

# **METHODIST MORALS STUDY GUIDE**

## **PARTICIPANT HANDOUTS**

**By**

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### **Introduction**

This study guide provides suggestions and resources for leaders of the study of *Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness* (University of Tennessee Press, 2016). According to [the publisher](#), “This is the first full-length study of Methodist social teachings in over fifty years.” This book is timely for United Methodists in the U.S. and abroad, who continue to debate and disagree about standards of morality, particularly as expressed in this denomination’s document of Social Principles.

The Social Principles contains official United Methodist statements on many contentious social issues currently facing church and society. *Methodist Morals* provides historical background and context for these teachings. This study guide is designed to promote thoughtful and faithful reflection and dialogue, with the expectation that participants will bring a variety of opinions and experiences to the classroom. Each class member is encouraged to share relevant experiences and knowledge. Thus, it is important to observe some ground-rules for discussion:

### **Principles of Holy Conferencing<sup>1</sup>**

Every person is a child of God

Listen before speaking

Strive to understand from another’s point of view

Speak about issues, do not defame persons

Strive to accurately reflect the views of others

### **Use of this Study**

This study guide consists of two parts, the Leader’s Guide and the Participant Handouts. Leaders will need both. Throughout the study guide, page numbers refer to *Methodist Morals* and paragraph numbers refer to the *Book of Discipline 2012* (General Conference edition). Each session relates to one of the chapters in the book:

Session 1: From Social Creed to Social Principles (a study of Chapter 1)

Session 2: Methodist Law and Doctrine (a study of Chapter 2)

Session 3: Politics and Grace (a study of Chapter 3)

Session 4: Theological and Moral Learning ((a study of Chapter 4)

Session 5: Marriage ((a study of Chapter 6)

Session 6: Moral Leadership and Discernment (a study of Chapter 7)

Thus, the full six-week study will address the origin of the Social Principles; the nature of the Social Principles as doctrine or law; processes of decision making for moral standards;

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<sup>1</sup> Developed by the Northeastern Jurisdiction of the UMC in 2008.

considering the content of the Social Principles; changes especially in relation to divorce and marriage; and requirements for clergy as moral models and professionals. The study guide does not cover material in the Introduction, Chapters 5 and 8, and the Conclusion to *Methodist Morals*. Interested readers are, of course, encouraged to read and discuss those chapters, too.

Study groups will need a Bible and copies of *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Each participant will need a copy of *Methodist Morals* as well as the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church (UMC). The Social Principles are published in several formats: in the *Book of Discipline* (free [electronic edition](#)), in a booklet of the General Board of Church and Society, and online. Further articles and commentaries by the author are available at <https://darrylwstephens.com/>.

### **Additional Resources**

*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012*. Free [electronic edition](#).  
[Guide to General Conference 2016](#).

Podcast interview with Darryl W. Stephens, author of *Methodist Morals*. SEEK, the podcast of *United Methodist Insight*, Feb 22, 2016. Read adapted [transcript](#).

**METHODIST MORALS STUDY GUIDE**

**Participant Handout for STUDY SESSION 1: From Social Creed to Social Principles**

**FOCUS:** the historical roots of the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church

**OBJECTIVE:** Understand the Social Creeds and Social Principles as provisions for following the example and teachings of Jesus in our personal lives, our societies, the ministry of the church, and the world.

**SCRIPTURE:** Micah 6:8; Luke 4:16-19

**PRAYER:** O God, who created and then proclaimed that it was "good," you entrusted us with the care of the earth and our human relationships. We confess that in the "crowded ways of life," the goodness of life has been thwarted. We pray for a closer relationship with you and the wisdom, courage, discipline, and persistence to work for our words of good intention to become actions of reality.

**In the name of the one whom you sent to show us the way, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**DISCUSSION:**

**Moral Standards, EUBC**  
Church and Economic Life  
Community Life  
Family Life  
Moral and Social Conduct  
Racial and Cultural Relations  
World Order

**Social Creed, Methodist Church**  
Family  
Economic Life  
Church and General Welfare  
Human Rights  
Peace and World Order

*notes*

1908: \_\_\_\_\_

1939: \_\_\_\_\_

1968: \_\_\_\_\_

1972: \_\_\_\_\_

2008: \_\_\_\_\_

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**METHODIST MORALS STUDY GUIDE**

**Participant Handout for STUDY SESSION 2: Law and Doctrine**

**FOCUS:** the relation of the Social Principles to Methodist doctrine and law

**OBJECTIVE:** Distinguish between United Methodist doctrinal standards and Social Principles and understand their interrelatedness

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 22:34-40; I Corinthians 2:1-5

**PRAYER: O God, as we look at statements of doctrine and Social Principles of The United Methodist Church, give us discerning spirits to comprehend how these documents might inform our faith and actions. In the name of Jesus Christ who demonstrated by word and actions what it means for us to be Christian. Amen.**

**LITANY OF GRACE**

**LEADER:** We are captives and slaves to traditions and the cultures in which we live -- drawing daily salty water from the wells of self- indulgences to quench our thirst.

**RESPONSE: Christ's grace can provide our needs.**

**LEADER:** Engrained beliefs and self-righteousness make us sure of ourselves. How can we be open to listening to others out of love and acceptance?

**RESPONSE: Christ's grace can provide the right motivation.**

**LEADER:** Varying views and opinions imprison us, making us unable to leave the narrow confines of our perceptions. How can we be released?

**RESPONSE: Christ's grace can set us free to search for truth.**

**AMEN**

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## ARTICLES OF RELIGION

Article I--Of Faith in the Holy Trinity  
Article II--Of the Word, or Son of God, Who  
Was Made Very Man  
Article III--Of The Resurrection of Christ  
Article IV--Of the Holy Ghost  
Article V--Of the Sufficiency of the Holy  
Scripture for Salvation  
Article VI--Of The Old Testament  
Article VII--Of Original or Birth Sin  
Article VIII--Of Free Will  
Article IX--Of the Justification of Man  
Article X--Of Good Works  
Article XI--Of Works of Supererogation  
  
Article XII--Of Sin After Justification  
  
Article XIII--Of the Church  
Article XIV--Of Purgatory  
Article XV--Of Speaking in the Congregation  
in Such a Tongue as the People Understand  
Article XVI--Of the Sacraments  
Article XVII--Of Baptism  
Article XVIII--Of the Lord's Supper  
Article XIX--Of Both Kinds  
Article XX--Of the One Oblation of Christ  
Finished upon the Cross  
Article XXI--Of the Marriage of Ministers  
Article XXII--Of the Rites and Ceremonies  
of Churches  
Article XXIII--Of the Rulers of the United States  
Article XXIV--Of Christian Men's Goods  
Article XXV--Of a Christian Man's Oath  
[unnumbered] Of Sanctification  
[unnumbered] Of the Duty of Christians to  
the Civil Authority

## CONFESSION OF FAITH

Article I--God  
Article II-- Jesus Christ  
  
Article III-- The Holy Spirit  
Article IV--The Holy Bible  
Article V--The Church  
  
Article VI--The Sacraments  
Article VII--Sin and Free Will  
Article VIII--Reconciliation Through Christ  
Article IX--Justification and Regeneration  
Article X--Good Works  
Article XI--Sanctification and Christian  
Perfection  
Article XII--The Judgment and the Future  
State  
Article XIII--Public Worship  
Article XIV--The Lord's Day  
  
Article XV--The Christian and Property  
Article XVI--Civil Government

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**Participant Handout for STUDY SESSION 3: Politics and Grace**

**FOCUS:** the process of decision-making in The United Methodist Church regarding its teachings and practices, past and the present.

**OBJECTIVE:** Explore the relationship between democracy and moral discernment in the UMC.

**SCRIPTURE:** Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 12:28-31; John 14:15

**PRAYER:**

**Loving God, Open our minds and hearts to discern your will and ways for the living of these days. Speak to us from past experiences and present needs; teach us how to conference together to witness to your love for all humankind; and lead us by your Grace. Amen.**

**CLOSING UNISON PRAYER:** (Edited version of Psalm 86:11-13a)

**Teach us your ways, O God, that we may walk in your truth.  
Give us hearts totally committed to your ways.  
We give thanks to you, O Lord, our God, with all our beings.  
We praise you, for your faithful love toward us is awesome.**

**In the name of the Incarnated One, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

*notes*

means of grace \_\_\_\_\_

General Rules \_\_\_\_\_

Special Advices \_\_\_\_\_

Social Principles \_\_\_\_\_

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## **EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF HOLY CONFERENCING**

1. Every person is a child of God
2. Listen before speaking.
3. Strive to understand another's point of view.
4. Strive to reflect accurately the view of others.
5. Disagree without being disagreeable.
6. Speak about issues; do not defame people.
7. Pray, in silence or aloud before decisions.
8. Let prayer interrupt your busyness.

From *A STUDY GUIDE FOR CHURCHES AND GROUPS* by Bishop Sally Dyck,  
[http://mnumc-  
email.brtapp.com/files/eefiles/documents/holy\\_conferencing\\_study\\_guide\\_2012.pdf](http://mnumc-email.brtapp.com/files/eefiles/documents/holy_conferencing_study_guide_2012.pdf).





## Addressing Faith in and to the World

*This litany is based on the primary theological claims in the Social Principles (page 79).*

Group 1: All of creation is the Lord's

Group 2: and we as individuals, church and society are responsible for its stewardship.

Group 1: Every person is equally valuable in the sight of God,

Group 2: created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ.

Group 1: Community is important for nurturing the fullest potential in individuals,

Group 2: and each person deserves opportunity for full participation in church and society.

**ALL: God's grace is available to all.**

Group 1: The inherent dignity of all persons leads us to support basic human rights,

Group 2: including equal access to basic human needs.

Group 1: We are responsible to God for our economic systems and social and political life

Group 2: and hold governments responsible for the public interest.

Group 1: The church is committed to justice, equal opportunity, and equal rights for all people

Group 2: and is especially concerned about the protection of vulnerable populations from injustice, discrimination, and exploitation.

Group 1: The church supports the poor

Group 2: and opposes unjust distributions of wealth.

Group 1: The church supports the self-determination of peoples

Group 2: within a world community of full and equal membership.

**ALL: God's grace is available to all.**

## STATEMENTS OF ABSTINENCE FROM ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

### METHODIST CHURCH (para. 1820.C.1 in the 1964 *Discipline*)

We believe that the Christian principle of love for God and neighbor calls us to abstain from the use of alcoholic beverages and to minister to those victimized by their use. The use of beverage alcohol imperils the abundant life to which Christ calls us. This is especially true in an organized and mechanized society. Individuals and families are destroyed by its use. We join with men of good conscience who seek to overcome the social, economic, and moral waste which this indulgence has created. The Church must become a healing and redemptive fellowship for those who suffer because of beverage alcohol.

### EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH (para. 931 in the 1963 *Discipline*)

Science and human experience agree in condemning alcoholic beverages as useless, damning and injurious.

The manufacturing and vending of alcoholic liquors are contrary to the best interests of personal and social morality economy and welfare. Voluntary total abstinence from all intoxicants is the true ground of personal temperance, and complete legal prohibition of the traffic in alcoholic beverages is the duty of civil government.

The manufacture, sale and use of intoxicating liquors as beverage, the renting and leasing of property to be used for the manufacture or sale of such liquors, the signing of petitions for granting license, or the entering as bondsmen for persons engaged in the traffic in intoxicating liquors, are strictly prohibited.

### THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH (para. 162.L in the 2012 *Discipline*)

We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God's liberating and redeeming love for persons. We support abstinence from the use of illegal drugs. Since the use of illegal drugs, as well as illegal and problematic use of alcohol, is a major factor in crime, disease, death, and family dysfunction, we support educational programs as well as other prevention strategies encouraging abstinence from illegal drug use and, with regard to those who choose to continue alcoholic beverages judicious use with deliberate and intentional restraint, with Scripture a guide.

#### Question:

How does the United Methodist statement compare to the earlier witnesses regarding alcohol?



## ACTIVITY 1: Methodist Teachings on Marriage

1784 *Discipline* -- Persons who marry an unawakened person "either have a cross for life, or [are] turned back to perdition. The penalty was expulsion from church membership." (p. 127)

1792 *Discipline* -- Strict enforcement of this rule came to be considered an infringement on individual rights, and the rule was loosened to allow marriage to non-Methodists." (p. 127)

1798 *Discipline* -- Bishops Coke and Asbury offered an explanation of "unawakened" persons: "We are well assured that few things have been more pernicious to the work of God, than the marriage of the Children of God with the children of the world." (p. 128)

1804 *Discipline* -- Penalty for marrying an unawakened person reduced to six-month trial, p. 127

1933 -- United Brethren General Conference called upon pastors "to counsel with candidates for matrimony on 'eugenic mating, home ideals, sex regulations, rearing of children and personal adjustments.'" (p.131)

1934 -- Methodist Episcopal Church South added to the Social Creed the need for "instruction in preparation for marriage."

1940-1956 -- "We recommend state and national laws requiring a medical examination of both contracting parties and the refusal of a license to those unfitted physically or mentally by heredity or otherwise for the responsible estate of matrimony." (p. 132)

1964 -- Methodist Church -- "Mixed Marriages -- Religious convictions should be a strong tie in marriage. Recent research has emphasized the importance of common cultural and religious backgrounds as the foundations of successful marriage..." (p. 132)

1996 -- *Social Principles* included prohibition against same-sex unions.

2016 *Social Principles* statement on Marriage (para. 161.B): "We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman."

### Questions:

- What are some of the differing moral concerns about marriage in different generations of Methodists?
- What would it be like to live under the moral expectations of past generations?
- How do past Methodist teachings on marriage equip the present generation to develop a theological response to the US Supreme Court's ruling on same sex marriage?

## ACTIVITY 2: Methodist Teachings on Divorce and Remarriage

1856 Methodist Episcopal Church tried to include Jesus' teachings about divorce (based on Matthew 5:32-32) as church law, but no official action was taken.

1867 – 1877 Evangelical Association and United Brethren Church first speak against divorce at their General Conferences.

1884 Ruling made by the Methodist Episcopal Church -- "No divorce, except for adultery, shall be regarded by the Church as lawful, and no Minister shall solemnize marriage in any case where there is a divorced wife or husband living; but this Rule shall not be applied to the innocent party to a divorce for the cause of adultery, nor to divorced parties seeking to be reunited in marriage." (p. 129) This statement remained basically unchanged until the 1920s and was the basis for teachings through the 1950s.

1908 Episcopal Address of the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church "The consecutive polygamy permitted by divorce laws of some of our states is a disgrace to our country." (p. 130)

1910 – 1916 Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South both called for uniform divorce laws. In 1916, the MEC supported a proposed federal "Uniform Marriage Act."

1940 --"No minister shall solemnize the marriage of a divorced person whose wife or husband is living and unmarried but this rule shall not apply to the innocent person when it is clearly established by competent testimony that the true cause for divorce was adultery or other vicious conditions which through mental or physical peril invalidates the marriage vow."

1960 --Requirement for minister solemnizing marriage: "when he has satisfied himself by careful counseling that the a) divorced person is sufficiently aware of the factors leading to the failure of the previous marriage (b) the divorced person is sincerely preparing to make the proposed marriage truly Christian and c) sufficient time has elapsed for adequate preparation and counseling."

1972 The UMC stated, "we recognize divorce and the right of divorced persons to remarry."

1984 – UMC stated, "When marriage partners even after thoughtful consideration and counseling are estranged beyond reconciliation, we recognize divorce as regrettable but recognize the right of divorced persons to remarry."

2012 -- *SOCIAL PRINCIPLES* statement (p. 23). *Note that the 2016 General Conference amended the wording under the section on Divorce to read: "The church must be on the forefront of premarital, marital and postmarital counseling in order to create and preserve healthy relationships ~~strong marriages.~~"*

### Questions

- How have Methodists changed their views on divorce over the years?
- General Conference 2016 changed the wording from "strong marriages" to healthy relationships in the section on Divorce. What other relationships created by (or within) a marriage continue to exist even after a marriage has ended?



## Past Statements on Moral Standards for Clergy

1939 Beginning with the newly formed Methodist Church, church law on divorce was relaxed to permit remarriage of divorced person for conditions that involved mental or physical cruelty or physical peril. However, clergy could still be tried for maladministration for “solemnizing the marriage of a divorced person.” (p.152)

1947 The Evangelical United Brethren Church *Discipline*: "No person shall be licensed to preach who is divorced, or who uses tobacco or alcoholic beverages in any form, or who is indifferent to his financial obligations." (p. 147)

1960 The Methodist Church revised its rule about clergy conducting remarriages of divorced persons: “In view of the seriousness with which the Scriptures and the Church regard divorce a minister may solemnize the marriage of a divorced person only when he has satisfied himself by careful counseling that (a) the divorced person is sufficiently aware of the factor leading to the failure of the previous marriage, (b) the divorced person is sincerely preparing to make the proposed marriage truly Christian and (c) sufficient time has elapsed for adequate preparation and counseling.”

1964 The Methodist Church *Discipline*: “abstinence from all indulgences including alcoholic beverages and tobacco.” (p. 147)

1972 Social Principles: “we recognize divorce and the right of divorced persons to remarry.”

### Questions:

- What major shifts in moral standards occurred between the time of John Wesley and 1972?
- Why do you think these changes were made?

## *TIMELINE OF ACTIONS RELATED TO HOMOSEXUALITY*

- 1972 General Conference declared: "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."
- 1982 The Judicial Council ruled that each annual conference must exercise its own discretion regarding the ordination of candidates with the same-sex orientation. (p. 155 of text)
- 1984 General Conference added the requirement "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness" for candidates for ordination.
- 1992 General Conference added a new paragraph to the Social Principles, (recommended by the Committee to Study Homosexuality), affirming the basic rights and liberties of homosexual persons in committed, same-sex partnerships
- 1996 Statement was added to the *Discipline* "...self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church." (Par.304.3, *Discipline*)
- 2000/2002 Germany Central Conference adapted the Social Principles to read "[a] majority in the church interprets the Bible in such a way that it cannot approve of the practice of homosexuality."
- 2004 General Conference amended the list of possible chargeable offences against clergy to specifically prohibit "immorality including but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness to not faithful in a heterosexual marriage" which barred non- celibate homosexuals from the clergy. Also added "Conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies."
- 2000, 2008, 2012, and 2016 -- the General Conference repeatedly rejected statements officially acknowledging disagreement in the church about this issue in spite of the fact that the 1992 Committee to Study Homosexuality reported to General Conference that there is disagreement in the church about homosexuality being incompatible with Christian teaching.
- 2008 General Conference rejected petitions identifying the "practice" of "transgenderism" as incompatible with Christian teaching and adding "identifying as transgendered" as a chargeable offense for clergy.
- 2012 "For the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world and the most effective witness to the Christian gospel, and in consideration of the influence of an ordained minister on the lives of other persons both within and outside the Church. The Church expects those who seek ordination to make a complete dedication of themselves to the highest ideals of the Christian life. To this end, they agree to exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to bodily health, mental and emotional maturity, integrity in all personal relationships, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, social responsibility, and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God." (Par. 306)



## CLERGY AS ETHICAL PROFESSIONALS

**Definition of sexual abuse:** "Sexual abuse is a form of sexual misconduct and occurs when a person within a ministerial role of leadership engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, coworker or volunteer." (p. 160)

### Timeline

1988 Sexual harassment" defined and named as a sin by General Conference. It was added to the list of chargeable offenses for clergy and every annual conference in the United States was required to "develop clear policies and procedures related to sexual harassment, establishing grievance procedures for victims and penalties for offenders." (p.160)

1992 Every annual conference, general agency, and UM related institution was required to have a sexual harassment policy and to forward the policies to the Commission on Women (p. 161)

1996 Dating relationship is incompatible with a ministerial relationship affirmed by General Conference. However, Annual Conference policies vary in their statements (pp. 162, 163)

1996 Child Abuse was added as a chargeable offense in the *Discipline* (Par. 2702 l. (g))

2008 "...the use of pornography in church programs on church premises or with church property by persons in ministerial roles (lay and clergy) is a form of sexual misconduct, a chargeable offense for laity and clergy." was adopted by General Conference as a Resolution. (p. 164)

### Questions for discussion:

- How can a clergy person distinguish between personal and professional life in moral situations?
- What ethical expectations do you have for your pastor that you do not have for lay members of your congregation?