

TRADITION'S RENEWAL

“And how do we keep our balance?
That I can tell you in one word... Tradition....
Because of our traditions,
We’ve kept our balance for many, many years....
Here in Anatevka,
we have traditions for everything....
You may ask, how did this tradition start?
I’ll tell you—I don’t know. But it’s a tradition...
Because of our traditions,
Everyone knows who he is and
what God expects him to do....
And among ourselves,
we get along perfectly well....
Now we live in simple peace and
harmony and....
Tradition, tradition... tradition.”

— *Fiddler on the Roof*

The famous Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on the book *Tevye the Dairyman* by Sholem Aleichem, tells the tale of a Russian Jewish family who, in 1905, faces numerous challenges to tradition. The opening scene features Tevye explaining the customs and faith traditions that keep the lives of his family and those of the small village community of Anatevka in balance. If you have never watched this delightful musical, I highly recommend it. The catchy tunes carry one through each of the challenges to tradition that Tevye faces over the course of the story.

Like Tevye and many others throughout the centuries, people of faith have faced challenges with their practice of customs and traditions as time passes and different circumstances arise. Any basic introductory course in religious history highlights how the ways in which we practice faith have evolved. Some of what we practice today has been carried on for centuries or even millennia, while some rituals are relatively new.

At Church of the Good Shepherd, we are engaging with various historic prayer book services during Lent. As we journey through the season, we remember our history as children of God redeemed by Jesus Christ and are reminded of our Anglican and Christian history and identity. It is loyalty to tradition that provides the bond that connects us as a community, not only with our global siblings in the Anglican Communion but also with all those saints who have gone before us and those who follow in our footsteps.

Tradition also connects us with Christian siblings in other denominations. The establishment of the Church of England itself was possible because of the Protestant Reformation that began in Europe in the mid-16th century. Through the study of religious history, we learn about the variety of theological differences that have resulted in a multitude of branches of the Christian faith, all born of a transformation in religious thinking. These denominations moved the Church away from the ecclesiastical unity of medieval Christianity.

“People and
societies continued to transform.”



The Luther Rose, a symbol of Martin Luther's theology.

Over the intervening centuries, people and societies continued to transform and adapt, resulting in new understandings that ultimately led to many changes within the Church. Sometimes suddenly, but more often slowly, these changes affected the whole Church. As practices were altered and as “our outer nature [was] wasting away,” people did not lose heart or faith in Jesus’ message but were “inwardly... being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).

Families over the course of many generations, Christian denominations that were formed from differences in belief now work together because of that common bond, which ultimately brings us back together in unity. Much of the ministry of ecumenical and interreligious leaders involves helping branches of the global family reunite in love. This effort is in progress with our siblings in the United Methodist Church.

John Wesley, considered the founder of Methodism, was an ordained Anglican priest who led a revival movement formed out of a “desire [for the faithful] to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ” (Advice to a People Called Methodist). Together with his brother Charles and other theologians, they pursued “holiness of heart

and life,” which Wesley described as “universal love filling the heart, and governing the life” (Advice to a People Called Methodist). The dual emphasis on both what we believe and how we live is essential to United Methodism today.

Although Wesley never left the established Anglican Church, his methods continually placed him further from the mainline Church. The Methodist Episcopal Church officially began its existence in 1784 when the American War of Independence left devout American Methodists without clergy and a means to receive the sacraments. Convinced and supported by the ancient opinion of the Church of Alexandria that priests also continue the apostolic succession and with no hope for a bishop to come to the U.S. within a reasonable time, John Wesley laid hands on Thomas Coke (a fellow Anglican priest), ordaining him as a Superintendent (later changed to Bishop), and then proceeded to ordain two lay elders as presbyters. He then sent all three to serve in America—and the rest is history.

But the story does not end there. Time changes things, and the ties that bind are often stronger than those that divide. John Wesley once stated in a sermon:



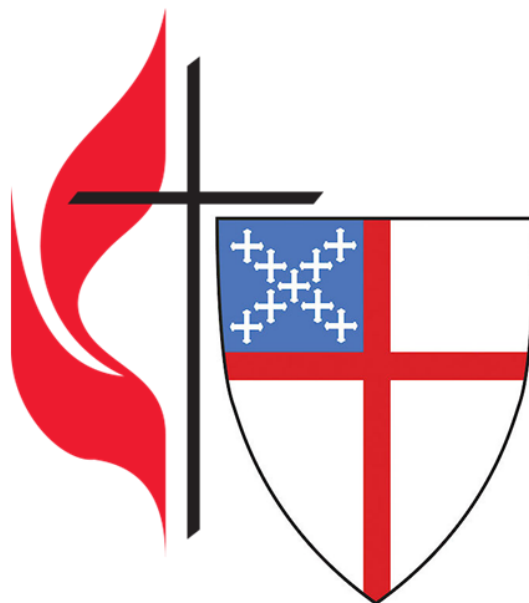
Statue of John Wesley in Melbourne, created by English sculptor Paul Raphael Montford.

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences” (Wesley).

It is through the love of Jesus Christ and the work of many that, in May 2024, the United Methodist Church General Conference approved a resolution for full communion with The Episcopal Church, to become effective upon the approval of the same by the Episcopal General Convention in 2027.

Roughly a month later, The Episcopal Church approved a resolution at its 2024 General Convention to “encourage The Episcopal Church-United Methodist Dialogue to continue its work towards full communion, including but not limited to such matters as a ‘Principles for the Orderly Exchange of Ministers’ document and a plan for liturgical recognition and reconciliation of orders.” The vote for full communion is planned for the 2027 General Convention in Phoenix (The Episcopal Church-United Methodist Dialogue).

With full communion comes the understanding that each denomination fully embraces the other as part of the universal Christian Church and recognizes their sacraments as authentic; clergy from one can serve in the other Church. Churches so related remain canonically distinct and need not assent to all the doctrines, customs, and practices of each other.



Emblems of the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church side by side.

By the end of Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye has to contend with changes triggered by forces beyond his control. Reluctantly, he accepts these changes but is able to maintain a thread of tradition as he does so. As we move forward in dialogue with our Christian siblings—not only between denominations but also between individuals—we do not lose heart but work toward being of one heart. We fix our eyes not on what we see as differences in our human understanding but on what we know as children of God in our hearts: the eternal love of Jesus Christ. Through history, we have been transformed; now let us be renewed in the Spirit.

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— John Wesley



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