

# **“LIVING OUR PROMISE”**

## **Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors. The people of The United Methodist Church®**

### ***Overview***

The promise of “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.” from the people of The United Methodist Church is being adopted and lived out in our almost 36,000 congregations in the United States. It was created by Igniting Ministry at United Methodist Communications as part of the denomination’s first media campaign.

The promise was developed after analysis of The United Methodist Church’s theological history, as expressed in various sections of *The Book of Discipline*, the denomination’s official beliefs and policies. Extensive research helped identify genuine expressions of yearning by people seeking spiritual renewal and connection within an affirming community. Consultations with leading theologians in the church yielded possible thematic directions, which were tested to ensure integrity and the certainty that the messages developed would address persons open to our values and emphases.

### ***The Development of The Theme***

Although our communications strategy is complex, in short, we have used the following process in conjunction with our advertising agency partner to develop and scrutinize the “open hearts” theme:

- We commissioned The Barna Group to help us identify audience needs and ways to address them effectively.
- We had face-to-face meetings with George Gallup and George Barna and used data from the Gallup Organization, Percept and The Buntin Group to further refine our focus.
- We tested potential messages with focus groups made up of individuals from the audience profile.
- We conferred with a panel of theologians to identify theological issues.
- We reviewed *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, specifically Part II, section 104, “Our Theological Task”; Part III, “The Ministry of All Christians”; and Part IV, “Social Principles.”
- We collaborated with staff of the General Board of Discipleship to develop biblically sound training modules for welcoming and hospitality.
- We partnered with a behavioral psychologist to gain an understanding of the audience’s needs and emotions and the role the church might play in addressing those needs.
- We presented the promise to groups throughout the church, including bishops and communications professionals, for comment and critique.

### ***The Audience We Are Reaching***

The 25- to 54-year-old seekers we attempt to address, and the communications environment we use to reach them, are also enormously complex. The evangelistic approach we have taken identifies the audience's spiritual concerns and needs, using ordinary language that places us on common ground. We've discovered that, because many in this audience are unfamiliar with the language of faith and others have had negative experiences with religious organizations, the use of traditional religious language can block communication. Our goal has been to discover and address their deeper needs and to offer The United Methodist Church as a community in which they can experience nurture and connection in the body of Christ.

In our independent research work with The Barna Group, we presented to spiritual seekers 18 attributes of the denomination and asked them if those attributes motivated them to attend. Then we pooled the strongest responses into three groups. Those groups were finally designated as hearts, minds and doors.

Throughout our research we discovered the importance of positioning the church as a caring, redemptive community of faith rather than as a building or institution. For this reason, our advertising messages include biblically themed, yet highly personal, invitations of hope, healing and spiritual comfort.

### ***The Environment Of Our Messages***

Our invitations are being extended in a communications environment that includes competing claims for attention and commitment, and conflicting values. In his book *Colossus: How the Corporation Changed America*, Jack Beatty cites the fear of billionaire/philosopher George Soros "that we are advancing from a market economy toward a 'market society' in which everything is for sale; and the corporation through assiduous billions spent on conditioning the American Dream is taking us there." (Jack Beatty, ed., *Colossus: How the Corporation Changed America*, Broadway Books: New York, 2001, p. xiv.)

This market society defines human life, more often than not, in material terms. It is life commodified. The conditioning Soros mentions is the promise that materialism can fulfill individual wants and needs. But it cannot. It fails in doing so, leaving some with a "hole in the soul," as one seeker said.

The messages developed seek to invite people to enter into a relationship within a loving, nurturing community to grow in God's love as revealed in Jesus Christ. We are clear that advertising can extend the invitation; spiritual growth and discipleship occur within the community of the local church.

### ***Wesleyan Heritage***

The promise of "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors." reflects our solid biblical foundation as a church and our theological alignment with John Wesley, our founder.

John Wesley was committed to using the common language of the people to reach those with searching hearts, including the poor and marginalized in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England. He and his brother Charles used the music of the day, including tunes from the pubs of England, to reach out and welcome people into a relationship with the church.

Wesley taught a commitment to openness and strongly preached against exclusivity. He vigorously opposed slavery, visited those in prison and collected alms for the poor. His legacy lives on today in a variety of ways.

The promise of “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.” is not limited to any one issue, but analogous of the whole denomination. For example, the people of The United Methodist Church:

- have a strong commitment to an open communion table, recognizing that we are all God’s children. All people are invited to the Eucharist, regardless of ethnicity, church membership or sexual orientation. The United Methodist Church offers perhaps the most open access to the Eucharist in all of Christendom.
- stress an ecumenical spirit of cooperation and dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian faiths;
- embrace the ordination of women and clergy appointments that cross racial lines.
- endorse a set of Social Principles that are reviewed every four years in the light of the latest scientific evidence and spiritual insight from clergy, laypersons and theologians.
- are dedicated to inclusiveness. In a time when many Christian groups and people are viewed as being exclusive, The United Methodist Church works to be more faithful to Jesus by encouraging its members and friends to demonstrate a spirit of welcome.

*The Book of Discipline* defines inclusiveness:

*“Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world. Thus, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination. The mark of an inclusive society is one in which all persons are open, welcoming, fully accepting, and supporting of all other persons, enabling them to participate fully in the life of the church, the community, and the world. A further mark of inclusiveness is the setting of church activities in facilities accessible to persons with disabilities.”*  
*(The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church - 2000, ¶138, page 93)*

### ***The Inclusiveness of The United Methodist Church***

United Methodist congregations are called to welcome all persons into our congregations. United Methodists believe all persons are children of God. *The Book of Discipline* states:

*"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." (The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church – 2000, ¶4, page 22)*

Although we welcome all persons, the *Discipline* states that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, and does not allow for the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals.

However, many homosexual persons worship in United Methodist congregations each Sunday and feel welcome. Many local churches have special ministries to gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

Inclusiveness is also reflected in United Methodism's emphasis that some aspects of our shared humanity will always be more important than our differences.

### ***Unity Amid Disagreement***

The church recognizes that living in a pluralistic society means that disagreement is inevitable — on goals, styles and aims of the church, and on our understanding of the nature and authority of Scripture. Dialogue is encouraged on all theological and social issues.

Disagreement does not mean division. As is true in any family, The United Methodist Church includes a wide variety of opinions on many subjects, but a strong commitment to family unity. That was demonstrated clearly at the 2004 General Conference, when the top legislative body of the denomination adopted a statement that makes clear our unity:

*"As United Methodists we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and affirm our commitment to work together for our common mission of making disciples throughout the world." (2004 General Conference, Pittsburgh)*

A number of theological and social issues continue to be discussed within The United Methodist Church. The dialogue regarding the role and the question of ordination of gay and lesbian persons in our church exemplifies our efforts to remain in conversation.

### ***Our Service to The World***

Our open hearts are evident not only in our shared theology but also in our service to the world. *The Book of Discipline* states:

*"We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining **heart** and hand, we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing." (The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church – 2000, ¶101, page 47)*

Our open minds focus on servanthood:

*“The heart of Christian ministry is Christ’s ministry of outreaching love. Christian ministry is the expression of the **mind** and mission of Christ by a community of Christians that demonstrates a common life of gratitude and devotion, witness and service, celebration and discipleship. All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment.” (The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church – 2000, ¶125, page 89)*

Our open doors allow for a variety of understandings within a single faith community:

*“While the Church considers its doctrinal affirmations a central feature of its identity and restricts official changes to a constitutional process, the Church encourages serious reflection across the theological spectrum.” (The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church – 2000, ¶104, page 75)*

### ***Acting As If ...***

We recognize that not all United Methodist congregations equally open their hearts, minds and doors to welcome people. The call to live out this promise is a worthy goal, set high. And the achievement of “open hearts” is subjectively measured. The test of when a church truly lives the promise is perhaps best judged by those it serves.

Furthermore, congregations do not suddenly obtain open hearts, minds and doors. It can be understood as a process of “acting as if ...” We teach this principle, grounded in the life of John Wesley, in Igniting Ministry welcoming training

Three days before his Aldersgate experience, Wesley attended a special healing service. It was a time of a personal faith crisis. Peter Böhler, an important spiritual influence and friend of Wesley, said to him: “Preach faith until you have it. And then because you have it, you will preach faith.” Wesley used these words in other instances in his journals, perhaps as a reminder to himself when he felt the ebbs and flows of faith, to “act as if” he had the faith he was preaching.

The Book of James uses the image of the tongue as an important metaphor in this theme. James likens the tongue to the rudder of a ship. Controlling a ship means controlling its rudder. James tells us that the tongue defines the whole body. In other words, the things we say affect our whole being. What we say influences who we are and what we will become. What we say and how we act hardwires us for a vital ministry as United Methodists.

We know that, for United Methodists, the words “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.” come to life as we make them reality through our words, our behaviors and our relationships.

### ***Final Thoughts***

Finally, the campaign is evolving. However miniscule it is when compared to the assiduous billions of corporate advertising, it is the most complex and extensive effort of its kind by a religious denomination in recent memory. It is a courageous step by The United Methodist Church to engage with persons in the electronic culture in a sensitive and constructive way. It entails risk -- the risk that we will not communicate effectively enough, or that we will not embody community in a way that incorporates seekers into our midst.

But it is a risk worth taking, carefully, prayerfully and with sensitivity to the presence of God in the culture, calling us to speak words of comfort, healing and new life. Living the promise together can rekindle our own understanding of ourselves as a faith community and reinvigorate our compassionate concern for all God's children.

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For further reading and biblical reflection:

“Beyond 30 Seconds: Developing a Welcoming Congregation”

A seven-session video curriculum for small groups that includes biblical study, discussion and life assignments. Order at [www.IgnitingMinistry.org](http://www.IgnitingMinistry.org) or call (877) 281-6535.

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