to sinning; Alpha and Omega be; end of faith, as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty.

3. Come, Almighty to deliver, let us all thy life receive; suddenly return and never, never more thy temples leave. Thee we would be always blessing, serve thee as thy hosts above, pray and praise thee without ceasing, glory in thy perfect love.

4. Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be. Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee; changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Notice what we are asking for – “that second rest”… “take away our bent for sinning”… “pure and spotless let us be”… “perfectly restored in thee.” That’s entire sanctification! The rubric in the upper left hand corner clearly states that the hymn falls within the section, “Sanctifying and Perfecting Grace,” but how many of us really understand what we are asking for when we sing this prayer.
III. Fasting

One of the least understood and practiced means of grace is fasting, the third of God’s gifts designed to nourish faith and holy living. This is not fasting in the Weight Watchers sense, with a purpose to lose weight, but with the aim of enhancing the holy life. Such practice is firmly rooted in the Bible. In the Old Testament, for example, Esther and the Hebrews fasted in their time of desperate need. In the New Testament, Jesus and his disciples fasted.

But what is fasting? Very plainly, it is abstinence from food and drink, partially or entirely, for a period of time. John Wesley found fasting important for four reasons.
1. Fasting is expression of sorrow for sin.
2. Fasting can be a special sign of penitence for excessive eating and drinking.
3. Fasting is a help to prayer because it allows setting apart more time to pray. The time not used for eating can be spent in prayer.
4. Fasting is a help to the poor because the money saved from fasting can be given to the poor to enable them to buy food. This is typical of Wesley.

John Wesley practiced what he preached. Early in his adult life, he began the habit of fasting every Wednesday and Friday; later in life, he fasted every Friday. In fact, early Methodists typically observed every Friday as a fast day. But in his usual manner, Wesley advised that not everyone was physically able to fast. He was adamant that fasting should never be undertaken to impair one’s health – as was the case when some medieval Christians literally starved themselves to death for “the glory of God.”

Fasting – a gift which brings God closer to us. Let us re-consider more fully this third means of grace. Many Charles Wesley hymn texts express a desire for the closeness of God and self-denial to which fasting can lead. Consider, for example, the first stanza of “I WANT A PRINCIPLE WITHIN,” #410 in the UM Hymnal.

1. I want a principle within of watchful, godly fear,
   a sensibility of sin, a pain to feel it near.
   I want the first approach to feel of pride and wrong desire,
   to catch the wandering of my will, and quench the kindling fire.

IV. Christian fellowship.

The fourth of these means of grace to strengthen holy living is koinonia, or Christian fellowship. John Wesley called it “Christian conference.” Holiness of heart and life cannot be developed in isolation. In the words of John Wesley, “You cannot be Christians in solitude.” For people of biblical faith, there is no such thing as “private Christianity.”
Biblical faith is always personal, but always personal within the community of God’s faithful people, the Body of Christ, the church. One of the distinguishing marks of the earliest Christian community was its practice of koinonia, Christian fellowship. In the book of Acts we see that Christians…

…worshiped and prayed together.
…supported each other.
…contributed to and shared from a common treasury.
…rejoiced together and suffered together.
…together shared their faith with others.

Following this example, Wesley formed Methodist societies with smaller groups (bands and classes) to pray, to sing, to hear biblical preaching, and “to watch over one another in love.” Early Methodists went to the local Anglican parish church for the sacraments and formal rites of the faith, met weekly as bands (congregations) for less formal worship and evangelistic preaching, and regularly attended small class meetings. Similarly, the Evangelical Association originated with three classes formed by Jacob Albright in 1800.

Class meetings were times of intimate fellowship led by lay persons. The opening question, “How does your soul prosper?” was answered by a report of temptations faced during the week – both those resisted, and those to which one had yielded. And these were gatherings of persons who lived and worked together in close proximity – if one person had trouble remembering the temptations to which he had yielded, his neighbors undoubtedly could remind him.

The Christian community was a disciplined fellowship guided by “General Rules” which were kept very simple. Avoid evil. Do good. Attend public worship, pay attention to Scripture, engage in prayer and fasting, receive the Lord’s Supper.

Many hymns by Charles Wesley emphasize the indispensability of Christian fellowship for the life of holiness. One of these, “ALL PRAISE TO OUR REDEEMING LORD,” is #554 in the UM Hymnal.

1. All praise to our redeeming Lord, who joins us by his grace
   and bids us, each to each restored, together seek his face.
2. He bids us build each other up; and, gathered into one,
   to our high calling’s glorious hope we hand in hand go on.
3. The gift which he on one bestows, we all delight to prove,
   the grace through every vessel flows in purest streams of love.
4. E’en now we think and speak the same, and cordially agree,
   concertered all, through Jesus’ name, in perfect harmony.
5. We all partake the joy of one; the common peace we feel,
   a peace to sensual minds unknown, a joy unspeakable.
6. And if our fellowship below in Jesus is so sweet,
   what height of rapture shall we know when round his throne we meet.
Notice the powerful recurring theme of being united in Christ – “each to each restored”… “gathered into one”… Have we yet achieved the unity described in the third stanza to “think and speak the same, and cordially agree, centered all, through Jesus’ name, in perfect harmony?” We are still “going on to perfection,” but we have not yet arrived.

V. The Lord’s Supper

The fifth of these “means of grace” is the Lord’s Supper. New attention has been called to this gift of God in the United Methodist document, “This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion” adopted at the 2004 General Conference. That document observes that “Many laypeople complain of sloppy practice, questionable theology, and lack of teaching and guidance” regarding Holy Communion. Every local church can be strengthened in its understanding and practice of communion with study and discussion of this document. The entire document and excellent discussion resources are available online from the General Board of Discipleship at http://gbod.org.

The Lord’s Supper is an act of thanksgiving – that why it is called the Eucharist, from the Greek word eucharistia meaning the giving of thanks. The Lord’s Supper is a means of spiritual nourishment, food for the journey of the Christian life. John and Charles Wesley, following Scripture, taught that the Lord’s Supper has three principal dimensions.

1. It is a memorial meal. Jesus commanded to “Do this in memory of me.” It re-presents God’s gracious acts in Jesus’ death and resurrection so powerfully as to make them really present now. It is the past come alive in the present.

2. It is anticipation of sharing in the “heavenly banquet.” It looks toward Jesus’ promise of the “Messianic banquet” in which God’s faithful people will eat and drink together. This is personal – it is not only anticipating sitting down in union with Moses and St. Paul and Martin Luther, but also with our grandparents and parents and other departed loved ones. It is the future come alive in the present.

3. It is a means of conveying God’s nurturing and sanctifying grace in the present. At the Lord’s Supper the real spiritual presence of Christ is a fact. As we commune, we receive God’s sustaining, maintaining grace. This is not transubstantiation, but it is more than a mere representative act. Past, present and future meet at the Lord’s Table.

In addition, in commemorating Christ’s sacrifice, we are prompted to present ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a holy and living sacrifice to God. The Wesleys believed so much in the power and importance of the Eucharist that they published in 1745 a hymnal which included 166 hymns on the Lord’s Supper. It was mainly to make the Lord’s Supper and the other sacraments available to his
people in North America that John Wesley authorized the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784.

John Wesley’s sermons and personal practice indicate the high regard he had for the Lord’s Supper. His sermon “The Duty of Constant Communion” is available on the aforementioned http://wesley.nnu.edu website. He would be appalled at today’s practice of offering Communion once a quarter, or even once a month. His personal practice was to avail himself of the Lord’s Supper every three to five days.

Charles Wesley’s hymn “O THE DEPTH OF LOVE DIVINE,” #627 in the UM Hymnal, represents the Wesleyan way of comprehending “this Holy Mystery.” The tune, unfortunately, is a difficult one to sing, but the text speaks for itself.

1. O the depth of love divine, the unfathomable grace!
   Who shall say how bread and wine God into us conveys!
   How the bread his flesh imparts, how the wine transmits his blood,
   fills his faithful people’s hearts with all the life of God.
2. Let the wisest mortals show how we the grace receive;
   feeble elements bestow a power not theirs to give.
   Who explains the wondrous way, how through these the virtue came?
   These the virtue did convey, yet still remains the same.
3. How can the spirits heaven-ward rise, by earthly matter fed,
   drink herewith divine supplies and eat immortal bread?
   Ask the Father’s wisdom how: Christ who did the means ordain;
   angels round our altars bow to search it out, in vain.
4. Sure and real is the grace, the manner be unknown;
   only meet us in thy ways and perfect us in one.
   Let us taste the heavenly powers, Lord, we ask for nothing more.
   Thine to bless, ’tis only ours to wonder and adore.

There are, of course, other “means of grace” than these five. Personal and public worship of the triune God is one, and there are others. But there is clearly a United Methodist Way of Discipleship which is rooted in spiritual formation, using the gifts God provides for nurturing faith and holy living, and leads to ministry. We simply impoverish our personal and congregational spiritual growth if we neglect them.