

Our United Methodist Heritage Leaders Guide
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Produced by United Methodist Communications

Introduction

Our United Methodist Heritage is the story of our life as a church. It is a four-century survey of what we have been through—from the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century to the 1968 United Methodist Conference. Discovery, despair, renewal, division, reconciliation, adventure, dedication—it is the story of the people who have built our church and, thereby, the story of the way God has worked through their lives.

The story is told in two parts:

PART ONE—THE FOUNDERS (approximately 16 minutes) is a biographical introduction to the men and women in whose lives may be found the origins and early development of The United Methodist Church:

- Life in late medieval times
- Martin Luther
- John Wesley
- Susanna Wesley
- The Wesleyan revival in England
- The first Methodists in America
- Beginnings of the Evangelical United Brethren Church
- Philip Otterbein
- Martin Boehm
- Jacob Albright
- Summary

PART TWO—TRAVELS ON A LONG ROAD (approximately 16 minutes) continues the story with the American Revolution and shows the organizational growth of the churches of United Methodism, their ministry to the early U.S. frontier and their worldwide growth through two centuries of mission and eventual unification:

- I. New churches for a new nation: American Revolution, Asbury, Coke, Christmas Conference, Otterbein, Boehm, Albright.
- II. Ministry on a moving frontier: Asbury, circuit riders, The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, The Evangelical Association, camp meetings.
- III. The churches divide and separate: Divisions among the Methodists.
- IV. A century of missions and social outreach: Missions, the social gospel, education.
- V. The reuniting of people and organizations: Participation of laity, women, youth, church union, formation of The United Methodist Church (1968).

Thus the story of *Our United Methodist Heritage* is largely chronological and the time span is divided by the DVD into two parts. It is a story packed with names, facts and dates—but behind these details a deeper affirmation rings clear: The United Methodist Church lives and serves

today because the men and women of our past took seriously God's work in their lives, and responded and reached out to the least and the lost, giving themselves totally to ministry.

It is an exciting and inspiring story. You are invited to share it with others.

Suggested Uses

The DVD is recommended for use in two general ways—celebration and cerebration. That is, it makes an excellent resource for a colorful, moving, joyous affirmation of our church's past and what this means for our present and our future. And it is an excellent tool for a concentrated study of the people, movements and events of this history and ways God has been at work in the church.

The DVD is appropriate for use with older elementary school children, youth, and adults—or any combination of these. In particular you will want to use *Our United Methodist Heritage* in some of these settings:

- The church school—especially with units on the church, church history, biographies of church leaders
- Confirmation preparation groups—perhaps in a joint meeting of young people and their parents
- Adult membership classes—especially with adults transferring from outside The United Methodist Church
- Local church anniversary celebrations—thus linking local history with our history as a denomination
- Ecumenical gatherings—thus sharing our United Methodist background and gifts with Christ's whole church
- Fellowship group programs—that is, regular meetings of youth groups, United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, older adult groups and the like
- Special conferences—youth or adult meetings on the district, city annual conference or state levels
- Innovative worship services—perhaps using one part of the DVD as the “sermon” portion of the service
- Family or intergenerational settings—where all ages can join in celebrating or learning about our heritage
- Teacher training—thus enriching your education leaders in our common history
- Charge conferences—in order to view the life and mission of the charge in relation to the church as a whole, past and present
- Story hours—using the visuals during informal times to tell children about one person or event

This DVD would be especially helpful, along with other resources, in a major celebration-and-learning event of several sessions' duration. Imagine a six-week, intergenerational exploration of our past and future—say, on Sunday nights or Wednesday nights—using different parts of the DVD each week, with different activity centers for all ages.

In any case, with *Our United Methodist Heritage* on your church library shelf, you can come back to this resource again and again, using it in different ways with different groups. All it takes is imagination—and some pretty clear objectives:

Possible Purposes

Once you have in mind the group and occasion for using the resource you will want to sharpen your purposes. What do you really want to accomplish? If you can state your objectives clearly you can then decide which part of the DVD to use and with what related activities for learning or celebration. Here are some possibilities:

- To help persons understand the men and women who made our history: their times, their background, their Christian experience, their ministry. (See activities #1, 6, 7 below).
- To help persons grasp the chronology of our history: the sequence of people, events and stages in our church's development. (See activities #3, 5, 10.)
- To help persons grasp the geography of our history—to identify the places where major events took place. (See activity #2.)
- To help persons identify the characteristic emphases of our church through the centuries. (See activities #8, 9, 11.)
- To help persons reflect on how God has been at work in the life of our church and how people responded to God's Spirit. (See activities #5, 6, 7, 8.)
- To help persons relate our history as a church to major stages in United States history. (See activity #4.)
- To help persons feel an enthusiastic sense of participation in our church, past, present and future. (See activities #12, 13.)
- To stimulate persons to imagine and help create the church of the future. (See activity #12.)
- To invite persons to renewed commitment to Christ and rededication to Christ's church and its mission. (See activity #13.)

You might check off some of the above purposes which you hope to achieve, consider carefully the people you will have and their needs and then state your objectives for using *Our United Methodist Heritage* in your own words.

A Plan for Using *Our United Methodist Heritage*

The temptation in using an audio-visual resource is simply to show-and-discuss. But if your objectives are educational in nature, you will want to make more effective use of the DVD, including such elements as these in your plan:

- Motivating learners, arousing curiosity and interest
- Setting objectives with the learners: How do we want to grow?
- Raising specific research questions: What do we want to know?
- Deciding what we will watch for in the DVD
- Viewing the DVD
- Studying other resources
- Summarizing learning in some creative way
- Sharing learning with others

Thirteen Group Activities

You have probably already imagined several activities for your group. Here are 13 quick ideas, appropriate for occasions of celebration or learning or both:

1. **People:** You might help participants focus on the lives of individual men and women and what they contributed to the church: Susanna Wesley, Philip Otterbein, Francis Asbury, Thomas Webb. Using the DVD as a start, they could gather more information from other resources, then perhaps write and illustrate a biography, or create a gallery of portraits of heroes (each with a caption), or dramatize imaginary conversations between two or three of the old timers. You may need to help your group get beyond facts and dates to the qualities of each person, the crises points, the relationship to God, the motivating force, the contributions made.
2. **Places:** Some leaders may want to explore the geography of our denomination. Just where did Luther, Wesley, Otterbein and Boehm originate? What were the routes of immigration to America and the new centers of church life here? Where did the circuit riders travel? Where were the camp meetings? This suggests some careful research, followed by map making. But again, help participants get beyond the facts of geography to its meaning: The places and the nature of the challenge in each place helped to shape the new church—and in turn the church began to shape life on the new frontiers.
3. **Time:** Other learners may be interested in dates, in the sequence of events through time. The DVD is helpful in pinpointing some crucial dates which are superimposed over the picture backgrounds at intervals, but these are all too easily forgotten. Using the DVD and other resources, a group might try to set down events in order, creating a time line as they go. If desired, they could track the various divisions and reunions of the church as is done in several scenes of the DVD. Help the group go beyond mere chronology to identify some of the major stages of the church's development.
4. **Church and nation:** Especially appropriate for use of the DVD in relation to U.S. holidays, would be some effort to relate our church's history to U.S. history: the colonist, the Revolution, the westward migration, the Civil War, industrialization, international responsibility and so forth. The DVD begins to suggest these relationships, but other resources would be needed. The place and time activities (see activities 2 and 3 above) could contribute to this. Perhaps participants could chart in parallel columns, from generation to generation, chief ways in which the nation influenced the church, and vice versa. Help the learners see the value of a church which stands independent of the nation and yet is critically related to it.
5. **Turning points:** Here and there in our history are events upon which all that followed hinged, turning points without which our church and our lives would be different now. A more mature group might view both parts of the DVD with the intention of identifying the most significant of these and then use other resources to examine them in more detail. For fun they might speculate how history would have been different without one of another of these events, or try to rank them according to importance (and defend their rankings). More seriously, they might list contributing factors for each crucial event and significant consequences of each.
6. **God at work:** Some of the above activities, especially "People" and "Turning points", might be carried further as you help participants theologize about them. How do we see God at work in the life of John Wesley, in the meeting of Otterbein and Boehm, in the commitment of the circuit rider, in the divisions over slavery and so forth? This, of course, is interpretative and requires some ability to relate

theology to everyday life. Opinions will differ as to how God works in the affairs of people. Attention should be given to the facts first, using primary sources where possible: How did the people at the time interpret the working of the Spirit? Only then, in faith and humility, can we claim to describe God's Action.

7. **Renewal:** Now and then, both in individual lives and in the corporate life of the church, there were times of vivid conversion and renewal. It is startling, in this day when Christian growth is so often a gradual movement, to see how many of our ancestors in the church went through a dramatic turn-about and received a rich new assurance of faith. A learning group might focus on this phenomenon, again studying original records where possible. As with "Turning points," above, group members might list contributing factors and consequences as well as trying to become sensitive to the conversion event itself. This research might well prompt examination of life today, both individual and corporate, and the possible need for and nature of conversion.
8. **Grace and faith:** Many theological themes might be isolated for study, but perhaps the Protestant and Wesleyan message about God's grace and our faith is most significant of all. A mature study group might well view the DVD with an eye toward following this theme throughout our history, and then study other sources to develop this stream more fully.
9. **Outreach:** Another persistent motif in our heritage is the passionate effort to reach the least and the lost with the good news of God's love. It seems that few of our ancestors spent much time with the comfortable. At least those we recall were there serving the prisoner, the miner, the frontiersman, the sick, the orphaned. One of your activities might be to document this through viewing the DVD and searching other resources, and then perhaps to compare the findings with the shape of the church's mission today. You might picture or dramatize answers to this question: To whom and where would Wesley be preaching today? Or Albright? Or Asbury?
10. **Separation/reunion:** The 19th century was characterized by divisions in the church, and the 20th by reconciliation and reunion. One group activity would be to explore these periods, to discover motives and causes in each case, as well as the results, both positive and negative. The time line at the front of this guide might be a helpful aid. Outside resources will be necessary in order to fully understand these movements. A group of learners might trace what has happened to the several offshoots from the Wesleyan churches which have not become part of the United Methodist Church—the Salvation Army, the Nazarenes, the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Free Methodist Churches, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, AME Zion Church, the Southern Methodists, some Evangelical United Brethren churches and so on. This group might also do some theologizing: Is God at work both in separation and reunion? What is God's ultimate will regarding our division of Christ's body?
11. **Our characteristics:** Many of the above activities suggest characteristics which may be typical of our denomination as it has developed through the centuries. One group activity is simply to describe the distinctive features of The United Methodist Church.
12. **Futuring:** The DVD portrays our United Methodist heritage up through the Uniting Conference of 1968. But what of the future? "The past is prologue." What does our past suggest for our future? What do our turning points and church characteristics auger for the church of tomorrow? You might have a group of persons do some speculating about The United Methodist Church. Of course, this could be a matter of sheer fantasy, and that would be fun. But you might also urge persons to do this with some discipline: "Given such-and-such in our heritage, I predict so-and-so." Then

you might shift the focus from prediction to intervention: Help persons describe the plausible future church which they really want to bring into being—and how they would do it. If desired, these visions could be pictured, dramatized or shared in other creative ways. Best of all, they could be acted upon! Which brings us to commitment, the final activity below.

13. Commitment: Whatever the setting for your use of the DVD, it may be fitting to move into an activity stressing commitment before your event is concluded. This could take many forms: a group-made litany, one-to-one sharing, letters to ourselves, stewardship decisions, a resolution to your council on ministries, the organization of a new missional effort and so on. Perhaps it is best not to plan this too far in advance—but keep it in mind as your group wrestles with our heritage. Keep asking them the “So what?” questions. Be alert to help individuals and the group as a whole use their response to our church’s past as an opening for creating a new future, for themselves and the church. And then help them make commitment necessary to live into that future.

A special note for teachers of older elementary children:

This resource has been designed and written for viewing by any age group from older elementary on up. But, as with any comprehensive treatment of church history, there may be a few concepts in the narration and visuals which are difficult for some children to grasp. You may wish to note these as you preview the DVD and then raise them as discussion points for your group after viewing.

Theological ideas such as atonement, free grace and salvation are directly related to the personal experiences of our church’s founders and of Christians today. Younger viewers may need some special help in comprehending these and thinking about them in terms appropriate to their own experience.

You may also wish to explore with children their understanding of the events of personal conversion which so many of our church fathers and mothers experienced in the moments of new beginning in their lives (See activity #7 above). And you will want to be prepared to explain to younger viewers the meaning of a few items of terminology from an earlier era, such as casting of lots and temperance which may be unfamiliar to them.

Previewing

Now with these suggestions in mind you will want to take time to preview both parts of the DVD. You might want to invite a small planning group to join you in previewing. Share with them some of the ideas from this guide and then, as you watch, take a few notes on how you might use these tools. Then you will be ready to begin in earnest to . . .

- Define your purposes
- Choose your group
- Set your learning goals
- Select some group activities

. . . and continue with the planning of the details: time and place, leadership, publicity and so on.

PRINTED RESOURCES

Here is a listing of reference books on our denominational heritage. Some of these are now out of print.

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