

Organization of the United Methodist Church: A Nuts and Bolts class on the United Methodist Structure

We're going to follow the order of (retired) Bishop Jack M Tuell's book "The Organization of the United Methodist Church (2005-2008 Edition)". Bishop Tuell first wrote the book in 1970 after the union in 1968 of The Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church and he has revised it every four years following each General Conference. Following Bishop Tuell's book, the outline of this class will be:

1. **Foundations** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 1–104)
 - a. Historical Origins
 - b. Theological Affirmations
 - c. The Constitution
 - d. Doctrinal Statements, the General Rules, and Social Principles
 - e. The *Discipline*
2. **The Ministry of all Christians** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 120–166)
3. **The Local Church** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 201–270)
 - a. Definitions
 - b. The Meaning of Church Membership
 - c. How New Churches Are Started
 - d. How Churches Are Governed
4. **The Ministry of the Ordained** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 301–366)
 - a. Major Changes
 - b. The Order of Deacon
 - c. The Order of Elder
 - d. Qualifications and Training
 - e. Relationship to the Annual Conference
 - f. The Pastor's Job Description
 - g. Other Tasks of Ordained Elders
 - h. Other Ministerial Relationships and Termination Procedures
5. **The Superintendency** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 401–435)
 - a. The Nature of Superintendency
 - b. The District Superintendent
 - c. The Episcopacy
 - d. Accountability of Bishop and District Superintendent
6. **The Conferences** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 501–666)
 - a. The General Conference
 - b. Organization and Affiliation Outside the United States
 - c. The Jurisdictional Conference
 - d. The Annual Conference
 - e. The Charge Conference
7. **Administrative Order** (*The Book Discipline*, Pars. 701–2405)
 - a. Structures of General Agencies
 - b. Agencies for Administration
 - c. Support Service Agencies
 - d. Program Agencies

8. **Church Property** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 2501–2552)
 - a. The Trust Clause
 - b. Compliance with Local Law
 - c. Property of General Conference, Annual Conference, and Districts
 - d. Local Church Property and Building Procedures
 - e. Church Institutions
9. **Judicial Administration** (*The Book of Discipline*, Pars. 2601–2719)
 - a. The Judicial Council
 - b. Trial Procedures
10. **Conclusion**

“The Organization of the United Methodist Church (2005-2008 Edition)” by Jack M Tuell (Nashville: Abingdon Press, ISBN 0-687-33320-2). Available from Cokesbury for \$12.

<http://www.cokesbury.com/search.aspx?scope=author&query=tuell&pid=0687333202>

Before the nuts and bolts, let's look at "why the church?" Is the church really necessary?

"Methodists understand the journey of Christian faith to be a corporate experience. It is not a two-seater sports car (just me and Jesus); it is a big bus packed with all kinds of people." (F Belton Joyner Jr. in "Being Methodist in the Bible Belt, p. 17.)

"If the gospel comes first, why not exalt it and let the church go? The answer to that question is that the church alone keeps the gospel alive." (Mack B Stokes in "Major United Methodist Beliefs", p. 101)

"The gospel has not come down to us by chance. It has been passed on through Christian groups of every generation who preached, taught, heard, and lived that gospel. They are the true apostolic succession. Without them, in their organized effort, the gospel would have died in the first century. The Bible has been kept alive by the church." (Stokes, p. 102)

"The gospel of God in Jesus Christ is unutterably beautiful. It wonderfully answers our deepest needs because gospel came from God just for that purpose. This gospel must be proclaimed and taught by a community of prayer and faith from one generation to another. Why one Christian dies, another must fill the void. The community of prayer and faith moves onward." (Stokes, p. 102)

"If the gospel is God's message, the church, despite its imperfections, is God's means of keeping that gospel alive." (Stokes, p. 103)

"If God lives as community [in the Trinity] and we are created in God's image, we are intended to live in community. God's people model that community. Christians call that community "Church". (Joyner Jr, p. 18)

Christian history confirms that the church is necessary. Paul has such an influence today because of the letters he wrote. "He wrote most of them to strengthen the churches he founded... He took the ageless gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and gave it a body in the form of the Christian churches at Galatia, at Philippi, at Thessalonica, at Corinth, and at Ephesus." (Stokes, p. 103)

John Wesley was an extraordinary man. He preached many sermons. Yet a friend of his, George Whitefield, was a better preacher. "Who can compare the lasting influence of the two men, however? What was the difference? This. Wherever Wesley went, he was concerned to set up Methodist societies where New Testament Christianity could thrive." (Stokes, p. 103)

Our human situation requires the Church. "We live in a world where evils are not limited to wicked individuals. The forces of evil are organized... Crime is a *social* force." (Stokes, p. 104)

"How can the dangerous forces of our modern day be overcome? Not by pious individuals who separate themselves from one another.... Unorganized goodness is no more effective than any other kind of unorganized power." (Stokes, p. 104)

"We find that we easily forget God. We need the church to keep reminding us of the reality of the spiritual... Take a live coal out of the fire, and it quickly loses its glow. Take people out of the fellowship of the redeemed, and they soon lose their faith." (Stokes, p. 105)

Foundations

The United Methodist Church evolved out of the “societies” (small groups) in the Church of England that people joined for the express purpose of bettering their spiritual condition. So the rules were strict and the discipline tight.

See UMC History timeline figure.

Theological Affirmations

Preamble to the Constitution:

The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church seeks to provide the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.

The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.

- *The church is a community:* The church is a people consciously and purposefully joined together.
- *...of all true believers:* what binds the people into a community: historic beliefs of Christian Church.
- *...under the Lordship of Christ.:* only one head of the church—Jesus Christ himself. Life and mission of the church is an expression of the rule and reign of Christ. Christ is our standard.
- *It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship:* We’re incomplete apart from God and we have confessed faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. Our lives have been set on the way God intends for us. Redeeming: redemption is continuing process for church members (always “going on” to perfection) AND reaching out to the world through both the words and acts of the fellowship. That is our ministry.
- *...in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called.:* Preaching is a central emphasis of this community. Some are set apart to preach. Our Church has never attempted to put a particular interpretation on just what a “call” is, believing that God is capable of calling persons in an infinite variety of ways.
- *...and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment.:* Two sacraments that Christ specifically told his followers to do: baptism and Holy Communion. While important, these sacraments are not the sole means of grace. Baptism is the indispensable first step of a person into the Christian community and Holy Communion provides us the nourishment as we travel along the Way.
- *Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit:* We are acting out together our response to the commission laid on us by our Lord himself: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). A discipline that frees us, not restricts us (see UMH 421).

- *...the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.:* Worship is not about me (how I feel); it is about God. Worship is the starting point for everything else the church does. The church helps to build up (strengthen, grow, nurture) those who trust Christ. Christian education does not end with high-school Sunday school class or a confirmation class, but is one of the central, continuing, basic tasks of the church. “Redemption”, not “conversion”. Usually “conversion” connotes a particular religious experience of an individual. “Redemption” includes that but also broader social dimension: redeem from squalor of poverty, racism, prejudice, and injustice. So both individual and social.
- *The Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world,:* Caution against institutional self-centeredness and ambition. The church is not an end in itself. While any institution needs a bureaucracy to enable it to function, we need to remember the purpose of the church!
- *...and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.:* The church is incomplete in its current structure. The church is not one and such dividedness gets in the way of our doing our job. The world does not believe our preaching of love and reconciliation when we can’t even agree among ourselves. Unity in spirit is not enough. In our structures, as in our personal lives, we are “going on to perfection”.

The Constitution

After preamble, there are 5 basic divisions.

1. **General:** first 3 sections cover the union of The Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) and The Methodist Church (MC). Although the UMC is a new church (formed in 1968), it is the inheritor of great traditions long standing. The new name reflects that this was a union of two churches and not simply an absorption of a smaller church (EUB) into a larger one. The 25 (+2) Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church and the Confession of Faith of the EUB Church (16 articles) are definitive for the UMC. Both are “deemed to be congruent” with each other at the 1968 union.

The UMC is part of the church universal and therefore must be inclusive—open to “all persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition...in any local church in the connection.” Anyone who bars another on grounds of race or other condition is in violation of the Constitution of the UMC. (Does this include sexual orientation? Bishop Tuell does not mention that—is the list an example of possible conditions or does it list all acceptable conditions?)

Other sections include: commitment to racial justice, ecumenical relations with a recognition that the UMC is incomplete and unfinished, and titles to properties held by the EUB and the MC.

2. **Organization:** Deals with the conference system of the UMC, roughly analogous to the legislative branch of civil government.
 - a. **General Conference:** Supreme legislative body made of “not less than 600 nor more than 1,000 delegates, one half of whom shall be clergy and one half lay members, to be elected by the annual conferences.” It meets

every four years in April or May. Last one was year 2004. Special sessions of General Conference may be called in between times by Council of Bishops or by other matter determined by General Conference. Representation is based on both the number of clergy and number of church members, each factor being equal.

General Conference has full legislative power over all matters distinctively connectional in sixteen areas that include defining terms of Church membership and the ministry, determining all the various structures of the Church, and guaranteeing the rightful place of all members in these structures, regardless of race or status. Also may “enact such other legislation as may be necessary, subject to the limitations and restrictions of the Constitution of the Church” (very broad power!)

Specific powers given to other groups in the Constitution include: judicial powers/actions are with Judicial Council; ordination of clergy is done by annual conferences; election of bishops is done by jurisdictional and central conferences.

Restrictive Rules: some things so important and some principles so basic that they are beyond even the power of the General Conference to change.

- i. Keeps General Conference from changing Articles of Religion (Methodist Church) or establishing new standards that are contrary to existing doctrinal standards.
- ii. Keeps General Conference from changing Confession of Faith (EUB church). A 1972 study supplemented the Articles and Confession and gave direction to continued theological exploration within the Church using “Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.” A 1988 study on “Our Theological Task” that replaced the 1972 study lifted up the primacy of Scripture. It also dealt with pluralism. “In these encounters [with other denominations and other faiths], our aim is not to reduce doctrinal differences to some lowest common denominator of religious agreement, but to raise all such relationships to the highest possible level of human fellowship and understanding.”

Rules 1 and 2 can be changed if $\frac{3}{4}$ of all members of the annual conferences agree PLUS a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote of the General Conference. The other restrictive rules can be changed with $\frac{2}{3}$ of all members of the annual conference PLUS a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote of the General Conference.

- iii. Keeps General Conference from doing away with the episcopacy or enacting legislation that in effect would destroy the institution of the episcopacy or change its essential nature.
- iv. Keeps General Conference from doing away with guarantee to clergy or laity of trial before their peers and a chance for an appeal.

- v. Keeps General Conference from revoking or changing the General Rules stated by John Wesley for the religious societies he created in England. These rules are not in force today.
- vi. Keeps General Conference from appropriating any of the proceeds of the publishing business of the Church for “any purpose other than for the benefit of retired or disabled preachers, their spouses, widows, or widowers, and children or other beneficiaries of the ministerial pension systems.”
- b. **Jurisdictional Conferences:** five regional bodies in the US. (We’re in the Western Jurisdiction.) Most important function is the election of bishops. Also carries on program of Church within the jurisdiction, determines boundaries of the annual conferences, and appoints a committee on appeals. Equal number of lay and clergy delegates.
- c. **Central Conferences:** about the same functions as jurisdictional conferences except that they are outside the US. Have a larger measure of freedom to work out their own structures, e.g., can establish whatever tenure they wish for bishops. Equal lay & clergy number.
- d. **Annual Conferences:** basic body of the Church. John Wesley held annual conferences before there were local churches. Itinerant preachers preached to groups of people that later became societies and then local churches. Annual conference is the primary “connector” of the local churches. Right of voting on constitutional amendments, election of General Conference delegates, decision on all matters related to admission to the ministry, conference relations of clergy, and ordination are all reserved to annual conference. Qualifications for delegates to General, jurisdictional, and central conferences described in here.

Two classes of members: clergy and lay. Lay membership based on representation of each pastoral charge. Number lay from a charge = number of full-time clergy in the pastoral charge. Clergy membership is for those in full connection and is for life. Includes district superintendents, retired clergy, those on special appointment. If total number lay < number of clergy, the annual conference shall elect additional lay members to equalize the numbers. Wesley Church elects two lay delegates to Annual Conference even though we have one clergy person.

- e. **Boundaries:** jurisdictional boundaries are codified in constitution. Northeastern, Southeaster, North Central, South Central, and Western. Western includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and the territory of the United States in the Pacific region.
- f. **District and Charge Conferences:** Annual conferences *may* organize district conferences. Each pastoral charge shall have a charge conference that operates according to provisions adopted by the General Conference. Our church officers are elected at a charge conference and the pastor’s

salary is set at a charge conference. Wesley Church's officers serve from July to July and pastor's salary is set in November/January.

3. **Episcopal Supervision:** provides the constitutional bases of our Episcopal form of government. There is a Council of Bishops composed of all the bishops of the Church that meets at least once a year to plan for general oversight and promotion of "temporal and spiritual interests" in the Church, and to carry into effect rules, regulations, and responsibilities set forth by the General Conference and the Plan of Union (in 1968). Bishops in a jurisdiction or central conference make up a College of Bishops.

Bishops serve within the jurisdiction in which they are elected. They may transfer to another jurisdiction but the requirements in the constitution are such big hurdles that it hasn't happened yet. Bishops have life tenure except those elected in central conferences, whose tenure is decided by the central conference.

There shall be a committee on episcopacy of the jurisdictional conference to which the bishops are accountable. This committee is made of 1 lay + 1 clergy delegate from each annual conference in the jurisdiction. The committee is a check on the power of the bishops and serves as a reminder that our episcopacy is constitutional rather than monarchical in nature. Bishops preside over the annual conference. There shall be district superintendents who assist the bishop. Their responsibilities and term lengths are decided by the General Conference. Bishops, in consultation with their district superintendents appoint clergy to a charge. This is the bishop's one source of real power.

Non-constitutional rules/restrictions: a bishop normally can serve in an annual conference for up to two 4-year terms. Third term possible if approved by jurisdictional conference [for example, when Desert Southwest (Arizona + Las Vegas area of Nevada) formed in 1980s, Bishop Galvan served for three terms to ensure things were well established. Bishops retire at the jurisdictional conference following their 66th birthday. Bishops are not assigned to the annual conference where he/she was a clergy member for at least four years following their election to the episcopacy unless 2/3 vote of Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy and 2/3 vote of jurisdictional conference decide otherwise.

4. **The Judiciary:** There shall be a Judicial Council, the UMC's supreme court. Number of members, their qualifications, their term lengths, and method of election and filling of vacancies are decided by the General Conference. The Judicial Council has the power to determine the constitutionality of acts of the General Conference brought to it, to hear various appeals on questions of law, and to carry out other duties as specified by the General Conference.

If the General Conference is in session, the Judicial Council must report its findings back immediately to the General Conference. There shall also be established a judicial system to guarantee our clergy and lay members a trial before the Church, or by a committee, and an appeal.

5. **Amendments:** Constitution can be amended by 2/3 vote of General Conference PLUS 2/3 vote of all members of all the annual conferences except for changing Restrictive Rules 1 and 2 in which a 3/4 vote of members of all the annual conferences is required. Amendments may originate in the General and Annual Conferences. Jurisdictional and central conferences may propose amendments as well.

Doctrinal Statements, the General Rules, and Social Principles

The Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church, the Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church are included within the context of “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task”. The Articles deal with the Trinity, Bible, nature of man, since, and the church. They deny purgatory, speaking in Latin in worship and doctrine of transubstantiation. They define the sacraments as only baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Clergy can be married. Rites and ceremonies may differ in different places. Christians can hold personal property and swear an oath before a magistrate.

The Confession of Faith by and large reiterates the Articles of Religion. The 1988 “Our Theological Task” report places both the Articles and Confession within the context of a continuing theological search bounded only by “Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.” The Articles, Confession, and Our Theological Task are posted on the UMC website and our church’s website.

Some ambiguity exists in what are the “General Rules”. Constitution talks about “General Rules of Our United Societies” and other documents talk about the “General Rules of The Methodist Church”. Are they still valid rules of the UMC or are they rules of religious societies of an earlier day? Although clergy agree to abide by them, do they carry legal or juridical force?

Both of the uniting churches had long histories of affirming the indivisibility of the gospel and its necessary application to all of life, including the social needs of humankind. The social concern of the Church is spelled out in the “Social Principles” in five categories: The Natural World, The Nurturing Community, The Social Community, The Economic Community, The Political Community, and The World Community. The gospel is by its very nature “social”, and must include the social dimension to be true to its Lord. The “Social Principles” are not law.

The Discipline

The last foundation of the United Methodist Church is its *Book of Discipline*. It contains all of the organizational structure, doctrinal standards, principles, constitution, etc. of the UMC. Bishop Tuell’s book goes through the *Discipline* section by section.