

MAKING CONNECTIONS FOR IDENTITY AND MINISTRY APPENDIX—
Developments Since 1996

Since the original publication of this study guide in 1997 and its revision in 1998, the subject of baptism and church membership has continued to be a live and unresolved issue in The United Methodist Church. Fortunately, the occasion of a third printing of this book affords the opportunity to address the present situation. The issue of the relationship between baptism and church membership has a long history in American Methodism. I have traced this through the periods of denominational development in *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America* (Abingdon, 1992). Some of the tension is suggested by an article in an 1843 Congregationalist paper ridiculing the Methodists: "But how a person can join a class which is part of a church, and be admitted to the most holy ordinances of the church, and still not be a member of the church, is hard to be understood." Our situation today is fully as confused and confusing.

The 1996 General Conference adopted the document entitled *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* as an official interpretive statement for The United Methodist Church on the meaning of the sacrament and its relation to other rites of the church. This statement was printed in *The Book of Resolutions* in 1996 (pp. 716-735) and 2000 (pp. 798-817) and in the gray sidebar sections of this study guide. None of the Judicial Council decisions involve this document or have any effect upon it. *By Water and the Spirit* remains the denomination's authorized interpretation of the theology and practices of baptism. It can and should continue to function as both authentic and authoritative. (For clarity, I use the title *By Water and the Spirit* to refer to the official baptismal statement and the term *study guide* to refer to this publication, which includes both commentary and leader helps.)

A major part of the work of every General Conference involves the revision of *The Book of Discipline*, which contains provisions for the structure and governance of the church, as well as historical and doctrinal material. Legislative actions of each General Conference are reflected in *The Book of Discipline*, which is published a few months after the conclusion of the conference. The Committee to Study Baptism and the staff of the General Board of Discipleship prepared a list of points in the *Discipline* where changes are needed to implement the theological and practical effects of *By Water and the Spirit* in the life of the church. This was a tedious and painstaking process involving the perusal of the entire *Discipline*. These legislative changes were proposed to and adopted by the 1996 General Conference.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, some points in the 1992 *Discipline* that needed change to conform to *By Water and the Spirit* were not cited and proposed to the General Conference for approval. One of these was the focus of the case that reached the Judicial Council for its session in October 1997. The Minnesota Annual Conference submitted a Petition for Declaratory Decision on the membership provisions of the 1996 *Discipline*. While a series of inquiries was included, the pivotal question was number fifteen: "Does the 1996 *Discipline*, in making all baptized persons, including infants, members of The United Methodist Church, violate the Constitution ¶4, which says that persons are eligible for membership 'when they take the appropriate vows'?"

The constitutional paragraph referred to in the 1996 *Discipline* is "Article IV of Division One—General," which is entitled "Inclusiveness of the Church." It read as follows:

The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. Therefore all persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, to participate in its programs, and, when they take the appropriate vows, to be admitted into its membership in any local church in the connection. In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition.

In "Decision Number 811," effective on October 25, 1997, the Judicial Council ruled that the answer to the question posed is "yes." Regardless of theological understandings of baptism, "no change which abolishes the vow requirement can be legislated without amending the Constitution."

The practical effect of this decision was that:

The 1996 legislation which constituted amendments to the existing membership provisions of the 1992 *Discipline* are unconstitutional and invalid, the 1992 *Discipline* relating to membership categories "preparatory membership" and "full membership" ¶¶216.4, 222-224, 232.1 and 2 (1992 *Discipline*) remain as the governing law of The United Methodist Church. . . . [L]ocal church membership rolls of The United Methodist Church [are to] be kept and maintained in accordance with ¶232 of the 1992 *Discipline*, and . . . the baptism and membership practices and polity shall be continued in accordance...[with] the 1992 *Discipline*. (From Decision No. 811 of the Judicial Council)

In the attempt to resolve the contradictions and confusion, the General Board of Discipleship in 1998 and 1999 tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Judicial Council to approve a procedure which would expedite the process by allow implementing legislation to be passed by the same General Conference which proposed a constitutional amendment. Such legislation would not have gone into effect until after final ratification of the amendment.

The GBOD brought to the 2000 General Conference numerous petitions designed to move the church toward resolution of the conflicts between the membership provisions of the 1996 *Book of Discipline*, the baptismal ritual, *By Water and the Spirit*, and the Judicial Council's rulings. In Decision No. 884, issued during the meeting of the General Conference, the Judicial Council ruled that no petitions for changes of parts of the *Discipline* which had been ruled unconstitutional could be considered. The legislative petitions were then withdrawn by the GBOD.

More significantly, the 2000 General Conference approved, by the required two-thirds majority, amendments to ¶¶ 4, 14, 30, 34, and 42 of the church constitution (as well as other amendments related to different subjects). These amendments were submitted to the annual conferences and, as certified by the Council of Bishops, received a two-thirds affirmative vote. Changes to ¶¶ 14, 30, 34, and 42 are largely to clarify language. The crucial amendment is a revision of ¶ 4 of the constitution, which now reads:

The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection. In the United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition.

This amendment now provides the constitutional foundation upon which legislation will be brought to the 2004 General Conference.

The major change needing to be reflected in the legislation is the elimination of language referring to "preparatory" and "full" categories of membership. In accord with *By Water and the Spirit*, all baptized people, regardless of age, become baptized members of the local church. This action expresses the understanding of baptism in mainstream Christian history throughout the centuries. Baptism is initiation and incorporation into the universal church of Jesus Christ, The United Methodist Church, and the local congregation. When baptized people profess their faith publicly and are confirmed, they become "professing" members. This emphasis upon profession of faith is consistent with the Wesleyan tradition. When people are capable of responding to divine grace in repentance and faith, they need to take public vows of commitment to Christ and to faithful discipleship.

Practical issues of church polity need to be addressed along with theological concerns. Representatives of the General Board of Discipleship are working closely with the Official Forms and Records Committee of the General Council on Finance and Administration to develop appropriate recording materials which will be clear and easily useable. Because membership figures are used as the basis of apportionments and representation in some annual conferences, these statistics should reflect only the number of professing members.

The approval of such legislation will resolve the contradictions which have existed among

- 1) baptismal rituals, developed through a long process of study and revision, that clearly affirm that baptism at any age makes a person a member of the local church, The United Methodist Church, and the church of Christ universal;
- 2) *By Water and the Spirit*, an official interpretive statement on the meaning of baptism that was developed through a similar protracted process;

3) stipulations in the *Discipline* of a system of determining and accounting that is based on a sharply different interpretation of the relationship between baptism and membership.

Finally, the church's theological understandings will be expressed in its polity and records.

The United Methodist Church needs to get on with its mission of making Christians and redeeming the world. May the process of resolving our present confusion serve as an opportunity for deeper study and reflection, exciting teaching and learning, and ever more faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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