

Sermon Series

A sermon series to use this fall or early 2023, as you look forward to what's next for your congregation:

Week 1: **Sinners—Together**

Luke 15:1-2

Jesus's determination to save sinners would be challenge enough for us sinners without Jesus's equally determined insistence to put those being-redeemed sinners together in the church. That's Christ's crazy plan for how to accomplish his will in the world. Us.

Week 2: **The Answer to Jesus's Prayer—Together**

John 17:21

Our being together was Christ's idea before it was ours. Division and differences may not be signs that we have fallen short of being church but rather signs that we are actually trying to live out Christ's wildly expansive corporate salvation.

Week 3: **Following Jesus—Together**

Mark 1:6-20

Christ's propensity to save and to deploy us *together*, means that in every church you can expect differences and disagreements, arguments, and disension. When it comes to being Christian, it's better to be in relationship than to be right. Or as John Wesley put it, "Christianity is a social religion. To turn it into a solitary thing is to destroy it."

Week 4: **Put Up with One Another—Together**

Colossians 3:13

Because Christ is not only savior but also reconciler, if we're going to be close to Christ, we must put up with one another, have the courage to congregate, not simply because that's the only way we'll survive as a church, but because our church, yes, for any of its faults, has been given the truth about God. God really is in Christ reconciling the world to himself, bringing all things together. How? Maybe not exclusively but certainly primarily through our congregation.

For more details on this sermon series, check out MinistryMatters.com

Don't Look Back **A Leadership Resource Guide**

I began research on this book the week a committee decided to delay General Conference. Here's the good news despite the delay: none of your necessary work requires anything to be done or not be done at the general church level. The Holy Spirit is God going local. No fundamental problem of a Methodist congregation can be solved either by leaving or preserving The United Methodist Church. The most surprising Holy Spirit provocations are not in denominations, old or new, but in Methodist congregations who jump on board with God's mission to God's world, one neighborhood at a time.

From the first, Christians never asked, "Has God got a future?" The question has always been, "Will we be part of God's future or not?"

I hope that this short resource will help you have these conversations with the leaders working alongside you to move toward that future. In here you will find a quick outline for how to use this book with your key leaders, how to move toward a large one-day retreat with all your ministry teams, and how to preach a worship series using the key themes from this book.

I'm grateful to partner with you in focusing on what's important and in not giving in to nostalgia for what never was. Let's remember together how we got to be Methodists in the first place, our mission, our hope, love in action, all Jesus ever wanted, don't look back, "Follow me."

—Will

Leadership Reading Plan

Make a plan to gather your leaders (Administrative/Church Council, or a small group of key ministry leaders) to read through the book together using this basic plan:

Month 1: Invite leaders to read chapters 1–3 and reflect on these questions before you gather:

1. What are you grieving most about our losses, your sadness in saying good-bye to what you've loved about the pre-COVID, pre-graying, pre-separation UMC?
2. What are our strengths as a congregation?
3. What gifts are we known for? What are we already doing well?
4. What do our expenditures tell us about what our congregation most values?

Make this first gathering a free-flowing, open conversation. Use sticky notes or notecards to capture these ideas where everyone can contribute. The goal here is to name where we are and what we value as inputs for the future.

Month 2: Invite leaders to read chapters 4, 5, 7, & 9, and reflect on these questions before you gather:

1. What gifts has God given this congregation that people in our neighborhood need?
2. What's God already doing in our neighborhood, and through whom—and how can we hitch on?
3. What skills must we acquire in order to be more vibrant participants in God's mission?

Make that second gathering a turn toward what's next: Take time to reflect seriously and deeply on what God is calling you to do next, with the inputs above. Come to a clear, concise working statement from which you can start to move forward!

Leadership Retreat Conversation

After you've met with your core leaders, plan to start out the new year or a new season with a one-day leadership retreat. Gather all the ministry leaders, key volunteers, and informal movers-and-shakers you've got.

Share with them the six challenges from chapter 5 (p. 68) and share your concise statement about what God is calling your congregation to next.

Focus this day-long conversation on the questions we need to ask to live into that statement, particularly questions about what we count and how we measure:

1. What opportunities do we offer right now for people to connect to this church and to one another? How many opportunities do we offer?
2. How many people are participating in those opportunities? Who are they?
3. How are we connecting newer members with mission responsibility? How much time does it take us to make the connections?
4. How will we know when we have opened our doors wider?
5. What changes in structure, decision-making, or resources would you need to see in your ministry area to do what God is calling us to do next?