

# Allendale 101

## A Wesleyan Guide to Faith, Justice, and Liberation

Allendale United Methodist Church

St. Petersburg, Florida

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For people who are curious, wounded, hopeful, skeptical, faithful, searching, returning, rebuilding, and trying to follow Jesus with honesty and courage.

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*This guide draws on United Methodist doctrine, polity, worship, history, and theological traditions, while reimagining these questions through Allendale's particular witness.*

# Introduction

Faith grows best when there is room for real questions. Questions are not a threat to faith—they are the center of it. They are how we listen for God, how we tell the truth about our lives, how we wrestle with scripture, how we learn from one another, and how we keep our hearts open to the Spirit.

This guide was written for people who want to understand Christian faith through the Allendale lens: rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, centered on Jesus, shaped by grace, committed to justice, and open to the mystery of God. Some of these questions are ancient. Some are deeply personal. Some have caused conflict in the church. Some are the kinds of questions people carry quietly for years because they were taught that asking them was bad.

You do not have to leave your questions at the door. You do not have to pretend certainty in order to belong. You do not have to have every doctrine figured out before grace can find you. The life of faith is not about memorizing perfect answers. It is about being drawn more deeply into the love of God, the way of Jesus, and the movement of the Spirit in the world.

Allendale's witness has been shaped by people who know what it means to be pushed aside, underestimated, targeted, or told they do not belong. Because of that, we listen for God among the poor, the grieving, the queer and trans community, the unhoused, the incarcerated, the recovering, the disabled, the immigrant, the exhausted, the angry, the joyful, the doubtful, and the brave. We believe the Spirit often speaks from the places respectability ignores.

Several places in this book, you will read the phrase "Christians believe..." That does not mean every Christian believes the same thing in the same way, and it does not mean you are required to believe every sentence exactly as written. You may think, "I'm not sure I believe that," or "I used to believe that, but I don't anymore." You may feel curiosity, resistance, grief, relief, or nothing at all. That is okay. These are not absolute answers. They are a faithful attempt to name mystery, knowing that words, ideas, doctrines, and beliefs always fall short. This guide is an invitation into conversation, reflection, humility, and deeper honesty before God.

These answers are offered as a beginning, not an ending. They are meant to teach, but also to invite conversation. Each section ends with another question because faith keeps opening. God is larger than our language, wider than our traditions, and more alive than any single answer can hold. The goal is not to close the conversation. The goal is to help us follow Jesus more faithfully.

So bring your curiosity. Bring your doubts. Bring your church hurt. Bring your hope. Bring your need for something more than survival. Bring your longing for a faith that can stand in the real world, tell the truth, and still sing.

There is room here. There is grace here. There is work to do. And God is already moving among us.

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# 1. God

## 1. How do we know God?

We know God because God chooses to be known. God is bigger than our language, wider than our imagination, deeper than our explanations, and more mysterious than any doctrine can contain. Every word we use for God is reaching toward mystery. God is beyond us, before us, around us, and more than us. We sometimes call this the transcendence of God.

God is also near. God moves toward us. God meets us in creation, in community, in struggle, in worship, in bread and cup, in protest and prayer, in the quiet places of our own hearts, and in the lives of people the world too often pushes aside. We sometimes call this the immanence of God.

For Christians, the fullest picture of God is Jesus. In Jesus, God takes on flesh, enters history, walks among ordinary people, touches the untouchable, welcomes the excluded, challenges the powerful, feeds the hungry, heals the wounded, and tells the truth. When we say Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us," we are saying something beautiful and bold: God cares enough about the world to enter it.

We also come to know God through scripture. The Bible is the story of people trying to make sense of God's movement among them. They told stories. They sang songs. They remembered liberation. They argued with God. They wrote laws. They passed down wisdom. They cried out in grief. They imagined justice. They testified to hope. Through all of it, communities of faith began to recognize God's presence and call.

At Allendale, we read scripture with love, curiosity, humility, and courage. We listen for good news for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, dignity for every body, and the Spirit's invitation to build Beloved Community. United Methodists also believe we know God through lived experience. John Wesley famously described feeling his heart "strangely warmed," a moment when faith moved from idea to encounter. We honor that kind of experience, whether it comes in a sanctuary, around a table, in a march for justice, in recovery, in grief, in laughter, in music, in drag, in silence, or in the ordinary miracle of realizing we are loved.

We know God through creation's beauty, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, through scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, through the Spirit still moving among us, and through love. Wherever love sets people free, wherever truth heals, wherever mercy becomes justice, wherever the excluded are welcomed home, wherever courage rises in the face of fear, we believe God is there.

**Another question:** What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing God?

## 2. Who is the Trinity?

The simplest answer is: God. “Trinity” is the word Christians use to describe the mystery that God is one, and God is known to us as three: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. The traditional language is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Across the church, people also use language like Parent, Child, and Spirit; Lover, Beloved, and Love; Source, Word, and Breath. No single image can hold the fullness of God, but each one can help us reach toward the mystery.

The Trinity tells us that God is relationship. Before anything was created, before there were stars or oceans or people or churches or songs, God already existed as love shared. God’s very life is communion, mutuality, delight, and connection. God is love moving in relationship.

If we are made in the image of a Triune God, then we are made for connection. We are made for community. We are made for belonging. We are made to give and receive love. At Allendale, this is part of why we talk so much about Beloved Community. Community reflects the very nature of God.

The word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible, but the pattern is woven through scripture. Jesus speaks of God as the One who sends him. The Spirit descends and empowers. The risen Christ sends the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Paul blesses the church with the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. The early church eventually gave this mystery a name: Trinity.

The Trinity is a relationship to enter. It is a holy dance of love. The ancient church sometimes used the word *perichoresis*, which means mutual indwelling. The three dwell in one another. Love moves between them so fully that there is no separation, no competition, no scarcity.

This is good news in a world built on division. The Trinity teaches us that difference can belong inside love. Oneness does not require sameness. Unity does not require erasure. God’s own life holds distinction and communion together. That means our differences can be holy. Our bodies, cultures, genders, languages, gifts, and stories can belong together without being flattened into sameness.

For Allendale, the Trinity is a vision of church: a church where nobody has to disappear in order to belong, where power is shared, where love circulates, where relationship is sacred, where justice is what love looks like in public, and where we practice the life of God by making room for one another.

So when we praise the Triune God, we are praising the God who is beyond us, beside us, within us, and among us: God who creates, Christ who frees, Spirit who empowers. One God. Holy Mystery. Eternal Love.

**Another question:** Which image or name for God helps you feel closest to the Holy One?

### 3. What is the practical meaning of belief in the Trinity?

The Trinity is one of those doctrines that can sound like something for theologians in libraries, but it has everything to do with daily life. The Trinity means that relationship is at the heart of reality. God's life is shared life. God's life is mutual life. God's life is love that moves, gives, receives, creates, heals, and sends. When we talk about the Trinity, we are talking about the kind of life God invites us to practice.

The Trinity teaches equality. In the life of God, there is no domination. There is no hierarchy of worth. There is no member of the Trinity who matters more than another. Every system that ranks human beings by race, gender, sexuality, class, age, ability, immigration status, or social power contradicts the life of God.

At Allendale, theology should become flesh. A belief in the Trinity should shape how we share power, how we make decisions, how we welcome people, how we honor different gifts, and how we resist systems that try to make some people disposable.

The Trinity also teaches community. Our culture often celebrates individualism. It tells us to make it on our own, protect our own, brand our own, build our own, and survive on our own. The Trinity tells a different story. Life is not meant to be lived in isolation. We belong to one another.

This is why the church is called the body of Christ. Many members. One body. Many gifts. One Spirit. Many stories. One Beloved Community. The Trinity gives us a holy pattern for life together: love without possession, difference without division, unity without uniformity, power without domination, and community without erasure.

At Allendale, we practice Trinitarian faith every time we make room at the table, every time we listen across difference, every time we refuse white supremacy, queerphobia, transphobia, misogyny, ableism, and every other force that fractures the body of Christ. We practice it every time we say, "You belong here," and then build a community where that belonging becomes real.

The Trinity is not only something we believe. It is something we practice.

**Another question:** How does our life together reflect the love and mutuality of God?

#### 4. Why does God allow suffering?

This is one of the most honest questions faith can ask. A child gets sick. A hurricane destroys homes. A loved one dies too soon. A family loses housing. A nation chooses violence. A person cries out and hears silence. Some suffering has a cause we can name: greed, racism, war, neglect, climate destruction, poverty, abuse, bad choices, broken systems. Some suffering feels senseless.

The Bible does not give us one neat answer. It gives us lament. It gives us Job sitting in ashes. It gives us the Psalms asking, "How long, O God?" It gives us prophets crying out against injustice. It gives us Jesus weeping at a tomb. It gives us Christ crucified by empire. Christian faith does not require us to explain away suffering. Faith gives us permission to tell the truth about it.

United Methodists believe human beings have freedom. Love requires freedom, and freedom means our actions can bless or wound. Much of the world's suffering comes from what people do to one another and what systems do to whole communities. Sin is personal, but it is also collective. It lives in policies, economies, prisons, borders, churches, neighborhoods, and habits of indifference.

God does not cause that suffering. God does not need children to die, families to drown, bodies to be bombed, or people to be hated in order to teach a lesson. God is not the author of cruelty. God is the presence that enters suffering with us.

That is what the cross shows us. In Jesus, God does not stay far away from pain. God enters the wound. God stands with the condemned. God suffers with the abandoned. God is found among those crushed by religious and political power. In the resurrection, God declares that suffering and death do not get the final word.

This does not answer every question, but it gives us hope. Hope is not pretending everything is fine. Hope is the stubborn trust that God is still working for life, even when death is loud. Hope is the courage to comfort the hurting, challenge the systems that create suffering, and build communities where nobody has to suffer alone.

At Allendale, we believe God meets us in our grief and calls us into solidarity. We do not have to explain suffering before we respond to it. We are called to show up, tell the truth, repair what can be repaired, grieve what must be grieved, and work for the day when God wipes away every tear.

**Another question:** How have you experienced God's presence in a time of suffering?

## 5. Is it okay to call God “Father”?

Yes. It is also faithful to use many other names for God. Jesus called God Father. For many people, that name carries tenderness, trust, protection, provision, and intimacy. For others, the word father carries pain, fear, absence, control, or abuse. The church should be honest about that.

God is beyond all human language. Every name we use for God is partial. Every image points toward God without containing God. Father is one biblical image, but it is not the only biblical image. Scripture gives us many names and images for God: Creator, Shepherd, Rock, Mother Hen, Wisdom, Breath, Fire, Light, Comforter, Liberator, Judge, Parent, Friend, Redeemer, the One who gives birth, the One who searches for the lost coin, the One who shelters us under wings, the One who hears the cry of the oppressed, the One who makes a way out of no way.

The church has often used male language for God so constantly that people have imagined God as male. God is not male. God is not limited to any gender. God is Spirit. God is beyond gender, and God is also able to be encountered through images across gender.

At Allendale, we try to use expansive language for God because language shapes imagination, and imagination shapes faith. When the only language we ever hear for God is male, male power can begin to sound divine. Expansive language helps us remember that every person is made in the image of God.

So yes, it is okay to call God Father. It is also okay to call God Mother, Creator, Source, Wisdom, Spirit, Love, Breath, Rock, Shelter, and Friend. The goal is not to control God with the right name. The goal is to speak with reverence, honesty, humility, and love.

**Another question:** Which name or image of God means the most to you?

## 6. What do United Methodists believe about evolution?

United Methodists believe God is Creator. We confess with the ancient church that God is “maker of heaven and earth.” The universe, the earth, every creature, every ecosystem, every body, every breath, every atom of wonder belongs to the creative love of God.

United Methodists do not have to reject science in order to believe that. Science helps us explore how life developed. Faith helps us ask why life matters. Science studies process. Faith speaks of purpose, meaning, wonder, and worship. They are different ways of seeking truth. They do not have to be enemies.

Many United Methodists accept evolution as the best scientific explanation for the development of life. Evolution does not make creation meaningless. It can deepen our awe. It can help us see creation as dynamic, unfolding, interconnected, and alive with possibility.

Genesis is not trying to be a biology textbook. Genesis tells us something more foundational: the world is created by God, creation is good, human beings bear God’s image, and we are responsible for how we live within the web of life.

If creation is God’s good gift, then the earth is not a product to consume. It is a community to honor. If human beings are part of creation, then we are not separate from the earth. We are kin with soil, water, air, plants, animals, and one another. If God’s creative work is ongoing, then curiosity is holy. Learning is holy. Science can be a form of wonder.

At Allendale, we do not believe people have to choose between faith and intellectual honesty. We believe God is big enough for fossils, galaxies, DNA, mystery, scripture, sacraments, and awe. Whether life is described through ancient poetry or through genetic development, we receive creation as gift.

All life is held in God. All creation is beloved. Our calling is to live with reverence, humility, gratitude, and care.

**Another question:** How does science deepen your sense of wonder about God?

## **2. Jesus Christ**

## 7. What does incarnation mean?

Incarnation means God takes on flesh. Christians believe that in Jesus, God did not stay distant from human life. God entered it. God became embodied. God moved into the neighborhood. God took on skin, hunger, tears, laughter, exhaustion, friendship, danger, grief, joy, and pain.

At Allendale, we love this part of the story because incarnation tells us that bodies matter. God does not save us by escaping the world. God comes into the world. God does not treat flesh as shameful. God blesses flesh by taking it on. In Jesus, God says yes to human bodies, human stories, human struggle, and human life.

The Gospel of John says it this way: “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” Everything God wanted to show us, everything God wanted to say to us, everything God wanted to reveal about love, mercy, justice, and truth became visible in Jesus.

Jesus was fully human. He got hungry. He got tired. He wept. He loved his friends. He felt anger. He experienced temptation. He knew what it was to be misunderstood, betrayed, abandoned, and afraid. His suffering was real. His death was real. His body was real.

Jesus was also fully divine. In Jesus, we see the fullness of God. We see God’s heart. We see God’s character. We see God’s solidarity with the poor, the sick, the outcast, the grieving, the imprisoned, the shamed, the occupied, and the condemned. We see what divine love looks like when it walks around in sandals.

Incarnation means there is no place God is unwilling to go. God is present in hospital rooms, border crossings, protest lines, jail cells, recovery meetings, drag dressing rooms, church basements, family tables, funeral homes, and every place where people are trying to survive.

In Jesus Christ, there is full humanity and full divinity. God takes on flesh, and flesh becomes a place where glory can be seen.

**Another question:** What does Jesus’ humanity help you understand about God?

## 8. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?

Christians have long confessed that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary. For many Christians, this means Mary did not become pregnant through ordinary human sexual relations. For others, the virgin birth is understood primarily as a theological statement: Jesus' life begins in the mystery and initiative of God. Either way, the point is not to shame sexuality or make Mary's body a problem. The point is to proclaim that Jesus' birth is holy, surprising, and full of God's presence.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell stories of Jesus' birth in which Mary is drawn into God's saving work. She is not passive background scenery. She questions. She consents. She sings. She proclaims that God brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly. Mary's body becomes part of God's revolution of love.

The virgin birth is not only a doctrine about biology. It is a confession that Jesus comes from God and that God's saving work begins in a vulnerable body, in a poor family, in an occupied land, through a woman whose voice the church should never have silenced.

The early church used this language to affirm something central: Jesus is both human and divine. He is born. He has a mother. He has a body. He enters history. His life is also the work of God.

At Allendale, we make room for mystery here. Some people receive the virgin birth as literal miracle. Some receive it as sacred symbol. Some struggle with it. Some love it. The deeper invitation is to ask what the story reveals about God: God works through unlikely people, honors bodies, enters history through vulnerability, and begins freedom in places the world overlooks.

So yes, the church confesses that Jesus was born of Mary and conceived by the Holy Spirit. We hold that confession with wonder, humility, and room for honest questions.

**Another question:** What does Mary's role in the story teach us about courage, consent, and God's freedom?

## 9. Where was Jesus when the world was created?

Christians have traditionally confessed that there has never been a time when Christ did not exist. Jesus of Nazareth was born in history, in a particular place, to a particular mother, among a particular people. But the eternal Christ is not limited to the moment of Jesus' birth. The Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That Word is Christ.

So when Christians talk about Jesus, we are talking about the one born in Bethlehem and the eternal Word through whom all things came into being. We are talking about the child held by Mary and the Christ through whom creation itself is held together.

The early church had to wrestle with this mystery. Some people argued that Christ was created by God, almost like a first and greatest creature. The church rejected that idea because it made Christ less than fully divine. Christians came to confess that Christ is eternal, "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."

At Allendale, this helps us see creation as Christ-shaped. The same Christ we meet in Jesus is present in the beginning. The same Christ who welcomes children is woven into creation's first breath. The same Christ who touches lepers is connected to the dust, water, stars, trees, animals, and bodies that make up this world. The same Christ who rises from the dead is the one through whom all things move toward healing and wholeness.

This gives us a deeper way to think about creation. The world is not disposable. The earth is not raw material for exploitation. Creation is beloved by God, made through Christ, and held in divine love.

If Christ is present in creation, then care for creation is part of discipleship. If Christ is before all things, then every life belongs inside a holy story larger than empire, capitalism, nationalism, or fear. If Christ holds all things together, then nothing beloved by God is beyond the reach of grace.

There has never been a time when Christ was absent. Christ was there in creation. Christ is here now. Christ will be there when all things are made new.

**Another question:** What changes when we imagine creation itself as held in Christ?

## 10. Why did Jesus have to die?

Jesus died because love entered a violent world and refused to stop telling the truth. Jesus healed people whose suffering had been ignored. He welcomed people religious systems had pushed away. He challenged wealth, hypocrisy, domination, purity culture, and empire. He announced good news to the poor and release to the captives. He built a table wide enough to threaten every system built on exclusion.

The cross was what happened when the powers of the world met the love of God and chose violence. Christians have long tried to name how God was at work in Jesus' death. The church has used the word atonement to talk about this mystery. Atonement means reconciliation, healing, repair, the bringing back together of what has been broken.

Different Christians have explained the cross in different ways. Some have said Jesus' death shows the depth of God's love. Some have said Jesus defeats sin, death, and evil. Some have said Jesus enters the place of human suffering and opens the way to life. Some have said Jesus exposes the violence of the world and reveals that God's power is self-giving love.

At Allendale, we want to be careful with any theology that makes God sound cruel, abusive, or bloodthirsty. God is not a monster demanding violence before mercy can happen. The cross is not divine child abuse. The cross is God in Christ absorbing the violence of the world and answering it with forgiveness, solidarity, and resurrection.

Jesus' death saves us because it reveals the truth. It reveals the truth about human sin, empire, religious violence, scapegoating, love that will not abandon us, and death that does not get the final word.

Jesus died because he lived fully for God's reign. Jesus died because the powers could not tolerate his love that set people free. Jesus died because he would not turn away from us. Through his death and resurrection, God opens a way from captivity into freedom, from violence into peace, from despair into hope, from death into life.

**Another question:** Which understanding of the cross helps you experience God's love most deeply?

## **11. What is the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus?**

The resurrection means God's love is stronger than death. Jesus was crucified. His body was broken. His friends were scattered. The empire did what empires do. Religious and political authorities tried to silence a movement by killing the one at the center of it. Then God raised Jesus.

For the church, the resurrection has been the heart of Christian faith. It is God's great yes after the world's loud no. It is God's refusal to let violence have the final word. It is the vindication of Jesus' life, ministry, teaching, body, and love.

The resurrection is the beginning of a new creation. The risen Christ appears first to women whose testimony the world was trained to dismiss. God trusts the resurrection announcement to people the culture did not trust. From the beginning, resurrection disrupts who gets believed, who gets centered, and who gets sent.

The resurrection also changes how we live now. It gives courage to people facing death-dealing systems. It gives hope to communities carrying grief. It gives strength to movements for justice. It tells us that what we do in love is never wasted. Every act of mercy, resistance, repair, table-widening, wound-tending, truth-telling, child-protecting, and stranger-welcoming participates in resurrection life.

At Allendale, resurrection is not only something we proclaim on Easter. It is something we practice. We practice resurrection when we feed people, defend LGBTQ lives, resist racism, show up after hurricanes, make church a home for people who have been hurt by church, and choose joy without denying grief.

The risen Christ is alive in worship, in the breaking of bread, in the work of justice, in the body of Christ, and wherever love rises again.

**Another question:** What does the resurrection of Christ mean for your daily life?

## 12. Will Jesus come again?

The church has long confessed that Christ will come again, though Christians have understood that promise in different ways. Some believe Jesus will return in a visible way. Some understand Christ's coming as the ongoing arrival of resurrection wherever love rises, justice breaks through, and death-dealing powers lose their grip. Some hold those together: Christ is always coming to us, and history is still moving toward God's healing future.

However we understand it, the promise is not meant to turn faith into an end-times guessing game. Jesus warned his followers against obsessing over dates, decoding headlines, or pretending we can master the mysteries of God's future. The point is not to know when Christ comes. The point is to live in a way that recognizes Christ when he does.

When the church says Christ will come again, we are saying that cruelty does not own the future. Empire does not own the future. Violence, greed, and death do not own the future. The future belongs to the God whose love keeps moving creation toward repair.

Some Christians focus on the rapture, tribulation, and apocalyptic charts. That system is not ancient Christian teaching. Much of it comes from a relatively recent movement called dispensationalism in the 19th century. It has shaped a lot of American Christianity, but it has also done real harm by encouraging fear-based faith, treating war as a sign to be welcomed, and tempting Christians to care less about the earth because they expect to escape it.

United Methodists do not follow that reading of scripture. At Allendale, we reject any theology that makes fear stronger than love, treats creation as disposable, or turns suffering into proof that God's plan is working. Our focus is the hope that Christ is present now and that God's reign is still unfolding among us. That hope may be understood as a future promise, a present reality, a sacred metaphor, or some mixture of all three. It calls us away from despair to faithfulness.

Christ's coming is also connected to judgment. That can sound frightening, especially for people harmed by fear-based religion. But judgment in scripture is not only punishment. Judgment is truth-telling. It is repair. It is God exposing what harms life and restoring what God loves.

At Allendale, we hear the promise of Christ's coming as a call to live now as if God's future is already breaking in. Feed the hungry now. Welcome the stranger now. Protect the vulnerable now. Tell the truth now. Practice mercy now. Build Beloved Community now. Whether someone understands Christ's return literally, metaphorically, mystically, or with honest uncertainty, the invitation is the same: live as though resurrection is real enough to change the world.

The church often says, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Some days those words are a declaration. Some days they are a prayer. Some days they are hope we borrow from the community when our own faith feels thin. However they land in us, they point toward the same holy longing: that love will have the final word.

**Another question:** What does it mean to live as though God's future is already breaking into the present?

## **3. Holy Spirit**

### 13. What does the Holy Spirit have to do with Jesus?

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God moving through the life of Jesus and through the life of the church. Classic Christian theology describes the Holy Spirit as fully God, coequal and coeternal with Creator and Christ. The Spirit is God's living presence: active from the beginning, moving through creation, calling prophets, empowering Jesus, sustaining the church, and breathing courage into ordinary people.

In the Bible, the words for Spirit mean breath, wind, and life. The Hebrew word is *ruah*. The Greek word is *pneuma*. Both remind us that the Spirit is as close as breathing and as free as wind. We cannot manage the Spirit, own the Spirit, or contain the Spirit inside one church, one doctrine, one tradition, one language, or one kind of person. The Spirit moves where the Spirit moves.

The Spirit is woven through the whole story of scripture. The Spirit was present at creation, hovering over the waters. The Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit anointed Jesus to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the year of God's favor. The Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. The Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost with wind, fire, language, and holy disruption.

So what does the Holy Spirit have to do with Jesus? Everything. The Spirit reveals Jesus, continues the work of Jesus, and forms the body of Christ in the world. Jesus promised his disciples that when they could no longer see him, they would not be abandoned. The Spirit would come as Advocate, Comforter, Helper, and Friend. The Greek word often used here is *paraclete*, meaning one who comes alongside us.

At Allendale, we know the Spirit as the presence that keeps pulling us toward love. The Spirit comes alongside us when we are afraid, when we are grieving, when we are resisting injustice, when we do not know how to pray, and when we need courage we cannot manufacture on our own. The Spirit is present when a person finally believes they are beloved, when people wounded by religion begin to heal, when queer joy fills the sanctuary, when strangers become kin, and when the church follows Jesus into the streets.

The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, which means the Spirit will keep moving us toward the way of Jesus: mercy, justice, healing, freedom, courage, and love. The Spirit gives gifts to the whole body, not only to clergy, leaders, or the loudest voices in the room. Every person carries gifts. Every person can become a vessel of grace. Every person has a part in the living body of Christ.

The Spirit helps us say yes to Jesus with our lives. The Spirit breathes the living Word into us. The Spirit makes Christ present among us still.

**Another question:** When is the Holy Spirit most real to you?

## 14. What is the Holy Spirit's work within the church?

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God at work in the church, forming us into the body of Christ and sending us into the world.

We call on the Spirit in Baptism, when the pastor prays that the Holy Spirit would work within each person so they may become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. We call on the Spirit at Communion, asking God to pour out the Holy Spirit on the gathered community and on the gifts of bread and cup, so that we may become one with Christ and one with each other. We call on the Spirit in confirmation, ordination, funerals, healing services, prayers of confession, blessings, and moments when the church does not know what to do next.

The Spirit gives the church faith. The Spirit helps us trust God when we cannot see the whole road ahead. The Spirit gives gifts for ministry, not only to pastors or official leaders, but to the whole body. Some are gifted to teach, some to organize, some to sing, some to cook, some to pray, some to protest, some to listen, some to repair buildings, some to hold children, some to sit beside the grieving, and some to speak truth when silence would be easier. The church becomes alive when every gift is honored and every person is invited to participate.

The Spirit also moves us toward holiness. In the Wesleyan tradition, holiness is never only private morality. Holiness is love of God and love of neighbor made real. It is the Spirit shaping our lives so that we become more merciful, more truthful, more courageous, more generous, and more just. The Spirit keeps working on us, freeing us from fear, selfishness, prejudice, despair, and the habits that keep us from loving as Christ loves.

The Spirit works for unity, but not the kind of unity that asks people to hide harm or pretend everything is fine. The Spirit's unity is rooted in truth, justice, repentance, and shared life. At Allendale, we do not understand unity as sameness. We understand it as the Spirit's power to gather many bodies, many stories, many languages, many wounds, many gifts, and many hopes into one living body of Christ.

The Spirit gives hope. When the world feels heavy, when the church is tired, when grief is close, when justice feels far away, the Spirit bears witness that we are still children of God and that God is not finished with us. Paul says the Spirit helps us pray when we do not know how to pray. Sometimes the Spirit gives words. Sometimes the Spirit gives tears. Sometimes the Spirit gives silence. Sometimes the Spirit gives a song when words have run out.

One of the gifts United Methodists have often emphasized is assurance. Assurance is the deep trust that we are loved by God, held by grace, and find liberation through Christ. John Wesley described this as having his heart "strangely warmed," a moment when faith became more than an idea and grace became deeply personal. Assurance does not mean we never doubt. It means that beneath our doubt, fear, and struggle, the Spirit keeps whispering that we belong to God.

**Another question:** How has the Holy Spirit helped you trust that you are loved by God?

## 15. What is the Holy Spirit's work outside the church?

The Holy Spirit is already at work in the world before the church arrives. United Methodists often talk about this as prevenient grace, the grace that goes before us, meets people before they know how to name God, and prepares the way for healing, justice, repentance, courage, and love.

Jesus said the Spirit moves like wind. We do not control where the Spirit blows. We learn to pay attention. The Spirit is present wherever people are being drawn toward life, wherever truth is being spoken, wherever the poor are lifted up, wherever captives are set free, wherever eyes are opened, wherever oppressed people are finding freedom, and wherever communities begin to imagine a world shaped by God's mercy.

This means the church's job is not to carry God into places where God has been absent. God is already there. The church's calling is to notice where the Spirit is moving and join the work with humility. Sometimes the Spirit is easier to recognize outside the church than inside it, especially when the church has become too comfortable, too cautious, or too invested in protecting itself.

John Wesley believed that being with the poor, working alongside the poor, and learning from the poor were means of grace. God's presence can meet us through the very people society has pushed aside. The Spirit teaches the church through neighbors who are unhoused, immigrants, incarcerated people, queer and trans people, disabled people, grieving people, working-class people, children, elders, and communities who have had to become experts in survival.

At Allendale, we trust that the Spirit is at work beyond our sanctuary walls. The Spirit is present in disaster recovery after hurricanes, in neighbors washing clothes in a church parking lot, in organizers fighting for housing, in advocates resisting racism and transphobia, in people protecting reproductive freedom, in artists and drag queens helping the world see beauty and courage, in teachers caring for children, in nurses and caregivers tending bodies, and in every ordinary act of repair that makes life more possible.

The Spirit also works through daily labor. Holiness is not limited to Sunday worship. It can show up in how someone makes a roof safe, prepares a meal, fixes an air conditioner, writes a grant, tells the truth in a public meeting, handles money with integrity, cares for creation, or refuses to cut corners when people's lives are affected. The Spirit sanctifies ordinary work when that work is done with love, honesty, justice, and care for the common good.

When we ask what the Holy Spirit is doing outside the church, we are really asking where God is inviting us to show up next. The answer may come through prayer, but it may also come through a neighbor's need, a community meeting, a protest, a hospital room, a school hallway, a city council agenda, or a storm-damaged home. The Spirit is already moving in the world. Our calling is to follow with courage, humility, and love.

**Another question:** Where is the Holy Spirit at work beyond the church in your community?

## 16. How do we know when the Spirit is moving?

When we are trying to discern whether something is of God, we look for the shape of Christ: mercy, courage, truth, healing, justice, humility, and love. Not everything called spiritual is holy. Churches have used God's name to bless cruelty, silence questions, protect abusers, defend racism, shame bodies, exclude queer and trans people, and keep power in the hands of the already powerful. Religious language can manipulate. A room can feel emotional without becoming faithful. So discernment is one of the gifts the church needs most.

The Spirit often leads the church to become prophetic. Prophetic does not mean predicting the future like a fortune-teller. It means telling the truth in the present so another future can become possible. The prophets named what kings, priests, empires, and respectable people did not want named. They interrupted the lie that the way things are is the way things have to be.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has often reminded the church that we usually understand God's movement only in retrospect. We look back and begin to see where the Spirit was stirring, where the church was faithful, where the church was cowardly, and where people resisted. Discernment requires memory. We become students of history so we can recognize the patterns of the present and act with more courage toward a different future.

At Allendale, we study history because evils like slavery, segregation, patriarchy, and colonialism had theology. Every system of domination has tried to dress itself in sacred language. When we know that history, we become harder to fool. We learn to ask what future our choices are creating and whose bodies are paying the price?

The New Testament tells us to test the spirits. One way we test them is by looking at the fruit. Does this movement deepen love? Does it tell the truth? Does it make room for the vulnerable? Does it challenge domination? Does it produce compassion and courage?

The Spirit often moves through people the religious establishment has been trained not to hear: prophets, women, outsiders, servants, prisoners, and people pushed to the edges. If we only look for the Spirit in respectable places, we may miss what God is doing.

At Allendale, we listen for the Spirit in worship and in the streets, in scripture and at the Communion table, in recovery meetings, protest lines, city council chambers, hospital rooms, drag performances, storm cleanup, shared meals, and honest conversations with people who have survived harm. The Spirit is wherever love is becoming flesh.

The Spirit will not lead us to dehumanize people, abandon the poor, protect comfort, or call hatred holy. When the Spirit is moving, people become more alive. Fear loosens its grip. Truth rises. Mercy grows teeth. Communities find courage. People who were silenced begin to speak. People who were ashamed begin to breathe. People who thought they were alone discover a body around them. We may only fully understand it later, but faithfulness asks us to pay attention now, learn from what has been, and join the Spirit in making a different future possible.

**Another question:** Where have you seen something that felt like the movement of the Spirit?

## 17. What does Pentecost teach us about the Holy Spirit?

Pentecost teaches us that the Holy Spirit does not make the church quieter, safer, or easier to control. The Spirit comes as wind, fire, language, courage, and holy disruption. In Acts 2, the disciples are gathered in one place when the Spirit moves through the room and sends them into public witness. What had been fear becomes speech. What had been hiding becomes proclamation. What had been a small group behind closed doors becomes a movement for the whole world.

The miracle of Pentecost is often misunderstood. It is not only that people speak in unfamiliar languages. It is that people from many nations hear the good news in their own languages. The Spirit does not force everyone into one dominant language, culture, or way of belonging. The Spirit honors difference. The Spirit makes understanding possible across borders, accents, histories, and bodies. Pentecost is not sameness. Pentecost is communion without erasure.

That is a powerful word for the church. Too often, religious communities have expected people to become more acceptable before they can belong. Speak our language. Fit our customs. Hide your story. Smooth your edges. Leave part of yourself outside. Pentecost tells a different story. The Spirit meets people where they are and makes room for the gospel to be heard in the language of their own lives.

Pentecost also teaches us that the Spirit is public. The Spirit does not only create private spiritual feelings. The Spirit sends people into the street. Peter stands up and preaches from the prophet Joel: sons and daughters will prophesy, young people will see visions, elders will dream dreams, and the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh. Not just clergy. Not just men. Not just the powerful. Not just the respectable. All flesh.

At Allendale, Pentecost sounds like a church where many voices are trusted. It sounds like children asking questions, queer and trans people telling the truth, elders dreaming dreams, artists showing us beauty, organizers calling us to courage, grieving people teaching us tenderness, and people once silenced finding their voice again. A Pentecost church does not ask who deserves the Spirit. It learns to recognize where Spirit has already been poured out.

The Spirit also gives courage for truth-telling. The same Spirit who helps people understand one another also helps the church confront the powers that keep people divided. Pentecost is not diversity as decoration. It is the Spirit forming a community strong enough to share bread, redistribute resources, resist fear, and live as if God's reign has already begun.

When the Holy Spirit comes, the church becomes more alive, more honest, more multilingual, more courageous, and more dangerous to every system built on silence. Pentecost teaches us that God's dream is bigger than one language, one nation, one culture, one tradition, or one kind of person. The Spirit is still breathing. The fire is still spreading. The church is still being sent.

**Another question:** Where do you hear the Spirit helping people find their voice today?

## 18. What are the gifts of the Spirit?

The gifts of the Spirit are the abilities, graces, passions, and callings God gives people for the healing and building up of the whole body. Paul gives several lists in the New Testament, and the lists are wonderfully varied: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation, ministry, teaching, encouragement, generosity, leadership, compassion, evangelism, pastoring, and more. The Spirit is generous with gifts.

No one has all the gifts, and no one has none. The church needs the whole body. Some people have gifts that are easy to notice because they happen up front: preaching, singing, teaching, leading, organizing, praying aloud. Other gifts are quieter but just as holy: listening, repairing, encouraging, noticing who is missing, caring for children, preparing food, tending grief, making space beautiful, managing details, showing compassion, and telling the truth when a room has gone silent.

Paul is clear that spiritual gifts are never given for personal pride, status, or control. Gifts are given for the common good. The Spirit does not give someone a gift so they can feel superior to the body. The Spirit gives gifts so the body can become more faithful, more whole, and more loving. A gift becomes distorted when it is used to dominate, manipulate, exclude, or make one person seem more important than everyone else.

United Methodists often talk about gifts when people become members, discern ministry, or consider ordination. We ask whether someone shows evidence of God's grace and gifts for the work they are called to do. That does not only apply to clergy. Every member of the church promises to participate in the ministries of the church through prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Ministry belongs to the whole people of God.

Spiritual gifts also need to bear spiritual fruit. Paul names the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. A person may be talented, charismatic, or impressive, but the church has to ask what fruit is growing around that gift. Does it create fear or freedom? Does it build trust or demand control? Does it make room for others or center itself? Does it serve love?

Sometimes other people can see our gifts before we can. Sometimes the church has to help someone recognize a gift they have been afraid to use. Sometimes the church has to help someone use a gift with more humility, accountability, or care. The gifts of the Spirit grow best in community, where people can encourage one another, tell the truth to one another, and keep asking how our gifts can serve God's love in the world.

The Spirit gives gifts because the world needs the body of Christ alive and active. Every gift has a place. Every person has something to offer. The church becomes more faithful when gifts flow freely, humbly, and joyfully for the sake of love.

**Another question:** What spiritual gifts do others see in you?

## **4. Humanity**

## **19. What does it mean to say that people are created in *Imago Dei*, the image of God?**

To say that people are created in the image of God is to say that every human being carries sacred worth. Before anyone earns anything, proves anything, believes the right thing, says the right words, or becomes useful to anyone else, they already bear the image of God. This is one of the deepest claims of Christian faith: every person is created by God, loved by God, and marked with dignity that cannot be erased.

Genesis says God created humankind in God's image and gave humanity responsibility within creation. In the Wesleyan tradition, John Wesley described this image in several dimensions. We are spiritual beings with freedom and the capacity to respond to God. We are relational beings called to live with one another and care for creation. We are moral beings created for holiness, justice, mercy, and love.

The image of God is not a private possession. It is a calling into relationship. We are made for communion with God, with one another, and with the earth. When we harm people, exploit creation, or build systems that treat some lives as disposable, we are violating the image of God in others and distorting the image of God in ourselves.

At Allendale, every person's dignity is nonnegotiable. The image of God is present in people who are unhoused, incarcerated, disabled, undocumented, queer, trans, poor, addicted, grieving, angry, lonely, or afraid. The image of God is present in people we like and people we struggle to love. The image of God is also present in us when we have forgotten who we are.

Christian faith also tells the truth that the image of God in humanity has been wounded by sin. We do not always reflect God's love clearly. We can be selfish, fearful, violent, prejudiced, and indifferent. We can participate in systems that crush the very people God calls beloved. Yet God does not abandon what God has made. In Christ, God is at work restoring us to the image of love for which we were created.

Being made in God's image means we are called to live as reflections of God's mercy, justice, creativity, relationship, and care. We honor that image when we protect creation, tell the truth, practice compassion, seek repair, share power, and build communities where people can become fully alive.

**Another question:** What of God's intention do you see in the people around you?

## 20. Are people good or bad?

Christian faith begins with creation, and creation is good. Genesis says God looked at all that had been made and called it very good. That includes human beings. We are not created as mistakes, trash, problems, or disappointments. We are created from love, for love, and with the capacity to reflect God's goodness in the world.

At the same time, human beings are capable of deep harm. Scripture tells the story of Adam and Eve as a story about all of us. Given freedom, humanity reaches for what destroys us. We hide from God, blame one another, grasp for control, and fracture the relationships we were created to tend. Sin enters the human story not only as individual bad behavior, but as a power that bends our desires, habits, communities, and systems away from love.

So are people good or bad? The honest answer is both. We are created good, and we are wounded by sin. We carry the image of God, and we also carry fear, selfishness, pride, prejudice, and the capacity to harm. United Methodists take both truths seriously because denying either one distorts the human story.

If we only say people are good, we will have no language for racism, abuse, greed, violence, exploitation, or the ways churches and governments can bless harm while calling it order. If we only say people are bad, we will forget the goodness of creation, the dignity of every person, and the grace of God already working in the world. Wesleyan faith holds together the truth of human brokenness and the deeper truth of God's restoring love.

Sin is personal and social. It shows up in choices, habits, addictions, cruelties, and betrayals. It also shows up in policies, economies, prisons, borders, housing systems, environmental destruction, and religious teachings that dehumanize people. At Allendale, we try to tell the truth about both kinds of sin because healing has to reach both hearts and systems.

The good news is that grace is already at work. God's Spirit keeps drawing humanity toward goodness, even when we are tangled in sin. We see glimpses of that grace when people choose repair, when communities protect the vulnerable, when enemies become neighbors, when someone tells the truth after years of hiding, and when love interrupts the story we thought was inevitable.

People are created good, wounded by sin, and pursued by grace. God is restoring us, not because we have earned restoration, but because love refuses to let brokenness have the final word.

**Another question:** Why would God give human beings freedom, even knowing we could use it to harm?

## 21. What is original sin?

Original sin means that sin is part of the human condition before any one of us knows how to name it. We are born into a world already shaped by fear, violence, selfishness, injustice, and separation from God's intention for creation. Before we make our own choices, we inherit a human story that is already wounded.

United Methodists do not usually explain original sin as something passed through sexuality or as proof that babies are guilty of personal wrongdoing. Original sin is deeper than that. It describes the brokenness into which all of us are born and the bent toward sin that all of us eventually recognize in ourselves. We do not have to be taught to be selfish, afraid, defensive, or cruel. Those patterns come easily to the human family.

Original sin is different from actual sins. Actual sins are the choices we make, the harm we do, the love we withhold, the truth we avoid, and the ways we knowingly participate in what wounds God's creation. Original sin is the condition underneath those choices, the broken soil in which actual sins grow. It is the inherited distortion of human life that makes sin feel normal.

At Allendale, original sin helps us understand why injustice can feel so entrenched. Racism did not begin with us, but we inherit its systems and can choose whether to resist or reinforce them. Poverty, patriarchy, queerphobia, transphobia, ableism, nationalism, and ecological destruction are bigger than any one person's bad attitude. They are part of the world we inherit, and they shape us unless grace interrupts them.

The point of original sin is not to make us despair. The point is to tell the truth about why we need grace. We cannot simply educate, organize, behave, or self-improve our way out of the deepest human brokenness. We need the freeing love of God in Christ. We need mercy that reaches deeper than shame. We need transformation that is personal, communal, and social.

The good news is that original sin is not the deepest truth about us. The image of God is deeper. Grace is deeper. Christ is deeper. Paul says that in Adam all die, but in Christ all will be made alive. Sin may be in our origins, but it is not our destiny.

Original sin tells us that all of us need healing, and the gospel tells us that healing is possible. In Christ, there is no condemnation. In Christ, the Spirit is bringing us into freedom from sorrow, fear, and sin.

**Another question:** How would you explain original sin to a child without making them afraid of God?

## 22. Do people have free will?

United Methodists believe that people have free will because of grace. We are not naturally free in the sense that we can save ourselves, fix ourselves, or choose God without God first reaching toward us. Grace comes first. God's love awakens, invites, nudges, calls, and makes it possible for us to respond.

This is part of our Wesleyan and Arminian heritage. United Methodists believe God's saving love is offered to all people. We do not believe God creates some people for salvation and others for damnation. We do not believe Christ's grace is available only to a chosen few. God's grace is wider than that, and the invitation is real.

Free will means our choices matter. We can say yes to grace, and we can resist it. We can move toward love, and we can move away from it. We can participate in healing, or we can participate in harm. God does not force love, because forced love is not love. God invites, empowers, and pursues us, while honoring the real agency of human beings.

John Wesley was deeply committed to this idea. He believed that if people had no ability to respond to God, then obedience, repentance, discipleship, and love would lose their meaning. When we sing Charles Wesley's "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," we ask God to "take away our bent to sinning," not our ability to choose. Grace heals our desires so we become more free to love God and neighbor.

At Allendale, free will also means we take responsibility seriously. We cannot blame God for the harm people choose to do. We cannot shrug at injustice and call it destiny. We cannot pretend oppression is the will of God. Human beings, communities, churches, governments, and nations make choices that bless life or destroy it.

Free will is always surrounded by grace. God is not standing far away, waiting to see if we figure it out. God is already at work in us and around us, making freedom possible. Every invitation to love, repent, forgive, repair, resist evil, and follow Jesus is a sign that grace is moving.

The gift of free will means the invitation of Christ is genuine. When Jesus says, "Follow me," he is not pretending. When the church invites people to receive grace, we trust that the Spirit is already making a response possible.

**Another question:** Why do you think someone might resist the love God is offering?

### **23. Can a person really become perfect?**

When United Methodists talk about perfection, we are not talking about never making a mistake. We are not talking about having flawless theology, flawless judgment, flawless emotions, or a flawless life. John Wesley used the word perfection to mean being made perfect in love. Christian perfection is the Spirit's work of forming us until love for God and neighbor becomes the deepest shape of our lives.

Jesus told his followers to be perfect as God is perfect. Wesley took that seriously. He believed God would never command love without also giving grace to grow into love. Christian perfection, sometimes called entire sanctification, is the hope that God can so transform our hearts that love becomes our ruling desire.

This does not mean a person becomes sinless, superior, or finished. Even mature Christians need forgiveness. Even deeply loving people can misunderstand, misjudge, wound others, and need correction. Wesley did not imagine perfection as an arrival point where growth stops. He imagined it as a life so opened to grace that love keeps becoming more complete.

United Methodist clergy are still asked, "Are you going on to perfection?" and "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" The expected answer is yes. That answer is not a claim of achievement. It is an act of trust that God can do more in us than we can do in ourselves.

At Allendale, being made perfect in love would look like more than private spirituality. It would look like justice without self-righteousness, compassion without condescension, and joy without denial. It would look like people becoming more free from fear, more honest about harm, more willing to repair, and more able to love across difference.

Christian perfection is deeply personal and deeply social. The Spirit wants to heal our hearts, and the Spirit also wants to heal the ways we live together. A church going on to perfection would keep asking whether our worship, budgets, policies, leadership, advocacy, and relationships are becoming more loving, more just, and more faithful to Jesus.

We go on to perfection because God's grace is still working. We go on because love can grow. We go on because the Spirit is not finished with us.

**Another question:** What would it mean for you to be made more perfect in love?

## 24. What happens when we die?

Christians are invited to face death with grief and hope. Death is real. It breaks our hearts, ends a life we could touch, and leaves an absence that cannot be explained away. Faith does not ask us to pretend death is easy. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend, and that gives us permission to grieve honestly.

United Methodists also proclaim that death does not have the final word. At the beginning of our service of death and resurrection, we say, "Dying, Christ destroyed our death. Rising, Christ restored our life." That is the center of Christian hope. Our trust is not in our ability to escape death, but in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

The Bible speaks less about a naturally immortal soul floating away and more about resurrection. In the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed, Christians confess the resurrection of the body. That means our future with God is not based on the idea that part of us is indestructible on its own. Eternal life is a gift from God. The God who created us can create us anew.

There is much about death we do not understand. We do not know exactly what resurrection life will be like. Paul speaks of a spiritual body, and scripture gives us images of reunion, healing, worship, peace, and a creation made new. We trust that whatever God gives will be good, because God is good.

At Allendale, we often stand beside people in the rawness of death. We gather at hospital beds, gravesides, memorial tables, sanctuaries, and living rooms. We say names. We tell stories. We bless bodies. We hold families. We cry. We sing. We tell the truth that love does not end just because breath has stopped.

Christian hope is not only about what happens after we die. Eternal life begins now whenever we live in communion with God. Resurrection life breaks into the present when love overcomes fear, when forgiveness becomes possible, when grief is held in community, when justice rises from despair, and when people discover that God is with them even in the valley of the shadow of death.

When we die, we fall into the mercy of God. We trust Christ, who has gone through death before us and promises life beyond what we can see. With the saints who have gone before us, we live and die in this hope: the best of all is, God is with us.

**Another question:** What gives you hope when you think about death?

## **5. Salvation**

## 25. What is prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace?

United Methodists talk about salvation as a journey of grace. God's grace is not only something that happens at one moment, like a switch being flipped. Grace surrounds the whole story of our lives: before we know how to ask for it, when we first trust it, and as we grow into the people God is forming us to become.

John Wesley sometimes described salvation like a house. Repentance is the porch. Faith is the door. Holiness is the house itself. That image helps us see that grace is not only about being forgiven; grace is also about being changed. God meets us, welcomes us, restores us, and then keeps working in us so our lives can become more loving, more courageous, and more faithful.

Prevenient grace is the grace that comes before. It is God's love already moving toward us before we believe, before we understand, before we know how to pray, before we have the language for faith. Prevenient grace is the nudge toward truth, the ache for justice, the longing for home, the strange pull toward mercy, the quiet awareness that there has to be more than survival. It is God getting to us before we get to God.

Justifying grace is the grace that brings us into right relationship with God. Through faith in Christ, we receive forgiveness, mercy, and a new beginning. Justification means we are not defined by our worst mistakes, our deepest shame, or the stories sin has told about us. We are received by God, made right by grace, and invited to trust that love is stronger than condemnation.

Sanctifying grace is the grace that keeps shaping us after we have walked through the door. It is the Spirit forming us in holiness, which Wesley understood as love of God and love of neighbor. Sanctifying grace helps our faith become visible in how we live, how we treat people, how we use power, how we repair harm, and how we join God's work of freedom in the world.

At Allendale, we might say grace is the whole movement of God's love: God reaching for us, God receiving us, and God remaking us. Grace does not leave us where it found us. Grace heals, disrupts, forgives, challenges, strengthens, and sends. We are saved by grace, and that grace becomes embodied in justice, mercy, courage, and love.

**Another question:** Where do you feel yourself in Wesley's house of salvation: the porch, the door, or the house?

## 26. What about repentance?

Repentance is more than feeling bad. It is turning around. It is allowing grace to help us tell the truth about harm, change direction, and live differently. In the Wesleyan tradition, repentance is not a one-time religious performance. It is part of the ongoing life of faith.

A person might honestly say, “I repented years ago, and I repented this morning.” That does not mean we live in constant shame. It means the Spirit keeps opening our eyes. As we grow in grace, we begin to see more clearly where fear, ego, prejudice, selfishness, or indifference have shaped us. Repentance is one way God keeps freeing us.

Real repentance shows up in changed behavior. It repairs what can be repaired. It apologizes without demanding comfort. It returns what was taken. It changes policies, habits, budgets, and relationships. It moves from confession into a different way of living.

United Methodists do not believe repentance earns salvation. We are justified by faith, not by our own works or deserving. Grace does not make repair unnecessary; grace makes repair possible. God’s mercy gives us the courage to face the truth without being destroyed by it.

At Allendale, repentance has personal and public dimensions. A person can repent of cruelty, dishonesty, addiction, or betrayal. A church can repent of racism, exclusion, spiritual abuse, silence, cowardice, or protecting institutional comfort over vulnerable people. A city can repent of policies that criminalize poverty. A nation can repent of violence, white supremacy, environmental destruction, and the worship of wealth.

Repentance begins because God has already come near. God is the one stirring the desire to change, the courage to confess, and the hope that a different life is possible. We do not manipulate people into repentance. We tell the truth, trust the Spirit, and make room for grace to do what fear cannot.

**Another question:** Why do you think repentance is often easier in private than in public?

## 27. Is salvation a moment or a journey?

United Methodists usually answer this question by saying yes. Salvation can include holy moments when grace breaks through in a way we can remember. A person may have a moment when they realize they are loved, forgiven, called, claimed, or no longer alone. A person may look back on a particular prayer, Baptism, recovery meeting, retreat, worship service, hospital room, protest, or conversation and say, "Something changed in me there."

Salvation is also a journey. God's grace keeps working in us long after any single moment has passed. We are being healed over time. We are being freed over time. We are being formed over time. We are learning to love God and neighbor with more honesty, courage, and tenderness. We are learning to tell the truth, repair harm, resist evil, receive mercy, and become more fully alive.

John Wesley described salvation as the whole movement of grace: grace that comes before us, grace that awakens faith, grace that forgives, and grace that keeps shaping us in love. In that sense, salvation is not only about where we go when we die. It is about what God is doing in us and through us now. Salvation is the healing of our relationship with God, our neighbors, ourselves, and creation.

This means salvation is personal, but never private. God saves real people with real wounds, real histories, real bodies, real fears, and real responsibilities. Grace reaches into our shame, addiction, grief, bitterness, loneliness, and despair. Grace also reaches into our politics, money, habits, relationships, churches, and communities. God is not only interested in getting souls to heaven. God is interested in making people whole and making the world more just.

At Allendale, we do not imagine salvation as a religious transaction where someone says the correct words and then has nothing left to learn. We see salvation as life with God: being found, forgiven, healed, challenged, changed, and sent. A saved life should become more loving, not more arrogant; more courageous, not more cruel; more truthful, not more defensive; more available to the suffering of the world, not less.

This also gives us a gentler way to talk about people who struggle. Faith is not always a straight line. People wander. People doubt. People get tired. People leave church because church hurt them. People return years later with a different kind of honesty. People lose language for God and then find it again, or find new language that makes breathing possible. The journey of salvation has room for detours, silence, wilderness, and rebuilding.

The good news is that grace does not give up easily. God keeps reaching. The Spirit keeps calling. Christ keeps meeting people on the road, at the table, in the garden, by the sea, behind locked doors, and in all the places where we thought hope was finished. Salvation is the long work of God's love making us free.

**Another question:** Where have you experienced salvation as a moment, and where have you experienced it as a journey?

## 28. What are we being saved from and saved for?

Salvation is often talked about as being saved from hell or saved for heaven, but the biblical picture is wider, deeper, and much more connected to life right now. In scripture, salvation means rescue, healing, forgiveness, freedom, restoration, and new creation. It is God's work of bringing people and the world back toward wholeness.

We are being saved from sin, but sin is more than individual bad behavior. Sin is everything that separates us from God, from one another, from creation, and from our own belovedness. Sin shows up in shame, fear, greed, cruelty, despair, addiction, pride, violence, and indifference. It also shows up in systems that crush people: racism, poverty, patriarchy, queerphobia, transphobia, ableism, nationalism, exploitation, and the worship of wealth.

So when we say God saves, we are not only talking about what happens after death. We are talking about God placing healing grace on the wounds that keep people from becoming fully alive. God saves us from the lies that tell us we are worthless. God saves us from the habits that keep us trapped. God saves us from the powers that teach us to dominate, hoard, exclude, and fear. God saves us from making peace with the suffering of our neighbors.

We are also being saved for something. We are saved for love. We are saved for joy. We are saved for courage. We are saved for community. We are saved for the work of repair. We are saved for a life shaped by Jesus, where mercy becomes visible, tables get wider, wounds are tended, enemies become neighbors, and people who were pushed aside are brought to the center.

In the Wesleyan tradition, salvation is never only pardon. It is also transformation. Grace forgives us, and grace changes us. Grace receives us as we are, and grace keeps forming us into people who can love more truthfully. God does not save us so we can escape the world. God saves us so we can participate in the healing of the world.

At Allendale, we see salvation whenever someone begins to breathe again after years of shame. We see it when a person wounded by religion discovers that God was never the one who hated them. We see it when someone in recovery tells the truth and finds community. We see it when queer and trans people are not merely tolerated, but blessed. We see it when a church stops asking how to survive and starts asking how to love the neighborhood.

Salvation is personal, but it is never private. God saves actual people with bodies, histories, wounds, and hopes. And as God saves us, God draws us into the work of saving love: forgiving, protesting, healing, repairing, and building a world where every person can live with dignity.

To be saved is to be caught up in the mercy of God. It is to have grace placed like salve on what has been wounded. It is to be freed from what destroys life and called into what makes life whole. It is grace becoming breath, courage, community, and love in motion.

**Another question:** What do you think God is saving you from, and what might God be saving you for?

## 29. What do good works have to do with salvation?

Good works have everything and nothing to do with salvation. They have nothing to do with earning God's love. We are not saved because we perform well enough, serve enough, believe loudly enough, or collect enough spiritual achievements. Salvation is by grace through faith. It is God's gift, not our trophy.

Good works have everything to do with salvation because grace changes how we live. Faith that never becomes love, mercy, courage, repair, generosity, or justice is not the fullness of faith Wesley taught. James says faith without works is dead. Wesley would agree that living faith bears visible fruit.

United Methodists believe salvation includes transformation. God does not only forgive us; God forms us. God does not only reconcile us; God sends us. The grace that saves us also teaches us how to love our neighbors, tell the truth, feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and challenge systems that harm the vulnerable.

Good works are not spiritual résumé-building. They are the fruit of grace. A tree does not produce fruit in order to become alive; it produces fruit because it is alive. In the same way, good works do not create salvation. They reveal that grace is alive and growing in us.

At Allendale, good works look like worship and advocacy, prayer and protest, communion and community organizing, feeding and fighting for policy change, blessing children and protecting trans youth, offering pastoral care and challenging racism, and asking why so many neighbors were left vulnerable. Personal holiness and social holiness belong together.

Christian salvation is not simply moral behavior. It is communion with God in Christ, a life received by grace and reshaped by love. Good works are the evidence, not the engine.

**Another question:** What would you say to someone who says, "I do not need to believe; I live a good life"?

### 30. How wide is God's grace?

United Methodists believe God's grace is wider than we can measure. The saving love of Jesus Christ is offered to all people, not just the religious, not just the respectable, not just the people who already know the language of faith, and not just the people the church finds easy to understand. Grace moves toward the whole world.

This is sometimes called universal atonement. It means Christ's saving work is available to everyone. United Methodists reject the idea that God has chosen some people for salvation and others for damnation. We do not believe God creates people just to condemn them. The God we meet in Jesus is the God who seeks the lost, welcomes sinners, heals the wounded, feeds the hungry, and invites every soul to the feast.

John Wesley argued strongly against forms of predestination that made salvation seem limited to a chosen few. For Wesley, the gospel invitation had to be real. If grace is only available to some, then preaching becomes hollow, repentance becomes theater, and the character of God becomes distorted. Wesley believed God's love reaches every person before they know how to reach back.

This does not mean United Methodists have every mystery figured out. We should be careful whenever Christians speak too confidently about who is in, who is out, who is saved, who is lost, or how God's mercy will finally work. Those judgments belong to God. Our calling is to bear witness to the wideness of grace, not to patrol its borders.

At Allendale, we are less interested in drawing maps of who is beyond God and more interested in living as though no one is beyond love. We do not get to decide who is worth saving. We do not get to narrow the table God is widening. We do not get to treat any person as disposable, hopeless, or outside the reach of mercy.

Wide grace changes how we practice church. It makes us humble. It makes us curious. It makes us less afraid of difference. It teaches us to listen for God in people the church has too often dismissed. It sends us toward neighbors rather than away from them. It reminds us that the Spirit may already be working in someone long before they ever call that movement faith.

Wide grace also shapes evangelism. Evangelism is not scaring people into religion or treating neighbors like projects. It is bearing witness to the love that has found us. It is living in a way that makes grace visible. It is inviting people into the healing, freeing, truth-telling life of Christ without manipulation or fear.

God's grace is wide enough to find us, patient enough to stay with us, and strong enough to change us. The church's task is to trust that wideness and become a community where people can encounter it in flesh-and-blood ways: at the table, in worship, in recovery, in justice, in friendship, in repair, and in the ordinary miracle of being loved back to life.

**Another question:** What would change if we trusted that God's grace is wider than our fear?

## **6. The Church**

### **31. What is the nature of the church?**

The church is the body of Christ in the world. It is more than a building, more than a denomination, and more than a worship service. The church is a living community of people called by God, gathered by grace, shaped by Word and sacrament, and sent into the world to embody the love of Jesus.

United Methodists understand the church as both visible and invisible. The visible church has real people, real buildings, real meetings, real budgets, real sacraments, real sermons, real conflicts, real failures, and real acts of love. The invisible church is the deeper communion of all who belong to Christ, across time, place, tradition, language, and even death. We are part of something larger than what we can see on any given Sunday morning.

The ancient church described the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The church is one because our unity is found in Christ. The church is holy because we are called to live as a different kind of people, shaped by mercy, justice, and love. The church is catholic because the body of Christ is universal, larger than any one congregation, denomination, nation, or culture. The church is apostolic because we continue in the teaching and witness of those first followers of Jesus.

The church is also a disciplined community. Discipline is not about punishment for its own sake; it is about discipleship. To be part of the church is to enter a way of life where we are accountable to God and to one another. We learn to pray, forgive, serve, give, listen, repent, tell the truth, receive grace, and practice love when love is difficult.

At Allendale, the church is visible when people gather around the table, sing with courage, hold one another in grief, bless children, welcome those who have been harmed by religion, organize for justice, open space for the community, and insist that no one has to disappear in order to belong. The church is visible whenever the body of Christ erupts into the world with compassion, courage, and holy trouble.

The church is not perfect because people are not perfect. The church can wound, exclude, protect power, and confuse survival with faithfulness. Yet God keeps calling the church back to its true nature: a community where Christ is preached, the sacraments are shared, faith is practiced, gifts are honored, and love takes public form.

**Another question:** How do you experience church?

## 32. What is the mission of the church?

The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. For United Methodists, that means the church exists not only to gather people in worship, but to form people in the way of Jesus and send them into the world as agents of grace, justice, healing, and love.

Discipleship is more than agreeing with ideas about Jesus. It is learning to follow Jesus with our whole lives. Disciples are people being shaped by prayer, worship, scripture, sacraments, service, generosity, justice, mercy, and community. The church's mission is to help people become the kind of people who embody Christ in the world.

Transformation of the world is not a small mission. It means the gospel has consequences for bodies, neighborhoods, schools, housing, prisons, climate, public policy, families, and every place where human life is either honored or harmed. The reign of God is not limited to private spirituality. Jesus announced good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of God's favor. The church's mission flows from that same Spirit.

At Allendale, we understand mission as worship and witness, prayer and protest, communion and community organizing. We make disciples when people learn to love God and neighbor with courage. We participate in transformation when we welcome the excluded, defend LGBTQ lives, resist racism, feed people, respond to hurricanes, care for creation, challenge unjust policies, and build a community where grace becomes visible.

The local church is a crucial place where this mission takes flesh. It is where people are baptized, fed at the table, taught the stories of faith, held in grief, challenged in love, and sent into the world. A church does not measure faithfulness only by attendance, budgets, or reputation. We measure faithfulness by whether people are becoming more like Jesus and whether the world around us is encountering more mercy, more justice, and more hope because we are here.

The mission finally belongs to God. The church does not save the world by its own strength. We participate in what God is already doing. United Methodists sometimes talk about living with active expectancy: we act faithfully, and we expect God's Spirit to be at work beyond what we can control.

**Another question:** What is the church's mission when the world does not want to hear the gospel?

### 33. What are the creeds of the church?

A creed is a statement of belief. The word comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe.” Creeds developed in the life of the church as ways to confess the faith, teach the community, and protect the church from teachings that distorted the gospel. They are not meant to replace scripture. They are meant to help the church speak clearly about the God revealed in scripture.

United Methodists understand scripture as the primary authority for faith and life. At the same time, we receive the ancient creeds as gifts from the wider church. The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed are the two historic creeds most familiar in United Methodist worship. They teach the central Christian story: God creates, Christ comes among us, Jesus suffers, dies, rises, and will come again, the Spirit gives life, the church is called into communion, sins are forgiven, and resurrection is our hope.

The Apostles’ Creed has long been connected to Baptism. It gives the church language for the faith into which we are baptized. The Nicene Creed came from the early church’s struggle to speak faithfully about Jesus Christ as fully divine and fully human. Both creeds connect us to generations of Christians who prayed, argued, suffered, worshiped, and witnessed before us.

United Methodists also use many affirmations of faith beyond the historic creeds. Our hymnal includes statements from different parts of the Christian family, including modern affirmations, social affirmations, and affirmations based on scripture. This reflects a deeply Methodist instinct: the church’s faith is ancient, but our confession must keep becoming alive in the language and struggles of each generation.

At Allendale, creeds can be grounding, but we also know some people struggle with parts of them. Some carry questions about the virgin birth, resurrection, judgment, or the language used for God. Others have been hurt by churches that used doctrine as a weapon. We can honor honest questions while also recognizing that the creeds belong to the whole church, not only to our individual certainty on a given Sunday.

When we say a creed together, we are not claiming that every person has every word figured out. We are entering a shared story larger than our private understanding. We are allowing the faith of the whole church to carry us, teach us, challenge us, and stretch us.

**Another question:** Why do some congregations use creeds often, while others use them rarely?

### **34. Who are clergy?**

Clergy are people set apart by the church for representative servant leadership. In The United Methodist Church, clergy may be ordained, commissioned, or licensed. Their role is not to be more Christian than everyone else, but to serve the whole body by preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, ordering the church for mission, offering pastoral care, equipping the saints, and helping the congregation follow Jesus in the world.

United Methodist clergy are accountable to the annual conference, not simply to one local congregation. That is part of our connectional life. A bishop appoints clergy to places of service after consultation, and clergy serve within a covenant of accountability, education, formation, and discipline. This reminds us that ministry is never private ownership. It belongs to God and is entrusted to the church.

There are two orders of ordained clergy in United Methodism: elders and deacons. Elders are ordained to Word, sacrament, order, and service. They preach, teach, administer Baptism and Communion, order the life of the church, and help lead the congregation in mission. Deacons are ordained to Word, service, compassion, and justice. They often connect the gathered life of the church with the needs and struggles of the world. They were also given the right by the church to administer the sacraments in their ministry setting.

United Methodism also has licensed local pastors, who are authorized to serve in pastoral ministry in the particular places to which they are appointed. Commissioned ministers are in a process of preparation and formation toward ordination. Bishops are not a separate order of ordination; they remain elders who have been given a particular role of oversight, appointment, and leadership within the connection.

At Allendale, clergy leadership should never mean that the church revolves around one person. A pastor helps preach, teach, guide, organize, bless, challenge, comfort, and equip, but the body of Christ is larger than the pastor. Clergy are called to help the whole church discover and use its gifts, not to hoard ministry or become the center of the congregation's identity.

People of all genders are eligible for every clergy role in The United Methodist Church. At our best, we recognize that God calls people across gender, race, age, sexuality, class, culture, and life experience. The church's task is to discern gifts, test calling, form leaders, and hold clergy accountable to the way of Jesus.

**Another question:** What would the church be like without clergy?

### **35. What is the role of laypersons?**

Laypersons are not the audience of the church. Laypersons are ministers of the gospel. Through Baptism, all Christians are called into the ministry of Jesus Christ for the healing of the world. The pastor does not do the ministry while everyone else watches. The whole people of God are called, gifted, and sent.

The United Methodist tradition has always depended on lay ministry. Early Methodism grew through class leaders, lay preachers, organizers, visitors, teachers, and ordinary people who practiced faith in daily life. Some of the most important leaders in the movements that eventually became The United Methodist Church were laypeople whose lives showed that ministry could not be confined to pulpits, robes, or church offices.

The Protestant Reformation used the phrase priesthood of all believers. That means every person can come before God without needing another human being to stand between them and God's grace. It also means that together we share a common priesthood, offering our lives in service, prayer, witness, and love. The gifts vary, but the calling belongs to the whole body.

Lay ministry is much more than helping around the church building, though that work can be holy and necessary. Lay ministry happens in classrooms, courtrooms, kitchens, hospitals, protests, voting booths, recovery meetings, offices, neighborhoods, city halls, family tables, and friendships. Laypeople carry the gospel into places clergy may never enter.

At Allendale, laypersons lead, teach, sing, organize, welcome, challenge, pray, advocate, repair, care, serve, and dream. Laypersons chair committees, count money, write liturgy, run technology, visit the sick, offer testimony, mentor children, organize mutual aid, show up for justice, and help the church stay connected to the real lives of our community. The church becomes more faithful when laypeople are not merely allowed to participate, but trusted as ministers.

The role of laypersons is to live the gospel where they are. That includes acts of mercy, acts of justice, and the ordinary holiness of integrity, compassion, courage, and truth-telling in daily life.

**Another question:** What would the church be like without laity?

### **36. What is a Deaconess/Home Missioner?**

A Deaconess or Home Missioner is a layperson in The United Methodist Church who has been called to a lifetime vocation of love, justice, and service. They are not ordained clergy, and they are not “almost pastors.” They are laypeople whose ministry has been recognized, consecrated, and connected to the wider church.

The word deaconess has deep roots in the Methodist tradition, going back to women who served in ministries of mercy, education, health care, care for the poor, and community transformation long before the church fully recognized women’s leadership. The office of Home Missioner was later created so lay men and nonbinary folks could also enter this same kind of lifetime relationship in servant ministry. Today, the shared office of Deaconess and Home Missioner points to a calling that is public, embodied, and rooted in the needs of the world.

Some Deaconess/Home Missioners work with neighbors who are unhoused, immigrants, children, elders, survivors of violence, people in prison, people in recovery, or communities affected by poverty. Some work in health care, education, advocacy, community organizing, creation care, nonprofit leadership, disaster response, or ministries that do not look like traditional church work at all. Their ministry often happens where the wounds of the world are most visible.

At Allendale, we might say Deaconesses and Home Missioners remind the church that ministry is not limited to pulpits, sanctuaries, sacraments, or Sunday mornings. The Spirit calls people into the streets, schools, shelters, hospitals, courtrooms, kitchens, neighborhoods, and movements where love needs hands and feet. Their work helps the church remember that Jesus did not only preach good news; he touched bodies, fed people, crossed boundaries, confronted harm, and restored dignity.

This office also tells the truth about lay ministry. Laypeople are not assistants to “real” ministry. Laypeople are ministers of the gospel. A Deaconess or Home Missioner is one powerful example of what happens when a layperson’s whole life becomes organized around God’s call to serve. Their work is not less holy because it happens beyond the sanctuary. It may be holy precisely because it happens there.

The church needs Deaconess/Home Missioners because the world needs ministries that are patient, practical, and courageous. We need people who know how to listen to the cries of the community, build relationships, challenge unjust systems, and stay when the work is slow. We need people whose vocation teaches the church that love is not an idea. Love is a practice.

Deaconesses and Home Missioners are signs of a church that refuses to separate faith from daily life. They show us that grace can look like a classroom, a clinic, a shelter, a protest, a grant application, a home visit, a food pantry, a recovery circle, or a hand held in crisis. They help the church become more faithful by bringing the gospel closer to the places where people are trying to survive and become whole.

**Another question:** Where have you seen laypeople doing ministry that changed a community?

## **7. Worship and Sacraments**

### **37. How do United Methodists worship?**

United Methodists worship in many different ways. Some congregations worship with pipe organ, choir, robes, and historic liturgy. Some worship with praise bands, drums, projected lyrics, and raised hands. Some worship with call-and-response preaching, gospel music, silence, testimony, candles, Communion every week, children wandering freely, or a birthday song before the benediction. Across all that variety, we trust that God can be present.

The United Methodist Church has a basic pattern for worship: gathering, praise, prayer, scripture, proclamation, response, sacraments, offering, and sending. Congregations adapt that pattern to their own people, place, culture, gifts, and needs. The form can change, but worship always asks deep questions: Who is the God we are worshiping? What kind of people is this worship forming us to become?

Worship is directed toward God. We gather to praise, confess, listen, give thanks, receive grace, and offer ourselves. Worship is not a performance for the congregation, though beauty and creativity can help us pray. Worship is not a religious product for consumers, though hospitality and care help people enter the space. Worship is the people of God turning our attention toward the Holy One.

Worship also forms us. The prayers we pray, the songs we sing, the silence we keep, the scripture we hear, the table we share, and the people we welcome all shape our imagination. When worship teaches us to love God while ignoring our neighbor, something has gone wrong. The prophets remind us that worship divorced from justice is hollow. The God we worship cares about hungry bodies, oppressed people, captives, strangers, widows, orphans, workers, prisoners, creation, and the poor.

At Allendale, worship is where beauty and justice meet. We sing, pray, preach, laugh, grieve, organize, lament, bless, and tell the truth. We use ancient words and new words. We light candles. We name harm. We welcome children, queer and trans people, skeptics, elders, activists, artists, exhausted caregivers, and people who are not sure whether church can be safe. We worship a God who is holy enough to be adored and near enough to be found in the struggle for freedom.

United Methodist worship does not have one required style, but faithful worship should lead us toward love. It should help us become more honest, more merciful, more courageous, more connected to Christ, and more available to the world God loves.

**Another question:** How do you define worship?

### **38. Why does Allendale use secular music in worship?**

The church has often created a false divide between sacred and secular. Sacred music was treated as serious, pure, and worthy of worship, while secular music was treated as ordinary, suspicious, or unfit for God. But scripture does not give us a God who stays locked inside religious categories. God speaks through creation, dreams, strangers, prophets, meals, bodies, storms, silence, and songs of lament. Jesus finds holiness at dinner tables, wells, roadsides, fishing boats, public squares, and among people religious leaders had already dismissed.

Using secular music in worship does not mean anything goes. Not every song belongs in worship simply because it is beautiful, emotional, or popular. We ask what the song does. Does it tell the truth? Does it open the heart? Does it help us grieve, hope, resist, confess, rejoice, or remember who we are? Does it point us toward love of God and neighbor? Does it help the congregation hear the gospel in a register they can feel in their bones?

At Allendale, the question is not whether worship is traditional or contemporary. Those categories do not really fit us. Our worship is honest, embodied, creative, justice-rooted, and shaped by the people in the room. Sometimes that means hymns. Sometimes it means spirituals. Sometimes it means protest music. Sometimes it means Broadway, folk, soul, pop, jazz, or a song that would never appear in a denominational hymnal but still carries the ache of the human spirit and the hope of resurrection.

Secular music can help us name what religious language sometimes avoids. It can hold grief without rushing to fix it. It can tell the truth about love, heartbreak, survival, loneliness, joy, rage, and courage. It can give voice to people the church has silenced. It can help worshipers who have been wounded by religious words find another doorway into prayer. This does not make the music less holy. It may reveal that holiness was never as narrow as we were taught. A song does not have to mention God by name to carry the presence of God. A song does not have to sound churchy to become prayer. A song does not have to be written for worship in order to lead us toward mercy, justice, tenderness, truth, and freedom.

The Wesleyan tradition has always known that grace meets people in ordinary life. John Wesley preached in fields, organized people in homes, cared about workers and prisoners, and believed faith had to be lived in the real world. Allendale's use of secular music grows from that same instinct. We are listening for grace wherever grace is singing.

When secular music enters worship, it can remind us that God is not fragile. God does not need to be protected from the world. God is already in the world, already moving through the songs people sing when they fall in love, bury their dead, march for justice, or dance after grief. Allendale uses secular music because everything belongs to God, and because worship should sound like the actual lives of the people gathered. We sing what helps us tell the truth. We sing what helps us love. We sing what helps us become free.

**Another question:** What song from outside the church has helped you experience something holy?

### **39. How is United Methodist Communion different from other traditions?**

United Methodists understand Communion as a means of grace—one of the ordinary ways God meets us, feeds us, forgives us, forms us, and sends us. It is a holy meal where the risen Christ is truly present and where grace is offered to hungry people.

Different Christian traditions explain Communion in different ways. Roman Catholics speak of it becoming the body and blood of Christ. Lutherans speak of Christ's presence. Some Baptist and evangelical traditions understand it as a memorial. Reformed traditions often emphasize the Spirit's work in the meal. United Methodists share pieces of this wider Christian family, but we tend to hold the mystery without trying to over-explain it.

United Methodists trust the promise that Christ meets us in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. The presence is spiritual, and spiritual does not mean imaginary. Christ is present by the Holy Spirit, drawing us into communion with God and with one another.

Communion is also connected to Wesleyan grace. John Wesley encouraged Methodists to receive Communion frequently because he believed the table was a converting, justifying, and sanctifying ordinance. In other words, Communion can awaken faith, deepen trust, forgive sin, heal wounds, and shape us in holiness. The table is not only for people who feel spiritually ready. It is for people who need grace.

United Methodists generally practice an open table. The invitation is extended to all who love Christ, repent of sin, and seek to live in peace with one another. In practice, that means we do not turn Communion into a denominational checkpoint. You do not have to be United Methodist to receive. You do not have to have every doctrine figured out. You do not have to arrive with perfect faith. The table belongs to Christ, and Christ is the host.

United Methodists usually use grape juice rather than wine. That practice grew out of temperance commitments and pastoral concern, especially for people for whom alcohol would be harmful. At its best, grape juice is not a lesser version of the sacrament. It is a sign that the table should not create barriers for children, youth, people in recovery, or anyone seeking grace.

At Allendale, Communion is central because it tells the truth we are trying to live. Everyone comes hungry. Everyone receives by grace. Everyone is gathered into one body. The table does not belong to the pastor, the denomination, the powerful, the respectable, or the people who think they have earned their place. It belongs to Jesus.

The table also sends us. Communion is not a private spiritual moment that ends when we walk away with bread still on our tongues. We receive the body of Christ so we can become the body of Christ for the world. We are fed so we can feed. We are forgiven so we can practice repair. We are gathered so we can widen the circle. We are blessed and broken open for the life of the world.

**Another question:** What do you experience at Communion that words cannot fully explain?

## 40. How is United Methodist Baptism different from other traditions?

United Methodists understand Baptism as a gift of grace. It is a sign that God's love comes first. Before we understand, God is already moving toward us.

Different Christian traditions understand Baptism in different ways. Some baptize only people old enough to make a personal profession of faith. Some baptize infants because they understand Baptism as part of God's covenant with families and the church. Some traditions emphasize Baptism as public testimony. Others emphasize cleansing from sin, entrance into the church, dying and rising with Christ, or receiving sacramental grace. United Methodists share parts of that wider Christian witness, but our emphasis is deeply Wesleyan: grace comes before us, claims us, and invites us into a life of response.

That is why United Methodists baptize infants, children, youth, and adults. In infant Baptism, the child is not expected to understand what is happening. The church understands enough to make promises. Parents, sponsors, and the congregation promise to surround the child with a community of love, teaching, prayer, and care until that child can claim the promises of Baptism for themselves. Later, in confirmation or profession of faith, a person says their own yes to the grace that has already been surrounding them.

United Methodists also baptize only once. We do not rebaptize because Baptism depends on God's faithfulness, not on the strength of our memory, the clarity of our belief, or the consistency of our discipleship. People may wander, doubt, change, grieve, leave church, return to faith, or experience a new spiritual awakening. The church can bless those moments through reaffirmation of Baptism, prayer, anointing, and laying on of hands, but we do not need to baptize again because God's promise has not expired.

United Methodists baptize with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though many congregations also use expansive language. Baptism can happen by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. Some traditions insist on immersion as the only faithful form. United Methodists receive all three because the amount of water is not the center. The grace of God is the center.

Baptism is personal, but it is never private. In Baptism, we are incorporated into the body of Christ. We are joined to a people, a story, a table, a mission, and a way of life. The congregation makes promises because no one follows Jesus alone. Baptism creates a community responsibility: to help one another grow in faith, resist evil, practice mercy, seek justice, and live as people who belong to God.

Baptism tells the truth before the world can lie. Before racism, shame, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, ableism, addiction, grief, or fear can name us, Baptism says we are beloved. Before we can achieve anything, Baptism says we are received. Before we can understand grace, Baptism says grace is already holding us.

**Another question:** What would change if you trusted that God's grace claimed you before you could earn it?

## 41. What does it mean to remember your Baptism?

When United Methodists say, “Remember your Baptism and be thankful,” we are not assuming everyone has a clear memory of the day water touched their body. Many people were baptized as infants. Some were baptized in churches they no longer attend. Some were baptized before they had language for faith. Some remember their Baptism vividly, and some do not remember it at all.

Remembering Baptism means remembering who you are. You are beloved. You are claimed by grace. You are part of the body of Christ. You are not the worst thing you have done. You are not the worst thing done to you. You are not the labels placed on you by fear, shame, family, church, empire, or the world. The water tells a deeper truth.

Remembering Baptism means remembering what we have renounced. In the baptismal vows, the church rejects evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. That means Baptism is not only tender; it is also defiant. The water marks us for a life of resistance to everything that destroys, dehumanizes, exploits, or makes peace with suffering.

At Allendale, remembering Baptism means remembering that our faith is embodied. Water touches skin. Grace meets bodies. God blesses flesh. Baptism is not an escape from the world but a commissioning into it. We are baptized into a community that promises to love children, honor bodies, protect the vulnerable, widen the table, seek justice, and follow Jesus into the places where healing is needed.

Remembering Baptism can be especially powerful for people who have been harmed by religion. The church may have failed you, but the water did not. People may have used God’s name to shame you, but Baptism speaks a different word. It says you belong to the God whose love is wider than fear, deeper than shame, and stronger than every voice that told you there was no room for you.

When we remember Baptism, we also remember one another. No one is baptized into a private faith. We are baptized into a people. The congregation’s promises matter. We are responsible for helping one another live as people of grace. We remind one another who we are when we forget. We hold one another when the world is heavy. We call one another back to mercy, courage, truth, and love.

To remember your Baptism is to let the water keep speaking. It says grace came first. It says you are beloved. It says evil does not get your allegiance. It says your life belongs to God’s dream of healing, justice, and joy.

**Another question:** What promise do you most need to remember from the waters of Baptism?

## 42. Why don't United Methodists have other sacraments?

United Methodists recognize two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion. We do this because these are the two practices most clearly commanded by Jesus and given to the whole church as signs of God's grace. In Baptism, we are claimed by grace and incorporated into the body of Christ. At Communion, we are fed by grace and formed as the body of Christ for the world.

Other Christian traditions count more sacraments. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, for example, recognize seven: Baptism, Communion, confirmation, confession, marriage, ordination, and anointing of the sick. United Methodists honor all of those practices. We pray for the sick. We bless marriages. We confirm people in faith. We ordain clergy. We confess sin and hear words of forgiveness. We lay hands on people. We anoint with oil. We gather at death and proclaim resurrection hope.

We simply do not call all of those practices sacraments in the same technical sense.

That does not make them unholy. It does not make them less important. It does not mean God is absent from them. It means United Methodists use the word sacrament in a particular way: an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ to the whole church. Baptism and Communion are the two practices we place in that category.

At Allendale, this distinction helps us without limiting God. We do not believe grace only shows up in two places. God's grace can meet us in a hospital room, at a wedding, in a recovery meeting, during a protest, through a prayer of confession, in the laying on of hands, while singing, while grieving, while serving a neighbor, or while sitting quietly because words have run out. The sacraments are not the only places God acts. They are reliable places where the church gathers and trusts that grace will meet us.

Baptism and Communion also tell the whole story of Christian life in a simple and embodied way. Water says we are claimed before we can earn it. Bread and cup say we are fed before we can deserve it. Water gathers us into belonging. Bread and cup send us into love. Together, they teach us that Christian faith is not only an idea in our heads. It touches bodies. It creates community. It gives grace something we can feel, taste, and remember.

So United Methodists have two sacraments, but we have many means of grace. That is a deeply Wesleyan way to understand the Christian life. God is not stingy with grace. God meets us through practices, people, places, and ordinary elements that become holy because love is moving through them.

At Allendale, we can honor the two sacraments without pretending holiness is scarce. Baptism and Communion anchor us. Other sacred practices shape us. And the Spirit keeps surprising us with grace in places the church may not have thought to name.

**Another question:** Where outside the sacraments have you experienced God's grace?

## **8. The Bible**

### 43. What is the Bible's authority?

United Methodists traditionally understand the Bible's authority as rooted in God. The church has believed scripture is the primary witness to God's movement in creation, covenant, freedom, prophecy, incarnation, resurrection, and the life of the church. The Bible is not simply an ancient religious book. It is the story through which the church has learned to recognize the voice, character, and saving work of God.

For Christians, Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God. John's Gospel calls Jesus the Word made flesh. That means we read the written Word through the living Word. Scripture is our primary authority, and Jesus is the lens through which we interpret it. When we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus: his mercy, his truth-telling, his table, his solidarity with the poor, his confrontation with power, his death, and his resurrection.

United Methodists believe the Bible contains everything necessary for salvation. That does not mean the Bible answers every question we can imagine. It means scripture gives us what we need to know the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ and to live as people formed by that grace. The Bible teaches us who God is, who we are, what sin does, what grace does, and what love requires.

The Bible is a library of many kinds of writing: poetry, law, story, history, prophecy, letters, parables, songs, wisdom, lament, apocalypse, and Gospel. God speaks through all of it, though not always in the same way. A psalm is not a legal code. A parable is not a newspaper report. A prophetic oracle is not a scientific textbook. Taking scripture seriously means honoring the kind of writing we are reading.

At Allendale, we read the Bible with love, humility, courage, and community. We expect scripture to comfort us, challenge us, correct us, and send us. We also know Christians can read the same passage and disagree. That is why we need one another, especially people whose lives and experiences help us hear what we might miss on our own. The Bible belongs to the whole church, not to any one person's certainty.

The authority of scripture is not about using the Bible to win arguments or control people. Scripture's authority forms us in the way of Jesus. It calls us toward salvation, holiness, justice, mercy, repentance, freedom, and love.

**Another question:** How has the Bible been used to harm?

#### **44. Why do we call the Bible God's Word?**

We call the Bible God's Word because through scripture, God speaks. The Bible bears witness to what God wants to reveal: God's character, God's mercy, God's justice, God's covenant, God's grief over human violence, God's love for the world, and God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

Christians also call Jesus the Word of God. John says the Word became flesh and lived among us. That means God's deepest Word is not a sentence on a page, but a person. Jesus is God's self-expression in human life. The written Word points us toward the living Word, and the living Word helps us understand the written Word.

United Methodists do not usually imagine the Bible as if God dictated every syllable to passive human writers. Scripture is inspired, and it also comes through real people in real places, languages, cultures, histories, struggles, and communities. The humanity of scripture does not make it less sacred. It means God has chosen to speak through human voices, just as God chose to take on human flesh in Jesus.

Because the Bible comes to us through human language and history, we study it carefully. We ask who wrote a text, who first heard it, what kind of writing it is, what problem it was addressing, how it fits within the larger story of scripture, and how it is interpreted through the life of Jesus. Studying the words helps us hear the Word.

At Allendale, calling the Bible God's Word means we come to scripture expecting encounter. We do not read only for information. We read to be formed. We read to be interrupted by grace. We read to listen for the Spirit's call in our own time: good news for the poor, release for the captives, healing for the wounded, freedom for the oppressed, and courage for the work of love.

The Bible is God's Word because God still speaks through it. It has carried faith across generations, sustained people in suffering, sparked movements for justice, exposed the lies of empire, and taught the church to recognize Christ in the world.

**Another question:** What is the essential truth of the Bible?

## 45. Is the Bible infallible?

Hard no, if by infallible we mean the Bible is without contradiction, tension, historical complexity, or human fingerprints. The Bible does not need us to pretend it is something it is not in order for it to be sacred. It is not a modern science textbook, a perfect history manual, or a flat rulebook where every verse speaks in the same way with the same kind of authority.

The Bible contradicts itself in places. It gives more than one creation story. The Gospels do not always tell the same events in the same order or with the same details. Some passages carry ancient assumptions about patriarchy, violence, tribe, purity, and power that should not be baptized as God's eternal desire. Scripture contains argument, development, protest, poetry, memory, testimony, and competing voices.

At Allendale, we believe the Bible contains the Word of God. God speaks through scripture, but not every sentence carries the same closeness to the heart of Jesus. For Christians, the fullest Word of God is not a book. The fullest Word of God is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The written word is sacred because it bears witness to the living Word.

The Bible is a living document in the life of the church. That does not mean we can make it say anything we want. It means the Spirit keeps speaking through these ancient texts in new times, new struggles, and new communities. A story can carry more than one faithful meaning. Exodus is an ancient story of Israel, and it became a freedom song for enslaved people. The cross is a Roman execution, and it is also God's solidarity with every person crushed by state violence. Resurrection is a confession of faith, and it is also a pattern of hope wherever life rises after death.

Faithfulness does not require pretending the Bible is simple. Faithfulness asks us to tell the truth about what is there, refuse interpretations that dehumanize, and listen for the God who still speaks through sacred, complicated, dangerous, beautiful texts.

**Another question:** How does wrestling honestly with scripture deepen faith rather than weaken it?

## 46. How do I read the Bible?

Read the Bible with reverence, curiosity, humility, and courage. Do not rush to make every passage behave. Some texts comfort. Some confront. Some confuse. Some disturb. Some have been used to harm people, and some have helped people survive harm. A faithful reader learns to slow down.

Begin by asking what kind of text you are reading. Poetry does not work like law. Parable does not work like biography. Apocalypse does not work like a newspaper report. Lament does not work like doctrine. A psalm, a genealogy, a prophetic speech, a Gospel story, and one of Paul's letters each ask to be handled differently.

Then ask better questions of the text. Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? Who has power? Who is vulnerable? What wound, conflict, fear, hope, or injustice is in the background? What does the passage reveal about God, human beings, suffering, mercy, repair, and the world God desires?

United Methodists read scripture with the Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Scripture is primary, but it is not read in isolation. Tradition helps us hear the church across time. Reason helps us think honestly. Experience helps us notice what an interpretation does in real bodies, real communities, and real histories.

At Allendale, the Bible is best wrestled with in community. We need scholars and saints, children and elders, skeptics and mystics, people with church wounds and people with deep roots. We need people whose voices have often been excluded from official interpretation: the poor, the queer, the Black and Brown, the disabled, the immigrant, the recovering, the grieving, and the harmed. Without them, the church misses too much.

The goal is not to master the Bible like an object. The goal is to be formed by the God who still speaks through it, so that we become more honest, more merciful, more courageous, and more faithful to the way of Jesus.

**Another question:** Who has helped you read scripture in a way that opened it instead of closing it down?

## 47. Why do Christians disagree on what the Bible means?

Christians disagree about the Bible because the Bible is complex and because we are human. We bring different traditions, fears, wounds, cultures, politics, privileges, questions, and hopes to the text. None of us reads from nowhere. We all stand somewhere, and where we stand shapes what we notice.

Some disagreement comes from honest wrestling. Scripture has depth. A passage may speak differently to a grieving parent, a prisoner, a scholar, a child, an activist, a pastor, a person in recovery, or someone who has been hurt by church. That does not make scripture meaningless. It means no one person or group exhausts its meaning.

Other disagreement comes from the desire to protect power. Christians have used the Bible to defend slavery, segregation, colonization, patriarchy, war, abuse, economic exploitation, and the exclusion of LGBTQ people. Those were not harmless differences of opinion. They wounded bodies, families, churches, laws, and generations.

That history should make the church humble and careful. When someone says an interpretation is “biblical,” we still have to ask what fruit it bears. Does it heal or harm? Does it tell the truth or protect comfort? Does it make people more loving or more cruel? Does it deepen mercy or sharpen control? Does it move us toward the life of Jesus or away from it?

At Allendale, we do not believe every interpretation is equally faithful. We can make room for questions, uncertainty, and growth while still rejecting readings that bless oppression or erase human dignity. Unity does not require pretending harm is holy.

Christians will keep disagreeing about the Bible. The question is whether our disagreement makes us more honest, more humble, more accountable, and more open to the Spirit. The goal is not to win the Bible. The goal is to be converted by the God who still speaks through it.

**Another question:** What helps you recognize when an interpretation of scripture is bearing good fruit?

## 48. Why follow the lectionary?

The lectionary is a schedule of scripture readings assigned for Sundays and holy days. Many United Methodist churches, including Allendale, follow the Revised Common Lectionary, which moves through a three-year cycle and usually includes readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles, and Gospels. It connects us with Christians across denominations and around the world who are hearing the same texts.

Following the lectionary helps keep preachers from only choosing favorite passages. Left to ourselves, most of us would avoid hard texts, strange texts, judgment texts, genealogies, lament, and passages that challenge our own assumptions. The lectionary keeps putting the whole church in conversation with the breadth of scripture.

The lectionary also follows the Christian year. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time shape our worship around the life of Christ and the movement of God's story. Over time, the congregation learns to live inside the rhythms of waiting, incarnation, revelation, repentance, death, resurrection, Spirit, and discipleship.

Using the lectionary also helps us hold the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament together. The church has sometimes been tempted to treat the Hebrew scriptures as less important or less Christian. The lectionary reminds us that Jesus' story is rooted in Israel's story, and that God's covenant, freedom, law, prophets, wisdom, and poetry continue to form Christian faith.

At Allendale, the lectionary can become a discipline of trust. It gives us texts we might not choose and asks what the Spirit is saying through them now. It can also be used creatively. A congregation may follow the lectionary closely, depart from it for a series, or hold it in conversation with community events, justice struggles, and pastoral needs.

The lectionary is a tool, not a cage. It serves the gospel when it helps the church hear more of scripture, follow the life of Christ, and join the wider body of Christ in worship.

**Another question:** How can the lectionary help or hurt the way you hear the gospel?

## **9. Theology**

## 49. How do we do theology?

Theology means talking about God. United Methodists do theology whenever we ask who God is, what grace means, how scripture speaks, what Jesus calls us to do, and how faith should shape our lives. Theology is not only for professors or pastors. Every person has ideas about God, and those ideas shape how we pray, vote, forgive, serve, welcome, protest, spend money, use power, and treat people.

United Methodists have doctrinal standards that help guide our theology. These include the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, John Wesley's Standard Sermons, and Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. These sources root us in scripture, grace, salvation, holiness, and the particular history of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren traditions.

United Methodists also often speak of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Scripture is primary. Tradition helps us listen to the wisdom and mistakes of the church across time. Reason helps us think carefully and connect faith with what we know about the world. Experience helps us notice how God's grace is confirmed, challenged, and embodied in real human lives.

These four do not function as equal authorities in a simple formula. They are more like a conversation. Scripture leads the conversation, and tradition, reason, and experience help us interpret faithfully. United Methodists tend to be practical theologians. We want to know what a belief does in a life, in a church, in a neighborhood, and in the world.

At Allendale, doing theology means asking whether our God-talk looks like Jesus and bears the fruit of freedom. Does it heal or harm? Does it build Beloved Community or protect exclusion? Does it tell the truth about injustice? Does it help people love God and neighbor more fully? Does it make us more courageous, humble, joyful, and merciful?

Theology is the language beneath our discipleship.

**Another question:** In what ways are you a theologian?

## 50. Are United Methodists liberal or conservative?

United Methodists include people who call themselves liberal, conservative, moderate, progressive, traditional, evangelical, centrist, and many other things. The denomination has always held a wide range of theological and social perspectives, sometimes beautifully and sometimes painfully.

Labels can be useful when they help us understand where someone is coming from. They become dangerous when they become shortcuts for dismissing people. John Wesley encouraged Christians to practice a catholic spirit, meaning a generous love toward all whose hearts are turned toward God, even when opinions differ. That does not mean every opinion is harmless or every disagreement is minor. It means love remains central while the church discerns truth.

United Methodism has often been a tradition of balance. We hold together faith and works, grace and holiness, Word and sacrament, personal piety and social holiness, liturgy and revival, the inner life and public justice. That balance does not always fit neatly into American political categories.

At Allendale, we are clear about our commitments: full inclusion, racial justice, LGBTQ freedom, economic justice, reproductive freedom, care for creation, nonviolence, and the dignity of every person. Some people may call those commitments liberal or progressive. We understand them as expressions of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Wesleyan call to personal and social holiness.

The better question may not be whether United Methodists are liberal or conservative. The better question is whether we are faithful. Are we conserving what is worth conserving: grace, scripture, sacraments, community, holiness, mercy, and the love of God? Are we freeing what needs to be freed: people, imaginations, bodies, communities, and churches held captive by fear and injustice?

Labels will always be with us. The call of Christ runs deeper than labels.

**Another question:** Do you think United Methodism is liberal, conservative, both, or something else entirely?

## 51. Why be concerned about theology?

We should care about theology because what we believe about God shapes how we live. If we believe God is harsh, controlling, and eager to punish, we may become harsh, controlling, and punitive. If we believe God is love, mercy, justice, and freedom, that belief will begin to reshape our lives in the direction of love.

United Methodists have often emphasized practical theology, what John Wesley called practical divinity. Theology should become visible. It should shape our habits, prayers, politics, budgets, relationships, worship, treatment of the poor, care for creation, and willingness to repair harm.

There are many forms of theology: biblical, systematic, liberation, womanist, Black, feminist, queer, ecological, mystical, process, holiness, narrative, and more. These are not merely academic categories. They are ways communities have tried to speak truthfully about God from particular histories, struggles, insights, and encounters with grace.

At Allendale, theology has to meet the street. A theology of incarnation should make us care about bodies. A theology of resurrection should make us resist death-dealing systems. A theology of creation should make us protect the earth. A theology of grace should make us widen the table. A theology of the Trinity should make us practice mutuality, shared power, and Beloved Community.

Theology can also cause harm when it is used to bless oppression, silence questions, control bodies, or protect institutions. That is why the church must keep testing its theology by Jesus, by scripture, by the fruit of the Spirit, and by the lives of those most affected by our teaching.

We care about theology because God-talk becomes life. The question is whether our theology is forming people who look more like Jesus.

**Another question:** What is the difference between doing good and demonstrating Christian love?

## **52. How is Allendale building a community shaped by liberation theology?**

Allendale is a church where liberation theology is not a once-a-year sermon. We are letting it shape how we read scripture, how we worship, how we use our building, how we share power, how we spend money, how we show up in public, and how we understand the gospel itself.

Liberation theology begins with a simple but disruptive claim: God is especially revealed among people who are suffering, exploited, erased, criminalized, or pushed to the margins. The Bible is full of this witness. God hears the cries of enslaved people in Egypt. The prophets condemn systems that crush the poor. Mary sings of the powerful being brought down and the lowly lifted up. Jesus announces good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. The cross reveals God in solidarity with those condemned by religious and political power. Resurrection announces that death-dealing systems do not get the final word.

That lens changes how a church sees the world. The question is not only, “What do we believe?” The question is, “Whose pain have we been taught to ignore? Whose voices have been missing? Who benefits from the way things are? What would good news sound like to the poor, the unhoused, the incarcerated, the queer and trans community, the immigrant, the disabled, the grieving, the working poor, and those wounded by religion?”

This may make Allendale look different from some other United Methodist churches. Many care about welcome, mission, worship, and community service. Allendale shares those commitments, but we are trying to press deeper. We are not only asking how to be friendly. We are asking how to repair harm. We are not only asking how to serve people in need. We are asking why people are being made needy in the first place. We are not only asking how to grow the church. We are asking whether the church is becoming more faithful to Jesus and more dangerous to systems that depend on silence.

Wesleyan theology gives Allendale deep roots for this work. John Wesley taught that grace is active, embodied, and transformative. Grace does not only comfort us; grace changes us. Grace does not only forgive sin; grace breaks sin’s power. Grace does not only warm hearts; grace sends people into works of mercy and justice. Wesley’s insistence that there is no holiness but social holiness fits naturally with liberation theology’s insistence that faith must take sides with life wherever bodies are threatened.

At Allendale, this means personal holiness and public justice belong together. Prayer and protest belong together. Communion and community organizing belong together. Scripture and lived experience belong together. The table and the street belong together.

We also know liberation theology asks the church to examine itself. Churches can preach love while protecting power. Churches can say “all are welcome” while still centering whiteness, respectability, wealth, straightness, able-bodiedness, or institutional comfort. Churches can do charity while avoiding justice. Churches can talk about grace while refusing accountability.

Allendale is not exempt from those temptations. The work of liberation begins in the world and also in us.

So we are trying to build a community where people pushed to the margins are not treated as outreach projects, but as theologians, leaders, prophets, teachers, artists, and bearers of grace. We want queer and trans people to be more than included. We want their gifts to shape the church. We want people wounded by religion to be more than invited back. We want their truth to change how we practice faith. We want neighbors who are unhoused, organizers, children, elders, artists, recovering people, and grieving people to help us recognize where the Spirit is moving.

This kind of church will not always feel neat or comfortable. Liberation is disruptive. It asks us to tell the truth about racism, poverty, policing, housing, climate, gender, sexuality, immigration, war, and the ways religion has been used to bless harm. It asks us to risk misunderstanding. It asks us to give up the fantasy that church can be faithful without being political, if political means caring about how power affects bodies.

Allendale is still becoming. We will make mistakes. We will have contradictions. We will need repentance, repair, humility, and courage. But the project is clear: to become a deeply Wesleyan and deeply liberation-shaped community where grace becomes public, love becomes organized, worship becomes honest, and the gospel becomes good news for people who have been told too often that the church was not built for them.

**Another question:** What would Allendale look like if the people most harmed by church and society became the ones who helped us imagine the future?

### **53. Who is part of the larger Methodist family?**

The Methodist family is larger than The United Methodist Church. United Methodists are part of a much broader Wesleyan and Methodist movement that includes many denominations around the world. Some share direct roots in the eighteenth-century Methodist revival. Others emerged through conflicts over race, holiness, mission, slavery, governance, national identity, or theology.

There are African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Free Methodist, Wesleyan, Nazarene, British Methodist, and many other Methodist-related churches. The United Methodist Church itself was formed through the coming together of Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren streams, each with its own history, gifts, and wounds.

United Methodists also understand ourselves as part of the wider body of Christ. We have Christian siblings in Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Anabaptist, United Church of Christ, Disciples, and many other traditions. We do not have to pretend our differences are meaningless in order to recognize one another as part of Christ's body.

John Wesley preached about a catholic spirit. He did not mean indifference to belief. He meant a generous love that reaches across differences when hearts are turned toward God. "If your heart is as my heart," Wesley essentially said, "give me your hand." That spirit invites humility, curiosity, and partnership.

At Allendale, we are deeply Methodist and gladly ecumenical. We know God's Spirit is not limited to our denomination. We can learn from Black church traditions, queer theology, Catholic social teaching, Pentecostal fire, Quaker peace witness, freedom movements, and the wisdom of people outside the church who are already participating in justice and mercy.

The body of Christ has many branches, languages, songs, wounds, and gifts. We do not need every Christian to be the same. We need to be faithful to the love of Jesus and open to the grace God gives through one another.

**Another question:** What are the marks of people called Methodist?

## 54. Why has LGBTQ inclusion mattered so deeply to United Methodists?

For decades, United Methodists struggled over LGBTQ people, marriage, ordination, scripture, tradition, and the meaning of holy living. That struggle was never abstract. It was carried in the bodies of real people: queer clergy called by God and blocked by the church, couples whose love was treated as a problem, families wondering if there was room for their children, and congregations forced to decide whether “Open hearts, open minds, open doors” was a slogan or a promise.

At Allendale, we begin with the sacred worth and belovedness of LGBTQ people. Queer and trans people are not issues to be debated. They are children of God, members of the body of Christ, bearers of the Spirit, teachers of courage, and witnesses to grace. Queer love can reflect holiness, tenderness, fidelity, joy, covenant, sacrifice, and the freeing love of God.

The United Methodist Church has not always said this clearly. For more than fifty years, denominational language caused deep harm by describing “the practice of homosexuality” as “incompatible with Christian teaching” and by restricting LGBTQ clergy and same-sex weddings. That language wounded people, drove some from the church, and gave theological cover to exclusion.

In 2024, the United Methodist General Conference removed those long-standing restrictions. That change did not erase the harm or finish the work of repair. It did open a new chapter in which the church can move from exclusion toward repentance, healing, and fuller welcome.

The debate was often framed as a fight about the Bible. United Methodists argued over a small number of passages while also asking larger questions about biblical authority, interpretation, tradition, reason, experience, science, psychology, and the fruit of people’s lives. At Allendale, we read scripture through the life of Jesus, who consistently moves toward those who are excluded, shamed, policed, and pushed aside.

LGBTQ inclusion has mattered so deeply because the question was never only about sexuality. It was about what kind of church we are willing to be. Will we be a church of gatekeeping or grace? A church that asks people to survive our theology or a church that receives their gifts? A church that protects religious respectability or follows Jesus into deeper love?

At Allendale, we believe the Spirit has been moving through LGBTQ people all along. Queer joy is a gift. Trans courage is holy. Chosen family can reveal the Kin-dom of God. The question before the church now is how fully we will repent, repair, and receive the gifts God has already placed among us.

**Another question:** What would the church look like if LGBTQ people were treated not as a topic of debate, but as beloved witnesses to the grace of God?

# 10. Christian Life

## **55. What are the means of grace?**

The means of grace are practices through which God ordinarily gives grace to us. Grace is always God's gift. We cannot control it, earn it, or manufacture it. Yet United Methodists believe God has given the church practices that open us to receive grace again and again.

John Wesley named prayer, searching the scriptures, and the Lord's Supper as chief means of grace. The Methodist tradition also includes public worship, fasting, holy conferencing, and works of mercy. These practices do not replace grace. They are places where grace meets us.

United Methodists often speak of works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety include prayer, worship, scripture, Communion, fasting, and other practices that deepen our love of God. Works of mercy include feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, welcoming the stranger, caring for the poor, and working for justice. In Wesleyan faith, love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated.

The means of grace keep us from a passive faith that simply waits around for spiritual feelings. We show up where God has promised to meet us. We pray even when prayer feels dry. We receive Communion even when we feel unworthy. We read scripture even when it challenges us. We serve neighbors even when we are tired. We confer with one another even when community is difficult.

At Allendale, the means of grace include the sanctuary and the street. Grace meets us in worship, at the table, in Bible study, in confession, in music, in silence, in small groups, and in prayer. Grace also meets us in disaster response, mutual aid, advocacy, protest, feeding, listening, repairing, and standing with people whose backs are against the wall.

The means of grace form us over time. They help us become people who can recognize God's presence, receive God's mercy, and participate in God's freeing love.

**Another question:** Which means of grace not named would you lift up?

## **56. What are works of mercy?**

Works of mercy are acts of love toward our neighbors. They include feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, comforting the grieving, protecting the vulnerable, and working to change the conditions that harm people in the first place.

For United Methodists, mercy is not optional kindness added onto faith. Mercy is part of holiness. John Wesley taught that Christianity is a social religion, which means faith cannot be reduced to private belief or personal spirituality. Love of God becomes visible in love of neighbor.

Works of mercy are also means of grace. When we serve, accompany, and learn from people who are poor, sick, imprisoned, unhoused, excluded, or suffering, we do not simply bring God to them. God often meets us through them. The people the world pushes aside can become teachers of grace, truth, resilience, and the gospel.

At Allendale, works of mercy include a casserole and a city council speech, a hospital visit and a protest, a laundry trailer after a hurricane and a campaign for housing justice, a prayer shawl and a public stand against transphobia. Mercy is both tender and fierce. It comforts the afflicted and challenges the systems that keep afflicting them.

Works of mercy are not about earning salvation or becoming heroes. They are the fruit of grace. God loves us into becoming people who love. When the church practices mercy, the world gets a glimpse of God's coming reign: a world where people are fed, sheltered, healed, protected, welcomed, and free.

Mercy becomes most faithful when it is joined with justice. Charity can meet an immediate need. Justice asks why the need exists and what must change. The Spirit calls the church to both.

**Another question:** What is the relationship between faith and good works?

## 57. What about prayer?

Prayer is the breath of the spiritual life. It is how we open ourselves to God in honesty, trust, silence, longing, gratitude, confession, anger, grief, and hope. Prayer can use words, but it is larger than words. Sometimes prayer is a sentence. Sometimes it is a tear, a groan, a song, a breath, a candle, a march, or sitting quietly when we have nothing left to say.

United Methodists believe God hears prayer. We also know prayer is not a machine. We do not control God by saying the right words, having the right mood, or gathering the right number of people. Prayer is relationship, not manipulation. It opens us to God's presence and aligns us with God's will.

The Bible teaches us to pray constantly. That does not mean spending every moment with folded hands and closed eyes. It means living with an openness to God that becomes part of our whole life. We can pray in worship, in the car, in a hospital room, in a meeting, before a hard conversation, at a protest, beside a bed, or while washing dishes.

United Methodists use many kinds of prayer. We pray extemporaneously and with written prayers. We pray ancient prayers and new prayers. We pray alone and together. We pray the Lord's Prayer because Jesus gave it to us. We pray confession because we need truth. We pray intercession because love carries the needs of others to God. We pray lament because grief belongs in the presence of God.

At Allendale, prayer is deeply connected to justice. We do not pray to escape the world. We pray so we can face the world with courage and compassion. Prayer helps us name harm, resist despair, seek wisdom, confess complicity, ask for strength, and listen for where the Spirit is sending us.

Sometimes God answers prayer in ways we can recognize. Sometimes prayer changes us more than our circumstances. Sometimes prayer gives no clear answer, only enough breath for the next faithful step. Even when we do not know how to pray, Paul says the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

**Another question:** Why do you say that God does or does not listen to all prayers?

## 58. What about healing?

Healing is part of God's desire for creation. Throughout scripture, God is revealed as one who restores, tends, frees, forgives, and makes whole. Jesus heals bodies, minds, communities, and relationships. The church continues to pray for healing because we trust that God's love reaches the whole person.

United Methodists honor many ways healing comes. Healing can come through doctors, nurses, therapists, medicine, surgery, recovery groups, rest, prayer, anointing, laying on of hands, community care, and changes in the systems that make people sick. Medical care and spiritual care are not enemies. Both can become instruments of grace.

We also need to speak carefully. When someone is not cured, it does not mean they lacked faith. When someone dies, it does not mean God failed or that prayer was pointless. Jesus himself suffered and died. Illness, disability, pain, and death are part of our shared human vulnerability, not evidence that someone has been abandoned by God.

Healing is larger than cure. Cure may mean a disease goes away. Healing may mean peace, courage, reconciliation, dignity, relief, community, acceptance, or the deep assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Sometimes healing is physical. Sometimes it is emotional, spiritual, relational, or social. Often it is more than one of these at once.

At Allendale, we pray for bodies and we also pray for the conditions bodies live under. We pray for cancer to be healed, and we pray for access to health care. We pray for mental health, and we challenge stigma. We pray for recovery, and we build community where people do not have to recover alone. We pray for healing after trauma, and we resist the systems that keep creating trauma.

God heals through presence, love, truth, medicine, community, and grace. Healing may not always look like what we wanted, but the healing presence of God stays with us.

**Another question:** What would lead you to say that someone is healed?

## 59. Why be involved in justice?

United Methodists are involved in justice because the Bible is full of justice. The prophets call for justice to roll down like waters. Micah says God requires us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Jesus announces good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. James tells us to be doers of the word, not hearers only.

Justice is not a distraction from the gospel. Justice is what love looks like when it becomes public. Personal holiness and social holiness belong together. A faith that prays beautifully while ignoring hunger, racism, poverty, war, climate destruction, prisons, and violence has missed the shape of Jesus' ministry.

The Methodist tradition has a complicated history. Methodists have sometimes led movements for justice, and Methodists have sometimes accommodated slavery, segregation, colonialism, sexism, and exclusion. That honesty should humble us. It should also call us into deeper repentance and courage.

At our best, United Methodists have fought slavery, organized for workers, built hospitals and schools, responded to disasters, opposed the death penalty, advocated for peace, protected children, supported civil rights, cared for creation, and insisted that faith has consequences for public life. Our Social Principles are one way the denomination tries to speak about the ethical implications of Christian faith in the world.

At Allendale, justice is the center of discipleship. We worship the God who hears the cry of the oppressed. We follow Jesus, who was executed by empire. We are filled by the Spirit who sends people across boundaries with courage. Justice belongs in our prayers, sermons, budgets, partnerships, votes, public witness, and daily choices.

We seek justice even when the work is unfinished because resurrection teaches us that death does not get the final word. Sin may prevent justice from fully blooming in this life, but grace keeps planting.

**Another question:** In what ways can mercy be used to avoid doing justice?

## **60. Why does it make a difference how I live my life?**

How we live reflects the grace we have received. United Methodists believe salvation is personal, but never private. God calls each person by name, claims each life in grace, and invites each of us into the transforming way of Jesus.

Faith is more than belief in our heads. Faith becomes visible in our speech, habits, relationships, money, time, sexuality, politics, courage, compassion, and care for others. Jesus does not call us merely to admire him. Jesus calls us to follow.

United Methodists believe grace changes people. Justifying grace brings us into right relationship with God. Sanctifying grace keeps shaping us into holiness, which Wesley understood as love of God and neighbor. That means Christian life involves growth, repentance, discipline, mercy, and transformation.

Personal morality and social morality belong together. How we speak to our families, how we treat our bodies, how we handle money, how we tell the truth, and how we care for our inner lives are part of discipleship. So are our commitments to justice, peace, equality, creation care, and the flourishing of neighbors we may never meet.

At Allendale, the Christian life is not about respectability. It is about love taking flesh. It is about becoming more truthful, more free, more generous, more brave, more joyful, and more available to the Spirit. It is about letting Jesus interrupt the parts of us that have made peace with fear, prejudice, cynicism, or comfort.

How we live makes a difference because our lives can become signs of God's reign. People encounter the gospel not only in what we say, but in how we love, repair, forgive, resist harm, welcome strangers, and stand with the vulnerable.

**Another question:** What connection do you see between happiness and holiness?

# **11. The Reign of God**

## 61. What and where is the Kin-dom of God?

The Kin-dom of God is the world as God intends it: healed, reconciled, made whole, and alive with love. Christians have often used the phrase Kingdom of God, but many communities also say reign of God or Kin-dom of God to emphasize that Jesus is not announcing domination with a religious coat of paint. Jesus is announcing God's way of life, where the last are first, the poor are blessed, captives are set free, enemies become neighbors, and the table is wide enough for everyone God loves. It is about relationship, not domination.

Jesus talked about the reign of God constantly. He said it was near. He taught his disciples to pray for it to come on earth as it is in heaven. He compared it to a mustard seed, a hidden treasure, yeast in dough, a banquet, a field of wheat and weeds, and a world where rich people struggle to enter while the poor are welcomed with joy. The images are different, but they all point toward a reality where God's love overturns business as usual.

The reign of God is already here, and it is still coming. We see it in Jesus: in his healings, meals, forgiveness, truth-telling, boundary-crossing, and resurrection. We glimpse it now whenever mercy interrupts cruelty, whenever justice rises, whenever enemies reconcile, whenever the hungry are fed, whenever people pushed aside are centered, and whenever communities practice love with courage. Still, we also know the reign of God is not fully here, because violence, poverty, racism, war, greed, and death still wound creation.

At Allendale, the Kin-dom of God is the vision underneath our worship and witness. It is why we care about bodies, housing, food, climate, queer and trans lives, racial justice, children, elders, immigrants, incarcerated people, and neighbors who are barely surviving. We are not trying to build our own brand of goodness. We are trying to join the reign of God already breaking into the world through Jesus Christ.

When we pray, "Your Kin-dom come," we are asking God to reorder the world and reorder us. We are asking for every false kingdom to be swallowed up by grace: the kingdom of white supremacy, the kingdom of greed, the kingdom of fear, the kingdom of violence, the kingdom of respectability, the kingdom of despair. We are asking to live now as citizens of God's future—Beloved Community.

**Another question:** Where have you seen glimpses of God's Kin-dom?

## 62. Why is what I think about the future important?

What we believe about the future shapes how we live in the present. If we believe the future belongs to fear, we will live defensively. If we believe the future belongs to empire, we will accommodate empire. If we believe the future belongs to God, we can live with courage, even when the present feels fragile.

Christian hope is not wishful thinking. It is trust that God is moving creation toward healing, justice, resurrection, and new life. That future does not make present action unnecessary. It gives present action its direction. We work for justice now because God's future is just. We practice mercy now because God's future is merciful. We welcome strangers now because God's future is a banquet. We resist death-dealing powers now because God's future is resurrection.

The Bible's vision of the future is not escape from the earth. It is the renewal of creation. Jesus teaches us to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Revelation imagines a holy city coming down, not faithful people abandoning the world God loves. The future God promises is not the destruction of creation, but the healing of creation.

At Allendale, our future hope keeps us from surrendering to cynicism. We can look at hurricanes, hatred, political cruelty, racism, climate grief, attacks on LGBTQ people, poverty, and violence without pretending any of it is normal or final. Resurrection gives us permission to tell the truth and keep going.

What we think about the future also shapes what kind of church we become. If God's future is a reconciled and healed creation, then our church should be a preview of that future. Our worship, budgets, buildings, advocacy, relationships, and public witness should all ask the same question: are we living toward the world God has promised?

**Another question:** What is the future God wants to give?

### **63. What is the nature of heaven?**

Christians have often described heaven as full communion with God. It is life in the presence of Christ, joy with the saints, healing beyond what we can now imagine, and the completion of the grace that has already begun in us. When Christians speak of heaven, we are reaching toward a mystery larger than our language.

The Bible uses many images for heaven: a city, a banquet, a home, a garden, a wedding feast, a new creation, a place where tears are wiped away, and a life where death is no more. These images are not meant to satisfy every curiosity. They help us trust that God's future is good, relational, embodied, and filled with love.

United Methodists believe salvation is by grace through faith. Heaven is not earned by wealth, status, religious achievement, or even good works. Heaven is the gift of God's love brought to fullness. The grace that comes before us, justifies us, sanctifies us, and carries us through death becomes glorifying grace: God completing the work of love.

Heaven is not only future. Eternal life begins now wherever we live in communion with God. Every act of mercy, every table of grace, every moment of forgiveness, every glimpse of Beloved Community, every healing, every resurrection after despair is a foretaste of heaven. The Lord's Table is one of those foretastes, a meal that points toward the feast where all God's children are gathered.

At Allendale, we do not need heaven to be a tool for avoiding earth. Heaven gives us courage to love the earth more deeply. If God's future is healing, then healing begins now. If God's future is justice, then justice begins now. If God's future is communion, then we practice communion now.

Heaven is the fullness of God's presence, and that presence has already begun to reach us in Christ. We trust that what God has begun in love, God will bring to completion in love.

**Another question:** What do you hope heaven will be like?

## 64. What is the nature of hell?

Christians have imagined hell in many ways: fire, darkness, separation, judgment, exile, regret, or the terrible possibility of a life closed off from love. Those images are serious, and they should be handled carefully. Too often, hell has been used as a weapon to frighten children, control people, shame bodies, threaten queer people, silence questions, and make God sound more cruel than Christ.

If heaven is full communion with God, hell can be understood as separation from God. Jesus often used the word Gehenna, a valley outside Jerusalem associated with destruction and waste. His language was vivid because the stakes of love, justice, mercy, and cruelty are real. What we do to one another matters. The way we live has consequences.

At the same time, we should be very careful before imagining God as eager to fill hell. The God revealed in Jesus seeks the lost, welcomes sinners, forgives enemies, heals the wounded, and tells stories about shepherds who search until the sheep is found, women who sweep until the coin is recovered, and parents who run down the road to embrace the child who came home. If hell is real, the deepest hope of Christian faith is that it is empty.

That hope is sometimes called universal reconciliation: the hope that God's love will finally heal all things and bring every creature home. Christians have disagreed about this for centuries. Some believe hell is an eternal separation chosen by those who finally refuse God. Others believe God's mercy is more persistent than human resistance and that Christ will not stop until every lost thing is found. All of us should speak with humility, because judgment belongs to God, not to us.

At Allendale, we do not need hell to make the gospel urgent. Fear is not the center of our faith. Love is. The urgency of the gospel is that people are suffering now, bodies are being harmed now, systems are crushing people now, shame is killing people now, and God is calling us into healing now.

God does not ignore abuse, exploitation, racism, poverty, war, or the wounds people have carried in silence. God's judgment exposes what harms life so that what God loves can be restored. If God is love, then judgment is the fierce mercy that refuses to let lies, violence, and injustice have the final word. For people who have been traumatized by fear-based religion, the good news is this: God is not waiting for a technicality to condemn you. God is not more committed to punishment than healing. God is not less merciful than Jesus. Whatever hell is, it cannot be stronger than the love of God revealed in Christ.

So we hold the question of hell with humility and hope. We take seriously the reality that refusing love destroys life. We also trust that grace keeps searching, Christ keeps descending into every grave, and God's mercy may reach farther than any of us have dared to imagine.

**Another question:** What changes when we imagine God's judgment as truth-telling meant for healing rather than punishment meant for fear?

## **65. What do United Methodists teach about sin?**

Sin is whatever separates us from God, wounds our neighbors, distorts our humanity, and interrupts the reign of God. Sin is not only breaking a rule. It is a failure of love. Jesus summarizes the law as love of God and love of neighbor, so sin is anything that turns us away from that love.

United Methodists take sin seriously because grace is not shallow. If salvation means healing and freedom, then we need to tell the truth about what holds us captive. Sin shows up in personal choices: cruelty, greed, dishonesty, addiction, violence, pride, selfishness, and indifference. Sin also shows up in systems: racism, poverty, sexism, queerphobia, transphobia, ableism, nationalism, ecological destruction, mass incarceration, and economies that treat people as disposable.

We need forgiveness for what we have done, and we need freedom from what keeps shaping us away from love. Justifying grace forgives. Sanctifying grace heals and transforms. God does not only pardon sin; God breaks sin's power and forms us for holiness.

At Allendale, we try to name sin clearly without using sin as a weapon against vulnerable people. Too often, churches have obsessed over the bodies and identities of marginalized people while ignoring greed, abuse, racism, exploitation, and the violence of respectability. A faithful doctrine of sin tells the truth about harm and points toward healing.

The gospel does not leave us in shame. In Christ, sin does not get the final word. The Spirit convicts us so we can be healed, not crushed. Grace exposes what harms us so God can restore what is beloved in us.

Sin is real, but grace is deeper. The reign of God is God's answer to sin: mercy for the guilty, freedom for the captive, repair for the harmed, justice for the oppressed, and new life for all creation.

**Another question:** What is the relationship between scriptural law and gospel?

## 66. What will happen at the end of the world?

Christians have long hoped that God's future is new creation. The end of the world is not best understood as God throwing creation away. It is the full arrival of God's reign, when death, evil, violence, and injustice are finally defeated and all things are made new.

The Bible uses the language of last things, or eschatology, to speak about this hope. Much of that language is symbolic, poetic, and apocalyptic. Apocalyptic writing uses intense imagery to unveil what is hidden, especially during times of suffering and persecution. Its purpose is not to give us a coded calendar. Its purpose is to give hope to people living under pressure.

Jesus tells his followers not to obsess over dates and signs. The time belongs to God. The church's calling is not to decode every headline or frighten people with charts. Our calling is to be faithful in the meantime: to pray, love, serve, repent, seek justice, proclaim good news, and keep going on to perfection in love.

At Allendale, we hear end-times hope as a call to present faithfulness. If God will wipe away every tear, then we tend tears now. If God will heal creation, then we care for creation now. If God will judge the nations by how they treated the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned, then we know where to find Christ now.

The end of the world, in Christian hope, is really the beginning of God's new world. Death will not win. Empire will not win. Greed will not win. Despair will not win. The grace of the Lord Jesus will be with the saints, and creation will be made whole.

**Another question:** What difference would it make in your life if you knew exactly when the world as we know it would end?

## **12. History and Heritage**

## **67. Who was John Wesley, and who were all those other Methodists?**

United Methodists are part of a long story of revival, grace, organizing, singing, preaching, conflict, merger, and mission. John Wesley may be the most familiar name in that story, but he was never alone. The tradition that became The United Methodist Church was shaped by John Wesley and Charles Wesley, and also by Susanna Wesley, Barbara Heck, Sarah Crosby, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, Phoebe Palmer, Marjorie Matthews, lay preachers, class leaders, organizers, teachers, reformers, and communities whose names are not always remembered.

John Wesley was an Anglican priest in eighteenth-century England whose preaching and organizing helped spark the Methodist revival. He emphasized grace, salvation by faith, holiness of heart and life, frequent Communion, small groups, accountability, care for the poor, and a faith that transforms daily living. Wesley did not set out to create a new denomination. He wanted to renew the church and spread scriptural holiness across the land.

Charles Wesley, John's brother, was one of the great hymn writers of the Christian tradition. He wrote thousands of hymns that taught theology through song. Methodism has always been carried not only by sermons and structures, but by music people could sing in their bones. Charles gave Methodists a way to sing grace, wonder, repentance, joy, and the love of Christ into their daily lives.

Susanna Wesley, John and Charles's mother, helped shape the spiritual imagination of early Methodism before Methodism had a name. She taught her children scripture, prayer, discipline, and deep attention to the life of faith. While her sons often receive the public credit, Susanna's influence reminds us that movements are often born through the unseen labor of women whose teaching, organizing, and spiritual leadership make the future possible.

Barbara Heck helped organize early Methodism in America. She was not ordained, famous, or institutionally powerful, but she helped gather people, stir conviction, and insist that faith become more than private memory. Her story reminds us that Methodism crossed oceans not only through famous preachers, but through laypeople who carried faith in their homes, conversations, prayers, and stubborn hope.

Sarah Crosby was one of early Methodism's women preachers. She began by leading and teaching, and when crowds came to hear her, she preached with such power that the movement had to wrestle with the gifts God was clearly giving women. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher also preached, led, wrote, and served the poor with courage. She defended women's preaching not as a rebellion against faith, but as obedience to the Spirit's call.

Phoebe Palmer became one of the most influential voices in the holiness movement. She preached, wrote, led revivals, advocated for women's leadership, and helped Methodists imagine holiness as a life fully given to God. Marjorie Matthews, elected in 1980, became the first woman bishop in The United Methodist Church and the first woman bishop in any mainline Christian denomination in the United States. Her election did not end sexism in the church, but it cracked open a door that should never have been closed.

This history includes beauty and harm. Methodists preached grace to the poor, organized for mission, empowered lay leaders, sang the gospel in the language of ordinary people, and built schools, hospitals, and ministries around the world. Methodists also split over slavery, tolerated segregation, resisted women's leadership, harmed LGBTQ people, and sometimes confused institutional survival with faithfulness.

At Allendale, we receive this history as inheritance and responsibility. We do not have to romanticize the past to be rooted in it. We can thank God for the grace that moved through our ancestors and repent of the ways they failed to embody that grace. Heritage is not nostalgia. Heritage is a call to carry the best of the tradition forward with more courage, honesty, and love.

**Another question:** Whose stories have helped you understand what it means to be Methodist?

## 68. When does the church not look like a church?

The church does not always look like a sanctuary, steeple, pulpit, altar rail, or Sunday morning worship service. Sometimes the church looks like a hospital, a campus ministry, a children's home, a disaster recovery center, a food pantry, a protest, a counseling office, a camp, a retirement community, a school, or a parking lot full of laundry machines after a hurricane.

United Methodists have long believed that the mission of the church moves beyond church buildings. John Wesley cared about health care for the poor. Methodist and United Methodist people have built hospitals, schools, orphanages, colleges, camps, clinics, and relief ministries because the gospel touches bodies, minds, communities, and systems.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief, often called UMCOR, is one of the clearest examples of the church looking like something other than a church. Through disaster response, recovery, refugee support, health ministries, and long-term relief work, United Methodists participate in God's care for people facing crisis. The church is still the church when it is clearing debris, rebuilding homes, distributing supplies, or staying after the news cameras leave.

At Allendale, we know this kind of church. Sometimes church looks like worship. Sometimes it looks like organizing. Sometimes it looks like offering free meeting space. Sometimes it looks like feeding people, washing clothes, repairing buildings, caring for neighbors, showing up at city hall, or turning a 100-year-old campus into a site of community resilience.

The church does not become less spiritual when it becomes practical. Incarnation teaches us that God works through bodies, places, water, bread, touch, shelter, medicine, and community. A church that only looks religious but does not love its neighbors has missed the way of Jesus.

When the church does not look like a church, it may be looking more like Christ.

**Another question:** What are the gifts and risks of hands-on mission compared with mission that mainly involves sending money?

## **69. What is the history of women preaching in Methodism?**

Women have been preaching, teaching, organizing, exhorting, leading, and carrying the Methodist movement from the beginning, even when the church did not know how to honor their authority. The official structures were often slow, hesitant, and resistant, while the Spirit was already moving. Women preached because people needed the gospel, communities needed leadership, and God had clearly given them gifts.

Early Methodism created space for lay leadership, testimony, class meetings, field preaching, and spiritual accountability. That openness made room for women's voices to emerge. Sarah Crosby, one of the earliest Methodist women preachers, began by teaching and leading in ways that drew crowds hungry for the gospel. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher preached, served the poor, led communities, and defended women's preaching as obedience to God's call. John Wesley did not fully dismantle the assumptions of his time, yet he came to recognize that some women had an "extraordinary call" to preach.

That phrase, "extraordinary call," tells us both the gift and the limitation of the early movement. Women's preaching was often treated as an exception rather than as a regular expression of the Spirit's freedom. The church could see the fruit of women's ministry while still struggling to build structures that trusted women fully. Again and again, women proved faithful before the institution proved ready.

In America, Phoebe Palmer helped shape the holiness movement and preached to large crowds. Jarena Lee, in the African Methodist Episcopal tradition, became a powerful preacher and witness, challenging both racism and sexism in the church's life. Helenor Davisson was ordained in the Methodist Protestant Church in the nineteenth century, long before full clergy rights came to The Methodist Church.

Anna Oliver graduated from Boston University School of Theology in 1876 and became the first woman among Methodists to graduate from seminary. She served churches with clear gifts for preaching and pastoral leadership, and she pressed the Methodist Episcopal Church to recognize women's ordination. Oliver understood her call as holy necessity. Her words still ring with courage: "I have no alternative" she said to the denomination when asked why she kept applying. She was not asking for status. She was answering a call from God that the institution had not yet found the courage to bless.

The history of women preaching is a history of call and resistance, courage and exclusion, revival and patriarchy. Women preached while being told they should be silent. Women organized churches that would not ordain them. Women raised money, taught children, formed disciples, led missions, challenged injustice, and carried congregations while men held most of the official authority. The church often depended on women's labor while denying women's power.

The Methodist Church granted full clergy rights to women in 1956. That was a major step, and it came far too late. Women pastors continued to face resistance, tokenism, unequal

appointments, lower pay, doubts about their authority, and the burden of being judged more harshly than men. In 1980, Marjorie Matthews became the first woman elected bishop in The United Methodist Church, opening another door in a church that had taken far too long to recognize what the Spirit had been doing all along.

At Allendale, this history shapes how we understand the church. When women preach, the church is receiving a gift that has been present from the beginning. When women lead, interpret scripture, preside, organize, teach, pastor, and proclaim good news, the body of Christ becomes more whole.

This history also teaches us to ask who else the church has made wait for recognition. If the Spirit was speaking through women while the institution hesitated, where might the Spirit be speaking now through people the church still struggles to trust? The story of women preaching pushes us to listen for God beyond the boundaries of respectability, tradition, and inherited power.

Allendale honors women's preaching because we believe the Spirit gives gifts to the whole body. The pulpit is not the possession of one gender. The gospel is not carried by one kind of voice. The church becomes more faithful when every person called by God is free to stand, speak, lead, and proclaim the good news.

**Another question:** Whose voice helped you hear the gospel when the church had not yet fully recognized their authority?

## 70. What is the history of Black Methodists?

The history of Methodism in America cannot be told truthfully without Black people. Black Methodists were present from the beginning, not as a side story, but as preachers, organizers, theologians, singers, institution-builders, freedom-seekers, and witnesses to the gospel. They carried Methodism, challenged Methodism, left Methodism, stayed in Methodism, rebuilt Methodism, and kept calling the church toward the freedom it preached but often refused to practice.

Two Black preachers, Harry Hosier and Richard Allen, were present at the 1784 Christmas Conference, where American Methodism was formally organized. That fact should change how we tell the story. Black people were there at the beginning.

Richard Allen's story reveals both the power and the failure of early Methodism. Allen was born enslaved, became free, became a Methodist preacher, and helped build Black Methodist life in Philadelphia. But racism was already shaping Methodist worship. At St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Black worshipers were segregated and mistreated. Allen, Absalom Jones, and others left and formed the Free African Society in 1787. Allen later helped establish Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and when the African Methodist Episcopal Church was formed as a denomination, he became its first bishop.

Black Methodists left because white Methodists made it impossible to stay with dignity. The birth of the AME Church was not a rejection of Methodism's theology of grace; it was a refusal to let white supremacy control that grace. Black Methodists built their own institutions because the Spirit was moving, the gospel was alive, and freedom required more than patience with racist structures.

Other historically Black Methodist denominations also emerged because of racism, segregation, and the church's failures around slavery. The AME Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and other Black Methodist bodies carried Wesleyan faith in ways that centered Black survival, dignity, leadership, and liberation.

Some Black Methodists left, others stayed and kept pressing the church from within. Staying often came at great cost. Black Methodists endured segregated seating, unequal treatment, limited appointments, underfunded churches, paternalism, exclusion from power, and the constant insult of being asked to remain loyal to institutions that did not fully honor them.

One of the clearest examples of that harm was the Central Jurisdiction. In 1939, when several Methodist bodies merged to form The Methodist Church, Black Methodist conferences were placed into a separate racial jurisdiction. White conferences were organized geographically, but Black conferences were segregated by race. This was not an accident or a minor administrative choice. It was the church building segregation into its structure.

The Central Jurisdiction lasted until 1968, when The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged to form The United Methodist Church. Its abolition was

important, but ending a structure did not immediately heal the damage that structure had done. Racism did not disappear because the denomination reorganized. The church still had to confront the habits, assumptions, appointments, funding patterns, leadership barriers, and spiritual wounds that segregation had created.

Black Methodists continued to lead, organize, and hold the church accountable. In 1968, Black Methodists for Church Renewal was formed, giving Black United Methodists a powerful voice for justice, representation, and transformation in the new denomination. That same year, the General Commission on Religion and Race was created to help the church confront racism in its own life. Roy C. Nichols became the first African American elected bishop by a regional jurisdiction in the newly formed United Methodist Church. In 1984, Leontine T. C. Kelly became the first African American woman elected bishop in The United Methodist Church.

At Allendale, this history asks us to tell the truth. Methodism has been a movement of grace, revival, singing, organizing, and social holiness. It has also been a movement shaped by slavery, segregation, white supremacy, exclusion, and institutional cowardice. Both are true. We cannot receive the beauty of the tradition without repenting of the harm.

Black Methodists have given the church more than resilience. They have given theology, song, preaching, courage, institution-building, critique, imagination, and a witness to freedom that the whole church still needs. They remind us that grace cannot be separated from dignity. Holiness cannot be separated from justice. Revival cannot be separated from liberation. A church that sings about freedom while tolerating racism has not understood its own gospel.

The history of Black people in Methodism is not only a story of suffering. It is a story of power, creativity, survival, and Spirit. It is the story of people who preached when they were not fully welcomed, built when they were denied resources, organized when they were ignored, stayed when staying was costly, left when leaving was holy, and kept insisting that the gospel of Jesus Christ must mean freedom for everybody.

**Another question:** How would Methodism change if Black Methodist history were treated as central to the story rather than added as a footnote?

## 71. Who were Marjorie Matthews, Leontine Kelly, and Geraldine McClellan?

Marjorie Matthews, Leontine T. C. Kelly, and Geraldine McClellan help tell the story of women's leadership in Methodism, especially the long struggle for the church to recognize gifts the Spirit had already given. Their stories are not identical, but together they show how sexism, racism, regional culture, and institutional hesitation shaped who the church trusted to preach, pastor, preside, and lead.

Marjorie Matthews was a United Methodist pastor, scholar, district superintendent, and bishop. In 1980, she became the first woman elected bishop in The United Methodist Church and the first woman elected bishop in any mainline Christian denomination in the United States. Her election did not happen because the church suddenly became free of sexism. It happened because women had been preaching, leading, organizing, teaching, pastoring, and refusing to disappear for generations.

Leontine T. C. Kelly became the first Black woman elected bishop in The United Methodist Church in 1984. Kelly stood at the intersection of racism and sexism in a denomination shaped by both. She had been a teacher, lay speaker, pastor, and elder before being elected bishop by the Western Jurisdiction and assigned to the San Francisco Area. Her leadership reminded the church that breaking one barrier is not the same as dismantling every system that keeps people from being fully recognized, trusted, and followed.

Geraldine McClellan belongs in this story in a deeply local way. She was the first Black woman approved for ordination in the Florida Conference. Her journey was marked by both call and resistance. In 1980, as she came before the Board of Ordained Ministry, she was asked why she would want to serve in a white church. At that time, no Black women were serving as pastors in the Florida Conference. She kept going anyway. She appeared before the board multiple times, endured racism and sexism, and continued to trust the call God had placed on her life. She preached at Allendale in November 2020.

At Allendale, these stories are important because leadership is never just about titles. It is about who the church imagines can carry the gospel. When a woman becomes bishop, when a Black woman becomes bishop, when a Black woman in Florida walks through the storm of institutional racism and sexism to answer God's call, the church becomes more honest about the body of Christ. The Spirit gives gifts across gender, race, sexuality, class, age, and every boundary the church has too often mistaken for God's will.

Their stories also ask who is still waiting for the church to see them clearly. If women had to preach before the church blessed their preaching, if Black women had to lead before the church fully honored their leadership, then we should be humble about the people God may already be calling while the institution is still hesitating. Matthews, Kelly, and McClellan call the church to listen sooner, trust deeper, and stop making people prove what the Spirit has already made clear.

**Another question:** Who has helped you imagine leadership in the church differently?

## **72. Who paid the price in the struggle for LGBTQ inclusion in The United Methodist Church?**

The 2024 changes in The United Methodist Church did not come cheaply. They were carried by queer clergy, trans and nonbinary Methodists, same-gender couples, parents, congregations, bishops, pastors, laypeople, and allies who refused to let the church confuse exclusion with faithfulness. Some lost credentials. Some lost appointments. Some lost income. Some were threatened by being outed and chose to disappear. Some lost pulpits, churches, reputations, friendships, and decades of ministry. Some stayed. Some left. Some were pushed out. Some kept coming back because the gospel they knew was larger than the rules being used against them.

In 1972, The United Methodist Church added the language that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” That sentence became the seed of decades of harm. Over time, the denomination added restrictions against LGBTQ clergy, same-sex weddings, funding for LGBTQ advocacy, and protections for those who enforced exclusion. For more than fifty years, queer Methodists and their allies lived under a church law that treated their love, bodies, families, and callings as problems to be managed.

Gene Leggett was one of the earliest people to pay the price. He came out publicly before the 1972 language was even adopted and was defrocked in 1971. His story reminds us that the church’s fear of queer clergy did not begin with one sentence in the Discipline. That sentence gave official shape to a deeper prejudice already present in the body.

Rose Mary Denman was defrocked in 1987 after acknowledging that she was a lesbian. Jimmy Creech was defrocked in 1999 after officiating same-sex covenant ceremonies and refusing to stop blessing queer love. Greg Dell was suspended after officiating a same-sex holy union. Karen Dammann faced trial after disclosing that she was living in a committed relationship with another woman. Beth Stroud was defrocked after telling her congregation the truth about her relationship and her life. Amy DeLong faced trial for being an out lesbian clergywoman and for officiating a same-sex union.

Allies also paid a price. Frank Schaefer was defrocked after officiating at his son’s same-sex wedding and refusing to promise he would never do it again. Thomas Ogletree faced charges after officiating at his son’s wedding. Bishop Melvin Talbert called for biblical obedience against unjust church law and officiated a same-sex wedding in Alabama. These allies did not act because it was easy. They acted because love of family, love of neighbor, and love of the gospel became more compelling than obedience to harmful rules.

David Meredith, an openly gay elder, faced charges after marrying his longtime partner. Karen Oliveto became the first openly lesbian bishop elected in The United Methodist Church in 2016, and her election immediately became a denominational test case. Her ministry revealed the contradiction at the heart of the church: the Spirit’s gifts were visible, but the institution still wanted permission to question whether those gifts were legitimate.

There were many more names. Jeanne Audrey Powers came out as lesbian after decades of leadership. Reconciling Ministries Network helped organize communities of resistance, witness, and care. Entire congregations became Reconciling and risked backlash. Queer candidates for ministry sat before boards and committees that questioned their bodies more closely than their call. Couples asked pastors to bless their covenants and heard that church law would not allow it. Parents watched their children decide whether the church that baptized them would make room for them.

At Allendale, we remember this history because inclusion was not handed down by a generous institution. It was won through testimony, organizing, holy disobedience, grief, courage, lawsuits, trials, worship, prayer, and the refusal of LGBTQ people to disappear. The church did not wake up one day and become kind. People forced the church to tell the truth. We also remember that Allendale's history holds its own culpability for decades of silence, and even for asking a trans teenager to leave the youth ministry in 2013.

The 2024 General Conference removed the harmful language and the formal bans connected to LGBTQ clergy and same-sex weddings. That was a holy and historic shift, but it did not erase the harm. Some people died before they could see it. Some left the church and will never come back. Some lost years of ministry that cannot be returned. Some still carry the trauma of being told that their love was incompatible with Christian teaching.

So we name the saints and the scars. We honor those who stayed and those who left. We honor those who fought publicly and those who survived quietly. We honor queer clergy who told the truth at great cost and allies who chose love over institutional safety. Their witness reminds us that church law is not always the same as gospel faithfulness.

At Allendale, LGBTQ inclusion is not a trend or a political position. It is part of our repentance. It is part of our discipleship. It is part of how we follow Jesus, who kept moving toward the people religion pushed aside. The work now is not only to change the rules, but to repair the damage, receive the gifts, trust queer and trans leadership, and become a church where no one has to bleed for the body of Christ to become more whole.

**Another question:** Whose courage made it possible for you to imagine a more faithful church?

## **13. Polity**

### 73. What is The Book of Discipline?

The Book of Discipline is the law book and covenant guide for The United Methodist Church. It explains how United Methodists organize our life together, what we teach, how we make decisions, how churches are structured, how clergy are credentialed and appointed, how property is held, how accountability works, and how the connection seeks to live faithfully.

The word discipline is related to disciple. In the church, discipline is not meant to be cold bureaucracy. It is supposed to be the shared pattern that helps us follow Jesus together. The Discipline is one way United Methodists say that church membership is not a solo project. We are connected to one another, accountable to one another, and responsible for the mission we share.

The Discipline includes the Constitution of The United Methodist Church, our doctrinal standards, the Social Principles, rules for conferences, guidance for local churches, clergy processes, judicial procedures, and many other parts of denominational life. It changes through the General Conference, which meets every four years as the only body that can speak for the whole denomination. It is available online for free and also as an e-book.

Some parts of the Discipline are much harder to change than others, especially the doctrinal standards such as the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. Other parts are revised as the church responds to new circumstances, new debates, new harm, new insight, and new opportunities for mission.

At Allendale, we know church law can be both gift and frustration. Structures can protect fairness, accountability, and shared mission. Structures can also move slowly, preserve harm, or become disconnected from the Spirit's urgency. Faithful Methodists may work within the Discipline, work to change the Discipline, and sometimes engage in holy resistance when the church's rules conflict with the gospel's call to love and justice.

The Discipline does not replace Jesus, scripture, conscience, or the Holy Spirit. It is a tool for shared discipleship. Its purpose is to help the church become more faithful, more accountable, more connected, and more effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

**Another question:** How might The Book of Discipline help a person be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

## 74. What are the Social Principles?

The Social Principles are The United Methodist Church's public witness about how faith speaks to the real conditions of human life. They are where the church tries to say, in an organized way, that following Jesus has something to do with creation, money, labor, race, gender, sexuality, war, peace, prisons, health care, government, families, human rights, and the common good.

United Methodists have always believed that faith is personal, but never private. John Wesley preached grace, conversion, holiness, and salvation, and he also visited prisons, organized medical care, spoke against slavery, challenged economic exploitation, and insisted that love of God must become love of neighbor. The Social Principles grow out of that same Wesleyan instinct. They help the church ask what holiness looks like in public.

The Social Principles are not the final word on every moral question. They are the church's prayerful attempt to apply the gospel to the social issues of a particular time. Because the world changes and the church keeps learning, they have been revised over the years. The current version was adopted by the 2024 General Conference and reflects the church's most recent effort to speak faithfully across a global denomination.

The Social Principles are organized around several large areas of shared life. They speak about the Community of All Creation, reminding us that the earth is not disposable and that human beings belong inside a web of creation. They speak about the Economic Community, asking how work, wealth, poverty, debt, wages, and economic systems can serve human dignity rather than exploitation. They speak about the Social Community, including families, sexuality, health, education, culture, and the rights and responsibilities we share with one another. They speak about the Political Community, addressing government, power, human rights, justice, war, peace, migration, and the protection of vulnerable people.

At Allendale, we receive the Social Principles as a tool for discipleship and public witness. They remind us that Christian faith cannot be reduced to private belief, Sunday worship, or personal morality. If Jesus cares about bodies, then the church must care about the conditions bodies live under. If Jesus announces good news to the poor, then the church must ask why people are poor. If Jesus welcomes the stranger, then the church must care about immigration. If Jesus confronts empire, then the church must pay attention to public power.

The Social Principles also help us stay connected to the wider United Methodist Church. Allendale has its own voice, context, and calling, but we are part of a larger body. These principles give United Methodists shared language for justice, even when we do not all apply that language in the same way.

At their best, the Social Principles help the church become more honest, more courageous, and more accountable. They call us to love God with our worship and to love our neighbors through policy, practice, mercy, repair, and justice.

**Another question:** How should the church decide when to speak publicly about social issues?

## 75. What is the trust clause?

The trust clause is a United Methodist property rule that says local church property is held in trust for the denomination. In everyday terms, a local congregation manages and uses its property, but it does so as part of the wider United Methodist connection.

This does not mean the annual conference casually owns or controls every local church building. Local churches make decisions about property within the processes of The Book of Discipline. The trust clause becomes especially important if a congregation closes, abandons the property, or seeks to leave the denomination. Then the annual conference has responsibility for what happens next.

The trust clause goes back to John Wesley and early Methodist polity. It was designed to protect Methodist property for Methodist doctrine, worship, and mission. If people gave money, land, or labor to build a Methodist church, the trust clause helped ensure that the property would continue to serve the Methodist connection rather than be taken in a different direction by a temporary majority.

The trust clause became especially visible after the 2019 Special General Conference, when The United Methodist Church created a temporary path for congregations to disaffiliate over conflict around human sexuality and leave with their property if they followed a specific process, including a costly buyout. In the imagination of many, that opening was expected to make room for progressive churches like Allendale to leave a denomination that had doubled down on anti-LGBTQ exclusion. But something different happened. Progressive and moderate United Methodists organized, stayed, built coalitions, and kept working for full inclusion. In practice, it was mostly conservative churches that used the temporary opening to leave. That disaffiliation paragraph expired at the end of 2023 and was later deleted by the 2024 General Conference. The temporary door through the trust clause is now closed again, which means local church property is once again held under the ordinary United Methodist trust clause for the mission of the whole connection.

The trust clause can be emotionally difficult because church buildings hold memory. People are baptized, married, ordained, fed, forgiven, mourned, and formed in these spaces. A sanctuary is never only bricks and beams. It is a container of stories. At the same time, United Methodists believe local church property belongs inside a larger covenant and mission.

At Allendale, this means our building is both local and connectional. We steward it for worship, justice, community, recovery, organizing, beauty, and mission in St. Petersburg. We also steward it as part of a wider church, one whose witness is larger than any single congregation.

The trust clause asks us to remember that church property is not private possession. It is a tool for ministry, held for the sake of Christ's mission in the world.

**Another question:** How does the trust clause protect the United Methodist witness to Christ?

## **76. How are bishops chosen, and what do they do?**

Bishops are elected leaders who serve as general superintendents of The United Methodist Church. They are elders who have been chosen for a particular ministry of oversight, unity, teaching, and appointment. United Methodists do not ordain bishops into a separate order of ministry. Bishops remain elders, set apart for episcopal leadership.

Bishops are elected by jurisdictional conferences in the United States and by central conferences outside the United States. Delegates from annual conferences vote in those elections. Once elected, bishops are assigned to episcopal areas where they provide leadership, preside over conferences, appoint clergy, guard the faith and order of the church, and help the connection live into its mission.

The way United Methodists elect bishops by jurisdiction also carries a racial history. The jurisdictional system was created in the 1939 reunion that formed The Methodist Church. Part of the compromise was about regional control: many in the former southern church did not want bishops from the North or West exercising authority over them, so bishops were elected and assigned within geographic jurisdictions. Even more shamefully, that same system created the Central Jurisdiction, a separate race-based jurisdiction for Black Methodists. White conferences were organized geographically; Black conferences were segregated by race. The Central Jurisdiction was abolished in 1968 when The United Methodist Church was formed, but the five geographic jurisdictions remained. That means our current system for electing bishops is not neutral. It carries the legacy of a structure shaped by regionalism, segregation, and white resistance to shared episcopal leadership.

One of the most visible responsibilities of a bishop is appointing pastors. United Methodist pastors are sent rather than called by local congregations. Bishops, working with district superintendents and in consultation with pastors and local church Staff-Parish Relations Committees, appoint clergy to places of service. The goal is to serve the mission of the whole connection, not only the preference of one pastor or one congregation.

Bishops also ordain elders and deacons, consecrate newly elected bishops, preside at annual, jurisdictional, central, and General Conferences, and help guide the church through conflict, change, and discernment. The Council of Bishops provides a collective expression of episcopal leadership across the denomination.

The Book of Discipline also names a bishop's work as prophetic. the Discipline describes episcopal leadership as including "a prophetic commitment for the transformation of the Church and the world" and says the bishop is to be a prophetic voice for justice in a suffering and conflicted world through the tradition of social holiness. That means a bishop's authority is not only administrative; it is moral, pastoral, and public. At their best, bishops help the church see where the gospel is being compromised, where people are being harmed, where the Spirit is calling for courage, and where the church must choose justice over comfort.

At Allendale, we might say a bishop's role is to help the church see beyond itself. The Greek root behind bishop means overseer, one who watches over or sees the larger picture. At their best, bishops help the church stay connected to Christ, to one another, and to the mission of love and justice. At their best, they use power not to control, but to equip, protect, challenge, and unify the body. In Allendale's recent history, we also learned that bishops can be changed by the churches they lead. When our bishop told us we could not officiate same-sex weddings, Allendale entered a standoff with him. We did the weddings anyway because we believed faithfulness required it. Eventually, he stood down and allowed us to continue being faithful. That moment helped open space not only for Allendale, but for other churches and clergy to follow conscience, break unjust rules, and trust that the Spirit was already moving the church toward a wider love.

Bishops are human and can fail, which is why United Methodism includes systems of accountability and shared governance. The office exists to serve the church, not the other way around.

**Another question:** How does a bishop express the unity of the church?

## 77. What do our general agencies do?

General agencies are one way The United Methodist Church does ministry beyond the local church. They are boards, commissions, councils, and other worldwide bodies created to carry out particular parts of our shared work. A local congregation cannot do everything by itself. General agencies help the connection teach, organize, remember, communicate, advocate, send, train, account, and serve.

Some agencies help form disciples and support congregations. Discipleship Ministries creates worship, teaching, and leadership resources. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry supports clergy formation, theological education, campus ministry, and the church's work with seminaries and universities. United Methodist Communications helps tell the church's story, share news, support local churches, and connect people across the denomination.

Some agencies help the church live its public witness. The General Board of Church and Society helps United Methodists connect faith with public justice, including the Social Principles, advocacy, peace, poverty, creation care, and human dignity. The General Commission on Religion and Race helps the church confront racism in its structures and practices. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women helps the church challenge sexism and work toward the full participation of women in the life of the church.

Some agencies help hold the church's practical life together. The General Council on Finance and Administration helps with denominational finances, data, legal and administrative work, and accountability. Wespith cares for clergy and lay employee benefits, pensions, and investments. The General Commission on Archives and History helps preserve the church's memory, which matters because a church with no memory is easier to manipulate and less likely to repent.

Some agencies help extend the church's mission into the world. Global Ministries sends and supports missionaries, connects mission partners, and includes the United Methodist Committee on Relief. UMCOR is one of the most trusted parts of our connectional life because it shows up after disasters, often long after cameras and politicians have moved on. When hurricanes, floods, wars, displacement, and crisis devastate communities, the wider church can respond in ways no single congregation could manage alone.

At their best, general agencies are tools for connectional ministry. They help a congregation like Allendale remember that we are part of something larger than ourselves. Our giving, voice, advocacy, prayers, and leadership connect with other United Methodists around the world. Through the agencies, we share resources, train leaders, respond to disasters, preserve history, confront injustice, and support ministries we may never see directly.

General agencies remind us that United Methodism is not only local. We are part of a wider body. When that body is faithful, it can do extraordinary things: equip congregations, respond to suffering, challenge injustice, and help the church become more fully what it claims to be.

**Another question:** How should the wider church help congregations become more faithful?

## 78. Why do United Methodist pastors move so often?

United Methodist pastors move because our system is itinerant. That means clergy are appointed by bishops to serve where the church believes their gifts are needed. This practice comes from early Methodism, when preachers traveled from place to place to spread the gospel, organize societies, administer the sacraments, and keep the movement alive.

In a connectional church, pastors are sent rather than hired by a congregation. Local churches and pastors are consulted, but the bishop makes appointments with the goal of serving the mission of the whole connection. The question is not only what one congregation wants or what one pastor prefers, but what will best serve the gospel across the wider church.

The length of pastoral appointments has changed over time. Early Methodist preachers often moved frequently. Today, longer appointments are common because sustained relationships can help congregations grow in trust, mission, and depth. Even so, United Methodist appointments are made one year at a time, and pastors remain part of the wider appointive system.

Moving pastors can bring new gifts to a congregation and new energy to a pastor. It can also be painful. Congregations grieve. Pastors grieve. Families are disrupted. Ministries shift. Relationships change. The itinerant system asks a great deal of everyone involved, which is why consultation, transparency, pastoral care, and trust are essential.

At Allendale, we also know the church cannot be built around one pastor. Clergy leadership is important, but the body of Christ is larger than the pulpit. A healthy church has many leaders, many gifts, and many ways the Spirit is alive. Pastoral transitions can reveal whether a congregation understands itself as a community of disciples or as an audience gathered around one personality. The bishop who appointed Andy Oliver to Allendale did so with the hope that this would be a long-term appointment to establish a congregation expression that would be unique to Florida and the Southeast.

The itinerant system is meant to serve mission. When it does, it reminds us that ministry belongs to God, pastors are part of a connection, and every congregation is called to be the church in every season.

**Another question:** If you could change one thing about The United Methodist Church, what would it be?

## **14. Allendale Specific**

## 79. Who are the people Allendale has named rooms after?

Allendale has named many of its rooms after liberationists that help tell the story of the kind of church we are trying to become. They remind us who has shaped our faith, whose courage we want to carry, and what kind of liberation we are trying to practice.

On either side of the chapel are the Romero Room and the Teresa Room. Oscar Romero was the archbishop of San Salvador who became a voice for the poor and a public critic of state violence. He was assassinated while celebrating Mass. His life reminds the church that worship and justice cannot be separated. Teresa, remembered by many as Mother Teresa, gave her life to serving people who were poor, sick, dying, and abandoned. Her witness reminds us that love must become concrete in the care of bodies.

Moving clockwise from the Teresa Room, the Rivera Room is named for Sylvia Rivera, a Latina trans activist and one of the fierce voices of the modern LGBTQ liberation movement. Rivera fought for people pushed even to the margins of queer movements: trans people, drag queens, unhoused queer youth, sex workers, poor people, and people of color. Alongside Marsha P. Johnson, she is remembered for her protest at Stonewall. Her room reminds us that liberation has to include the people most easily left behind, or it is not liberation yet.

The Ella Baker Room is named for one of the great organizers of the civil rights movement. Ella Baker believed in grassroots leadership. She developed ordinary people into leaders and trusted communities to organize their own freedom. Her room reminds us that leadership should be shared, power should be developed in others, and liberation is collective.

The Wesley Room honors John, Charles, and Susanna Wesley. John, the founder of Methodism, called people to holiness of heart and life. Charles gave the movement songs that carried theology into people's bones. Susanna shaped the spiritual lives of her children and reminds us that movements often begin through the hidden labor of women.

The Community Center is also the Rosetta Room, honoring Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the gospel musician whose sound helped shape rock and roll. Rosetta reminds us that sacred music has never stayed inside neat religious boundaries.

The Nursery is also the Bill W. Room, named for Bill Wilson, one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. That name honors recovery, honesty, surrender, community, and the daily courage of people seeking freedom from addiction. It reminds us that healing often happens in circles of truth where people learn they are not alone.

Above the office are the Rustin and Tubman Rooms. Bayard Rustin was a Black gay Quaker organizer, strategist, and architect of the March on Washington. His life reminds us that queer leadership has always been part of freedom movements, even when history tried to hide it. Harriet Tubman escaped slavery and then risked her life again and again to lead others to freedom. She was a liberator, conductor, prophet, and holy troublemaker.

Allendale's name itself reaches back to Cade B. Allen, the early St. Petersburg developer associated with the creation of the Allendale neighborhood. Allen helped shape the neighborhood around the church, and local history remembers him as providing land and helping begin the construction of Allendale Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1920s. That means our name is tied to place, neighborhood, architecture, and the complicated inheritance of local history.

**Another question:** Whose witness helps you imagine the kind of liberation Allendale is called to practice?

## **80. Why does Allendale have Drag Sundays?**

**Allendale has Drag Sundays because drag helps us see something holy about courage, joy, truth, embodiment, and becoming. Drag is not a gimmick for us. It is not entertainment added onto worship to make church more interesting. At its best, drag is testimony. It tells the truth that bodies can carry beauty, that survival can become art, that shame can be transformed into celebration, and that people who have been mocked, policed, silenced, or threatened can still rise in glory.**

**For many queer and trans people, drag spaces have been places of chosen family, protection, creativity, humor, grief, and liberation. Long before many churches learned how to bless queer and trans lives, drag queens, kings, and performers were creating rooms where people could breathe. They helped people survive. They helped people name themselves. They helped people laugh when the world had been cruel. They helped people imagine a self beyond the one shame tried to assign them.**

**That belongs in church because the gospel is always about bodies becoming free. Jesus spent his ministry moving toward people whose bodies had been judged, shamed, controlled, excluded, or treated as unclean. He touched bodies. He healed bodies. He fed bodies. He blessed bodies. He welcomed people religious respectability had pushed aside. Drag Sunday helps us remember that God is not embarrassed by bodies. God delights in bodies becoming whole.**

**Drag also teaches the church something about transformation. Christian faith has always used the language of new birth, new creation, putting on Christ, becoming more fully who God created us to be. Drag makes visible the holy work of becoming. It plays with costume, color, voice, beauty, exaggeration, and performance in a way that reveals deeper truth: the self the world tried to bury is still alive.**

**At Allendale, Drag Sunday is also an act of repentance. Churches have done great harm to LGBTQ people. We cannot repair that harm with vague welcome. We need worship that blesses queer and trans lives out loud. We need pulpits, songs, prayers, and sanctuaries where queer joy is not tolerated at the edges but honored as a gift to the whole body.**

**Drag Sunday is worship because God is present wherever truth becomes flesh, wherever shame loses power, wherever joy survives violence, and wherever people are called beloved in bodies the world tried to reject. We believe drag artists have something to show the church about resurrection.**

**Another question: What has queer joy taught you about God?**

## **81. What is liturgy, and why does Allendale write so much of its own?**

**Liturgy is the work of the people. It is the shared language, movement, prayer, song, silence, confession, blessing, and response that shape worship. Liturgy is what we do together when we gather before God. It includes the words spoken from the front, but it also includes the congregation's voice, the bodies in the room, the candles, the table, the music, the movement, the children, the silence, the tears, the laughter, and the way a community learns to become honest before God.**

**Every church has liturgy, even churches that say they do not. The question is what kind of people the liturgy is forming. Allendale writes much of its own liturgy because borrowed words do not always name the wounds, hopes, and callings of this community. We stand in the stream of ancient Christian worship, and we also believe worship has to speak truth in the present tense. The prayers of the church should be able to hold storms, housing injustice, queer grief, trans joy, racial violence, reproductive freedom, war, death, resurrection, laughter, exhaustion, and the stubborn hope that God is still moving.**

**Writing our own liturgy helps us resist religious language that has become too polished to tell the truth. Some church language comforts the comfortable and asks the harmed to be quiet. Some liturgy speaks of peace without justice, grace without repair, unity without truth, and love without risk. At Allendale, we want worship language that can bless, disturb, heal, provoke, and send.**

**Our liturgy also teaches theology. When we pray, "God of the outcast and overlooked," we are saying something about God. When we confess racism, transphobia, greed, and indifference, we are saying something about sin. When we bless bodies, welcome questions, name the dead, light candles for justice, and invite everyone to the table, we are saying something about grace.**

**Liturgy gives the congregation words to borrow when their own words are gone. It helps people pray when faith feels thin. It helps people enter a story larger than themselves. At Allendale, liturgy is one way we practice becoming the church we say we want to be: honest, embodied, brave, tender, joyful, and free.**

**Another question: What words in worship have helped you pray when you did not have words of your own?**

## **82. How does Allendale respond to people who disagree with us?**

**Allendale responds to disagreement with honesty, boundaries, and love. We do not expect everyone to think the same way, read scripture the same way, vote the same way, or arrive at the same place at the same speed. People come to church carrying different histories, fears, wounds, assumptions, and questions. A faithful community has to make room for real conversation.**

**At the same time, disagreement is not all the same. There is a difference between someone asking an honest question and someone trying to erase another person's dignity. There is a difference between struggling with a theological idea and using theology to harm people. There is a difference between discomfort and danger. Allendale wants to be a place where people can wrestle, but we will not ask marginalized people to become debate topics in order to keep others comfortable.**

**When people disagree with us, we try to listen for what is underneath the disagreement. Is there fear? Grief? Confusion? Church history? Family pressure? Political formation? A sincere reading of scripture? A wound from another community? Listening does not mean surrendering our commitments. It means taking people seriously enough to hear the story beneath their position.**

**Allendale's commitments are clear. We affirm LGBTQ people. We oppose racism. We believe justice is part of discipleship. We welcome people harmed by religion. We believe the church should be public in its love. Those commitments come from how we understand Jesus, grace, scripture, and the Spirit's work in the world.**

**So when people disagree, we try to stay open without becoming vague. We can say, "You are welcome to keep asking questions here." We can also say, "We will not allow language that dehumanizes people." We can say, "Let's study this together." We can also say, "The safety and dignity of queer and trans people, Black and Brown people, disabled people, immigrants, neighbors who are unhoused, and survivors of harm are not up for a congregational vote."**

**Jesus was patient with people, but he was not neutral about harm. He asked questions. He told stories. He welcomed doubters. He also confronted religious leaders when their interpretations crushed people. Allendale tries to follow that pattern: patient enough for conversation, clear enough for justice, humble enough to keep learning, and brave enough to protect the vulnerable.**

**Love is not the absence of conflict. Love is the way we tell the truth while refusing to abandon one another or sacrifice the harmed for the comfort of the powerful.**

**Another question: What kind of disagreement helps a community grow, and what kind causes harm?**

### **83. If scripture has done harm, why does Allendale still use it?**

**Allendale still uses scripture because scripture has also saved lives, sustained movements, exposed empires, comforted the grieving, and given people language for liberation. We do not deny the harm done with the Bible. We name it plainly. Scripture has been used to defend slavery, segregation, colonialism, patriarchy, anti-Jewish violence, queerphobia, transphobia, abuse, and submission to unjust power. Many people have been wounded by verses thrown like stones.**

**That history changes how we read. It makes us more careful, more humble, and more accountable. We do not approach the Bible as though interpretation is harmless. Interpretation shapes bodies, families, laws, churches, and lives. A sermon can heal, and a sermon can wound. A Bible study can open grace, and a Bible study can teach shame. Allendale uses scripture with the knowledge that sacred texts require sacred responsibility.**

**We also refuse to surrender the Bible to people who have used it for harm. The Bible is not owned by fundamentalism, empire, white supremacy, patriarchy, or fear. Scripture contains the Exodus story, the prophets' cries for justice, Mary's song of reversal, Jesus' good news to the poor, the Spirit poured out on all flesh, Paul's vision of one body with many members, and Revelation's image of a healed creation. The Bible has always carried dangerous freedom inside it.**

Allendale also keeps using scripture because we want to remain in conversation with the larger church. We are not trying to leave the Christian story behind. We are trying to help reform how the church reads, preaches, teaches, and lives it. If harmful interpretations have wounded people, then part of our calling is to offer better ones: readings rooted in Jesus, accountable to love, honest about history, and open to the Spirit's liberating work.

**We read scripture through Jesus. Jesus is the living Word, the clearest picture we have of God's character. When an interpretation makes us more cruel, more afraid, or more willing to abandon the vulnerable, we have to ask whether we are listening to the Spirit of Christ. The Bible should be read in a way that moves us toward love of God and neighbor, not away from it.**

**We read scripture in community because no one sees everything alone. We need scholars, pastors, children, elders, skeptics, mystics, queer readers, Black and Brown readers, disabled readers, poor readers, recovering readers, and people carrying church hurt. The people most harmed by certain interpretations often help the church hear what it has missed.**

**Scripture is sacred, but it is not simple. It contains poetry, protest, history, argument, memory, law, Gospel, and mystery. Allendale keeps reading because we believe God still speaks through these complicated, beautiful, dangerous, liberating texts. We keep reading because the Spirit can turn a weapon back into bread.**

Another question: What helps you know when scripture is being used for healing rather than harm?

#### **84. What about the “clobber passages”?**

The “clobber passages” are a small group of biblical texts often used to condemn LGBTQ people. They are called clobber passages because they have been used like weapons. Many queer and trans people know these passages not as abstract theological debates, but as words that were thrown at them by pastors, parents, churches, schools, politicians, and strangers. Allendale begins by acknowledging that harm.

These passages deserve careful reading, but they do not deserve the power they have been given to define queer and trans lives. They come from ancient contexts very different from our own. Some address sexual violence, exploitation, domination, purity systems, temple practices, or patriarchal assumptions about gender and power. They were not written with modern categories of sexual orientation, gender identity, mutual same-gender covenant, or queer family in mind.

Allendale does not build its theology of LGBTQ people from fear-based readings of a few disputed texts. We read the whole witness of scripture through Jesus. We ask what fruit an interpretation bears. Does it produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Does it honor the image of God? Does it protect the vulnerable? Does it move people toward life? Or does it produce shame, secrecy, family rejection, spiritual trauma, and despair?

For decades, the church told queer and trans people that their bodies, love, and callings were incompatible with Christian teaching. But we have seen the fruit of LGBTQ lives. We have seen faithful marriages, holy friendships, chosen families, courageous testimony, pastoral gifts, prophetic leadership, deep prayer, and love that looks like Jesus. The Spirit has been bearing fruit in queer and trans people all along.

The clobber passages also reveal a larger problem: the church has often been selective in its seriousness. Some Christians obsess over a handful of verses about sexuality while ignoring scripture’s relentless concern for the poor, the stranger, the prisoner, the worker, the widow, the orphan, the exploited, and the oppressed. Allendale wants to take scripture seriously enough to notice that imbalance.

We do not ask LGBTQ people to live forever under suspicion while straight people are presumed whole. We do not treat queer people as problems to solve. We receive queer and trans people as members of the body of Christ, bearers of the Spirit, and teachers of grace.

The question is not whether the Bible can be used to clobber. We know it can. The question is whether the church will keep clobbering, or whether we will let the living Christ teach us to read for liberation, healing, and love.

**Another question: What would change if the church read scripture first with people who have been harmed by it?**

### **85. I am atheist or agnostic. Would I be included at Allendale?**

**Yes. You do not have to pretend belief in order to belong at Allendale. You do not have to say words you cannot honestly say, force certainty you do not have, or hide your questions at the door. Atheists, agnostics, and people who are not sure what they are all have room here.**

**Allendale is a church, so we do speak the language of Christian faith. We pray. We sing. We read scripture. We celebrate Communion. We talk about God, Jesus, grace, the Holy Spirit, resurrection, justice, and love. But we do not believe faith grows through coercion. We do not believe belonging should require dishonesty. A person can participate in the life of the community while still wrestling with what they believe, what they cannot believe, what they used to believe, or what they hope might be true.**

**Many people become atheist or agnostic for serious reasons. Some were harmed by religion. Some were taught a version of God that sounded cruel, controlling, anti-science, anti-queer, racist, sexist, or obsessed with punishment. Some could not reconcile suffering with the idea of a loving God. Some simply never found religious claims convincing. Allendale does not treat those questions as failures. We treat them as honest.**

**In the Gospels, Jesus makes room for people with complicated faith. People come to him with doubt, desperation, curiosity, anger, need, confusion, and partial trust. He does not demand polished doctrine before offering compassion. He meets people where they are and invites them into deeper life.**

**At Allendale, inclusion means you are welcome to show up as yourself. You can sing or not sing. Pray or sit quietly. Receive Communion or come forward for a blessing or stay seated. Ask hard questions. Disagree. Listen. Serve. Build relationships. Join the work of justice. Be part of the community without pretending to be somewhere you are not.**

**We also believe atheists and agnostics often have gifts the church needs. Skeptics can help the church be more honest. People wounded by religion can help us see where our language needs repair. Those who do not believe in God may still believe deeply in compassion, truth, dignity, beauty, justice, and love. Allendale wants to be in conversation with that.**

**Belonging means we trust that grace is spacious enough for people in different places. We can walk together even when we do not all use the same words for what is holy. In our Welcome Statement, when we say “no matter your background or belief... you are God’s beloved and are welcome here,” we mean it.**

**Another question: What would make church feel honest enough for someone who is not sure they believe?**

## **86. What does it mean that Allendale is a Reconciling Congregation?**

**Allendale is a Reconciling Congregation, which means we are publicly committed to the full inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ people in the life of the church. This is more than being friendly. It is more than saying everyone is welcome. It is a public promise that queer and trans people are beloved, gifted, called, needed, and fully part of the body of Christ.**

**The Reconciling movement grew because The United Methodist Church spent decades harming LGBTQ people through official teaching, policy, trials, exclusions, and restrictions. Queer clergy were denied ordination or removed from ministry. Same-sex couples were denied weddings in their churches. Congregations were told that full inclusion was against church law. Many LGBTQ people learned to expect rejection from the very communities that baptized them.**

**Allendale became Reconciling as part of our commitment to build a church without barriers, a sanctuary for all. That welcome includes sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, race, ethnicity, economic situation, age, ability, family structure, background, belief, and the many stories people carry. The word Reconciling is especially connected to LGBTQ inclusion, but the practice of reconciliation reaches into every place the church has created exclusion.**

**Being Reconciling does not mean we have finished the work. A church can put a rainbow on a sign and still need to examine its language, leadership, bathrooms, policies, assumptions, theology, pastoral care, and worship. Allendale's call is to keep asking whether queer and trans people are merely allowed in the room or truly shaping the room.**

**Reconciling also means repair. The church has caused harm, including harm inside Allendale's own history. We cannot undo that with one statement. We practice repair by telling the truth, blessing LGBTQ lives out loud, trusting queer and trans leadership, changing harmful language, celebrating queer joy, and standing publicly when LGBTQ people are targeted.**

Allendale is also part of a larger Reconciling family. We are not standing alone. At the time of this writing, Reconciling Ministries Network includes more than 1,450 Reconciling Ministries and more than 46,000 Reconciling United Methodists across five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Kenya, the Philippines, and the United States. The network includes local churches, campus ministries, Bible studies, small groups, regional groups, colleges, and other communities committed to LGBTQ inclusion and justice. That means when Allendale says we are Reconciling, we are joining a connection of churches and people across regions, cultures, and contexts who are working for a church where LGBTQ people can live, lead, love, marry, serve, and be fully received as gifts of God.

**At Allendale, being Reconciling is part of discipleship. We follow Jesus, who kept moving toward the people religion pushed aside. We trust the Spirit, who keeps pouring gifts on all flesh. We practice grace, which is always wider than fear.**

**Another question: What does full inclusion require beyond welcome?**

## **87. Where did liberation theology come from?**

**Liberation theology grew from communities asking what the gospel sounds like when read from the underside of history. It became especially visible in Latin America in the twentieth century, where theologians, priests, pastors, base communities, workers, peasants, and organizers read scripture in the context of poverty, dictatorship, land theft, violence, and economic exploitation. They asked a question the whole church still needs: What does God's good news mean for people whose lives are being crushed?**

**Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest, is often named as one of the founders of Latin American liberation theology. He described theology as reflection on practice, especially the practice of solidarity with the poor. Liberation theology insisted that poverty is not simply unfortunate. Poverty is often produced by unjust systems. The gospel cannot be separated from the struggle for life, dignity, land, bread, freedom, and justice.**

**Liberation theology did not begin from abstract ideas about God. It began from the cries of people. It returned to the Exodus story, where God hears enslaved people and acts for their freedom. It listened to the prophets, who condemn those who trample the poor. It listened to Mary, who sings of the powerful brought down and the lowly lifted up. It listened to Jesus, who announces good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed. It saw the cross as God's solidarity with people condemned by the powers.**

**Liberation theology also developed in many other forms. Black theology, especially through James Cone and others, asked what the gospel means in a world shaped by slavery, lynching, segregation, police violence, and white supremacy. Womanist theology listened to the faith, survival, and wisdom of Black women. Feminist theology challenged patriarchy in church and society. Queer theology asked how LGBTQ lives reveal grace, embodiment, desire, survival, and resurrection. Disability theology, ecological theology, and other liberation-shaped theologies continue to widen the conversation.**

**At Allendale, liberation theology helps us read scripture with people whose lives are at stake. It teaches us to ask where God is found among the poor, people who are unhoused, the incarcerated, queer and trans people, immigrants, workers, survivors, and communities targeted by systems of domination. It does not replace Wesleyan theology for us. It deepens it. Wesleyan grace becomes public. Holiness becomes social. Salvation becomes healing for people and systems.**

**Liberation theology reminds the church that God is not neutral about suffering. God takes sides with life. God hears cries. God brings people out. God calls the church to join that movement.**

**Another question: Whose suffering has helped you understand the gospel more clearly?**

## **88. Why does Allendale show up at city council meetings and public actions?**

Allendale shows up at city council meetings and public actions because faith belongs in the real world. The gospel has something to say wherever decisions are made about bodies, housing, policing, land, budgets, safety, schools, poverty, and whose lives are treated as disposable. City council meetings may not look like church, but they often reveal what a community worships: profit or people, fear or care, punishment or repair, image or truth.

Jesus' ministry was public. He healed in public, taught in public, fed people in public, challenged authorities in public, and was executed publicly by the state. His message about the reign of God was not limited to private belief. It disrupted how power worked. It challenged who was included, who was protected, who was believed, who was fed, and who was pushed outside.

Allendale shows up because local policy shapes local suffering. Housing policy affects neighbors who are unhoused. Policing policy affects Black and brown communities, poor people, youth, immigrants, people in mental health crisis, and people living outside. Land deals affect neighborhoods and history. Budget choices reveal moral priorities. Public meetings are places where harm can be hidden in procedure and where truth needs witnesses.

Showing up does not mean Allendale thinks we have every answer. It means we believe discipleship includes public responsibility. Sometimes our role is to speak. Sometimes it is to listen. Sometimes it is to stand beside those most affected. Sometimes it is to help translate moral urgency into public language. Sometimes it is to remind officials that budgets are spiritual documents because they reveal whose pain counts.

The prophets did this kind of work. They spoke to kings, priests, landowners, judges, and people with power. They named exploitation, false worship, violence, and neglect of the poor. They did not separate prayer from policy. They understood that worship without justice becomes empty.

At Allendale, public witness grows from pastoral care. When we know people who are unhoused, we cannot treat housing policy as abstract. When we love trans youth, we cannot treat anti-trans laws as theoretical. When our neighbors are harmed by racism, poverty, and disaster, we cannot retreat into a sanctuary and call that faithfulness.

We show up because love has feet. We show up because silence helps the powerful. We show up because Jesus is already present among those asking for dignity, safety, housing, healing, and freedom. The church goes public because God's love is public.

Another question: Where should faith show up when people's lives are being shaped by public decisions?

## **89. Why does Allendale let community groups use the building?**

Allendale lets community groups use the building because the church building is not ours to hoard. It has been entrusted to us for ministry. A sanctuary, fellowship hall, classroom, parking lot, kitchen, and meeting room can all become places where grace takes shape. The building is a tool for love.

United Methodists often talk about stewardship. Stewardship is not only about money. It is about how we use everything God has placed in our care. Allendale's campus sits in a real neighborhood with real needs. If rooms sit empty while people need space for recovery, organizing, music, meetings, meals, care, celebration, learning, and mutual aid, we have to ask whether we are stewarding the building faithfully.

Many people first encounter Allendale through something other than Sunday worship. They may come for a recovery meeting, a community gathering, a choir rehearsal, a square dance, a lunch, a justice meeting, a support group, a preschool event, a training, or a gathering after disaster. They may not use church language. They may not be looking for a sermon. Still, they may experience welcome, safety, dignity, and belonging in a space held by the church.

That is ministry. Ministry does not always look like preaching. Sometimes ministry looks like unlocking a door, turning on lights, making coffee, cleaning bathrooms, setting up chairs, keeping a calendar, or making sure a group has space to breathe. Hospitality is practical before it is poetic.

Allendale's building use also reflects our theology. We believe God is already at work outside the church. When community groups gather here, we are not bringing God to them. We are making space for the Spirit's work that is already happening. Recovery groups, LGBTQ gatherings, justice organizations, arts communities, children's programs, neighborhood meetings, and mutual aid efforts can all reveal the grace of God in forms the church needs to recognize.

This also requires care. A building used by the community needs boundaries, accountability, safety practices, schedules, cleaning, maintenance, and honest communication. Hospitality does not mean chaos. It means creating conditions where people can gather with dignity and respect.

At Allendale, we want our building to say what our Welcome Statement says: a place without barriers, a sanctuary for all. We want the walls to hold more than Sunday morning. We want them to hold grief, recovery, organizing, laughter, learning, courage, and community. A church building becomes most faithful when it helps the neighborhood become more whole.

Another question: What would our building say about God if someone only knew us by how we use it?

## **90. What does Allendale mean by “Beloved Community”?**

**Beloved Community is a vision of life together rooted in love, justice, dignity, and repair. The phrase is often associated with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who used it to describe a reconciled society where racism, poverty, violence, and exploitation are overcome by justice and love. Beloved Community is not sentimental niceness. It is a public, organized, courageous form of love.**

**At Allendale, Beloved Community means we are trying to become a church where people do not have to disappear in order to belong. People should not have to hide their questions, their grief, their queerness, their recovery, their disability, their anger, their poverty, their family story, their doubts, or their joy. Beloved Community makes room for real people, not polished religious versions of people.**

**Beloved Community also requires truth. A community cannot become beloved by pretending harm did not happen. Racism has to be named. Queerphobia and transphobia have to be named. Poverty, ableism, sexism, religious trauma, abuse, and exclusion have to be named. Love without truth becomes avoidance. Truth without love can become cruelty. Beloved Community needs both.**

**For Christians, Beloved Community flows from the life of Jesus. Jesus gathered people across boundaries. He ate with those labeled sinners. He touched those treated as unclean. He welcomed children. He challenged the powerful. He restored people to community. He created tables where the excluded became honored guests. He revealed God’s reign as a new social reality, not simply an inner feeling.**

**Beloved Community is also deeply Wesleyan. John Wesley taught that there is no holiness without social holiness. We are formed together. We watch over one another in love. We practice mercy together. We resist evil together. Grace is personal, but it creates a people.**

**At Allendale, Beloved Community shows up in worship, Communion, committee meetings, public witness, pastoral care, conflict, forgiveness, mutual aid, and the way we use our building. It shows up when queer and trans people lead. It shows up when children are heard. It shows up when neighbors who are unhoused are treated as neighbors. It shows up when people with church hurt are given time to breathe. It shows up when we disagree without dehumanizing one another.**

**Beloved Community is not something we already possess. It is something we practice. We will fail at it. We will need repair. We will need confession, patience, courage, and grace. The goal is not a perfect church. The goal is a community that keeps being converted by love.**

**Another question: What would make Allendale feel more like Beloved Community to you?**

## **91. Why is Allendale divisive?**

**Allendale is called divisive because we say some things out loud that many churches prefer to leave vague. We say LGBTQ people are beloved and should be fully included. We say racism is sin. We say poverty is not inevitable. We say neighbors who are unhoused deserve dignity. We say public policy has moral consequences. We say women, queer people, trans people, Black and brown people, disabled people, children, elders, and people wounded by religion belong in the center of the church's concern. That clarity can feel divisive to people who are used to churches staying quiet.**

**The word divisive often gets used against people who name harm, rather than against the harm itself. When a church talks about racism, some say the church is creating division. But racism already created the division. When a church blesses queer love, some say the church is dividing people. But exclusion already divided the body. When a church stands with neighbors who are unhoused, some say the church is being political. But policies already made poverty public.**

**Jesus was called divisive too. He healed on the Sabbath and religious leaders got angry. He ate with sinners and respectable people complained. He challenged wealth and people walked away. He exposed hypocrisy and powerful people plotted against him. Jesus did not seek conflict for its own sake, but he did not avoid conflict when love required truth.**

**Allendale does not want to be divisive in the sense of being cruel, careless, arrogant, or addicted to outrage. That kind of division damages community. We want to speak with courage and humility. We want to keep listening, learning, repenting, and repairing. We want to make room for questions. We want to be patient with people who are growing.**

**But we cannot make unity our highest value if unity means asking harmed people to stay quiet. The church has too often protected a false peace by silencing those who were suffering. True peace is not the absence of tension. True peace is the presence of justice, dignity, truth, and repair.**

**At Allendale, we would rather be accused of being divisive than participate in a unity built on someone else's erasure. We would rather risk criticism than tell queer youth, neighbors who are unhoused, Black families, immigrants, or survivors of harm that their pain must wait until everyone feels comfortable.**

**The gospel divides when it separates truth from lies, courage from cowardice, liberation from control, and love from fear. If Allendale is divisive, may it be because we are trying to follow Jesus toward a deeper wholeness the world does not yet know how to welcome.**

**Another question: When has truth-telling felt divisive before it became healing?**

## **92. Why does Allendale care so much about neighbors who are unhoused?**

Allendale cares about neighbors who are unhoused because Jesus cares about people without shelter, security, protection, and rest. The Bible is full of concern for people pushed to the edge: the poor, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, the hungry, the sick, the displaced, and the abandoned. A church that follows Jesus cannot treat homelessness as someone else's problem.

People who are experiencing homelessness are not issues. They are neighbors. They are people with names, histories, trauma, gifts, humor, grief, intelligence, anger, faith, doubts, and belovedness. Many are surviving poverty, disability, addiction, family rejection, mental illness, job loss, medical debt, domestic violence, eviction, criminalization, or systems that failed them long before they slept outside. Their lives cannot be reduced to stereotypes.

Allendale's care for neighbors who are unhoused is rooted in the image of God. Every person bears sacred worth. Housing status does not erase dignity. Addiction does not erase dignity. Mental illness does not erase dignity. A criminal record does not erase dignity. Poverty does not erase dignity. The church's calling is to see people as God sees them and to act accordingly.

We also care because homelessness is not only personal misfortune. It is shaped by policy, wages, rent, health care, racism, disability access, policing, family systems, and economic choices. Charity can meet immediate needs, and those needs are real. People need food, laundry, bathrooms, showers, mail, transportation, shelter, safety, and human kindness. Justice asks why so many people are forced to live without those things in the first place.

At Allendale, care has taken practical forms: hospitality, advocacy, memorial services, disaster response, public witness, relationships, and opening space when possible. We remember those who die while unhoused because their lives deserve public grief. We speak against laws and practices that criminalize survival. We try to hold both tenderness and truth.

Caring for neighbors who are unhoused also changes the church. It exposes our assumptions. It tests our patience. It challenges our comfort. It forces us to ask whether our welcome is real when someone smells bad, talks loudly, carries trauma, asks for help again, or does not fit middle-class expectations of respectability. The gospel becomes very concrete in those moments.

Jesus said that when we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned, we meet him. Allendale believes Christ is present among neighbors who are unhoused, not as a metaphor to make us feel noble, but as a real call to love, dignity, housing, and justice.

**Another question: What would change if we saw unhoused neighbors as teachers of the gospel?**

### **93. What does it mean to become part of Allendale?**

To become part of Allendale is to join a community that is trying to follow Jesus with honesty, courage, joy, and justice. It does not mean you have every belief settled. It does not mean you know all the church language. It does not mean you have no doubts, no wounds, no questions, and no unfinished parts of your story. It means you are willing to enter the journey with us.

Allendale is a church for people who are curious, wounded, hopeful, skeptical, faithful, searching, returning, rebuilding, and trying to live with more love. Some people come after being harmed by church. Some come because they are hungry for worship that tells the truth. Some come because they want their children raised in a faith that blesses bodies and welcomes questions. Some come because justice and spirituality finally feel connected here. Some come because they need community.

Becoming part of Allendale can include formal membership, but belonging begins before paperwork. You become part of the life of the church by showing up, being known, sharing your gifts, asking questions, receiving care, offering care, worshiping, serving, learning, giving, and helping build Beloved Community. Membership gives public shape to that belonging, but grace is already moving before any vote or vow.

United Methodist members promise to participate in the ministries of the church through prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. At Allendale, those words have flesh on them. Prayers may sound like Sunday worship, a text to someone grieving, silence after hard news, or a chant at a public action. Presence means showing up for worship and for one another. Gifts include money, time, skills, creativity, leadership, organizing, food, music, teaching, and care. Service includes hands-on work in the church and community. Witness means living publicly as someone shaped by love.

Becoming part of Allendale also means joining a community with commitments. We are Reconciling. We are justice-rooted. We are Wesleyan. We are liberation-shaped. We believe worship and public witness belong together. We believe queer and trans people are beloved. We believe racism must be confronted. We believe the table is wide. We believe faith should make us more merciful and more brave.

Allendale is not perfect. No church is. We will disappoint one another. We will need repair. Becoming part of the church means helping us become more faithful, not pretending we have already arrived.

There is room here for your questions, your gifts, your grief, your laughter, your doubts, and your becoming. To join Allendale is to say: I want to walk this road with you.

Another question: What would help you feel more fully part of this community?

## **94. Why do so many people other than the pastor preach at Allendale?**

**So many people preach at Allendale because the Spirit speaks through the whole body. The pastor has an important role, but the pulpit does not belong to one person. The gospel is too large and the Spirit is too free for preaching to be limited to a single voice.**

**United Methodists believe in the ministry of all Christians. Through Baptism, every believer is called into the ministry of Jesus Christ. Some people are ordained, licensed, or appointed to particular forms of leadership, but ministry belongs to the whole people of God. Preaching is one way the church hears from the body, not only from the office.**

**Allendale also knows that different voices help us hear different dimensions of the gospel. A young person may hear something in scripture that an older person misses. A queer preacher may reveal grace from a place the church has ignored. A Black preacher may help the church hear liberation where white Christianity heard comfort. A layperson may speak from daily work, parenting, recovery, grief, organizing, art, or survival in a way that opens the text differently. When Allendale invites many people to preach, we are not lowering the meaning of preaching. We are widening the community's trust in the Spirit's gifts.**

**Many voices also protect the church from becoming centered on one personality. A healthy congregation cannot depend entirely on the pastor's charisma, theology, energy, or presence. The body needs many teachers, storytellers, witnesses, prophets, and encouragers. When more people preach, the church remembers that leadership is shared.**

**This practice also reflects Allendale's commitment to liberation. People who have been silenced need more than a welcome statement. They need microphones, pulpits, leadership, trust, and authority. The church becomes more whole when people once treated as objects of ministry become proclaimers of the gospel.**

**At Allendale, preaching may come through a sermon, testimony, dialogue, Bibliodrama, music, poetry, interview, youth reflection, or lived witness. The form may vary, but the question remains: Is the Word becoming flesh among us? Are we hearing good news? Are we being called toward love, justice, mercy, and courage?**

**Since 2022, Allendale's pastor was in the pulpit about 58% of the time. About 65% of those voices were queer, 42% were people of color, and 54% were women. Black preachers made up about 27%, Latinx preachers about 16%, and trans or nonbinary preachers about 4%. These categories overlap, but that is part of the point. The pulpit is not being shared as a symbolic gesture. It is being shared because the body of Christ is diverse, intersectional, gifted, and already speaking.**

**Another question: Whose voice has helped you hear God in a new way?**

## **95. What is the history of Allendale?**

**Allendale United Methodist Church has been part of St. Petersburg for a century. Like many churches, its history includes faithfulness, change, struggle, memory, and reinvention. It began as a neighborhood Methodist congregation, a place where people gathered for worship, children were taught, families were formed, funerals were held, sacraments were shared, and generations tried to follow Jesus in the context of their own time.**

**Over the years, the neighborhood changed. The city changed. The church changed. Allendale's story cannot be told only as a story of buildings, pastors, committees, or membership rolls. It is also the story of people asking what faithfulness looks like in each generation. Every church has to decide whether it will become a museum of what once was or a living body open to what the Spirit is doing now.**

**In recent years, Allendale has experienced a profound renewal. Since 2016, the congregation has become known as a vibrant, justice-oriented, radically inclusive community. Allendale adopted a public welcome rooted in unconditional love and full participation. In 2017, Allendale became a Reconciling Congregation, making clear its commitment to LGBTQ inclusion. That step helped shape the church's public identity and deepened its call to repair the harm religion has done to queer and trans people.**

**Allendale's more recent history includes worship that is creative, embodied, and justice-centered. The church has become known for Drag Sunday, inclusive language, public liturgy, shared preaching, and music that reaches beyond the usual boundaries of church. It has also become known for public witness: racial justice, LGBTQ rights, reproductive freedom, care for neighbors who are experiencing homelessness, disaster response, opposition to harmful public policies, and advocacy for a more just St. Petersburg.**

**The church's history includes courage, and it also includes harm. Like every church, Allendale has had to repent of ways it failed to embody the welcome it now proclaims. Part of our history is learning to tell the truth about those failures so the future can be different. A church that cannot repent cannot be renewed.**

**In 2024, Allendale celebrated its 100th anniversary. That milestone was not only a look backward. It was a question for the future: What kind of church is needed now? What would it mean to carry the best of the Methodist tradition forward with more courage, more honesty, and more love?**

**Allendale's history is still being written. It is written every Sunday in worship, every time someone finds welcome after church hurt, every time the building becomes sanctuary, every time the church shows up for justice, and every time grace becomes visible in St. Petersburg.**

**Another question: What part of Allendale's story do you hope future generations remember?**

## **96. How does Allendale incorporate inclusive language into worship?**

**Allendale incorporates inclusive language into worship because language shapes imagination, and imagination shapes faith. The words we use for God, people, sin, grace, bodies, family, and community teach the congregation what is holy. Worship language is never neutral. It forms what we believe God is like and who we believe belongs.**

**Inclusive language begins with how we speak about people. At Allendale, we try to avoid language that assumes everyone is male or female, married or single in the same way, able-bodied, straight, cisgender, financially secure, or carrying the same family story. We often use words like people, siblings, beloveds, friends, community, and body of Christ. These choices help more people hear themselves included in the prayer of the church.**

**Inclusive language also shapes how we speak about God. Allendale uses expansive language because God is beyond gender and beyond any single image. Father language can be beautiful for some and painful for others. Expansive language helps the church remember that every person is made in the image of God.**

**Inclusive language also means paying attention to harm. Some common Christian phrases carry ableism, anti-Judaism, colonialism, sexism, or assumptions that wound people. We try to avoid using disability as a metaphor for spiritual failure. We try not to describe darkness as evil in ways that reinforce racialized imagery. We try to speak of Jewish people and traditions with care, remembering that Jesus was Jewish and that Christian interpretation has often fueled anti-Jewish harm.**

**This work is never finished. We will make mistakes. Language changes. People teach us. Communities help us hear what we missed. Inclusive language requires humility because the goal is not to sound perfectly polished. The goal is to speak in ways that honor the dignity of God and neighbor.**

**At Allendale, inclusive language is also connected to liberation. When a trans person hears themselves blessed in worship, language becomes grace. When a child hears God described in more than male terms, imagination widens. When a disabled person does not hear their body used as a symbol of sin, worship becomes safer. When people harmed by religious language hear new words, they may find a doorway back to prayer.**

**Inclusive language does not shrink God. It reminds us that God was never as small as our favorite words. The church keeps learning to speak with more reverence, more honesty, and more love.**

**Another question: What word or phrase in worship has helped you feel included, seen, or blessed?**

## **97. What is the committee structure of Allendale?**

Allendale's committee structure is one way the church organizes its shared ministry. Committees are not the heart of the church, but they help the body function. They create accountability, steward resources, support staff, care for property, guide mission, and help the congregation make decisions in a way that is more faithful than one person deciding everything alone.

As a United Methodist congregation, Allendale is connected to the wider structure of The United Methodist Church. Each year, the charge conference elects leaders and receives reports. The church council helps coordinate the congregation's ministry and keeps the big picture in view. Trustees care for property, buildings, insurance, legal responsibilities, and the physical resources entrusted to the church. Finance helps build and monitor the budget, practice transparency, and align money with mission. Staff-Parish Relations Committee supports staff, evaluates staffing needs, and works with the pastor and district superintendent around pastoral leadership.

There are also teams and ministries that carry the daily life of the congregation: worship, care, justice, hospitality, children, youth, community partnerships, and other areas that may shift over time. Some groups are required by United Methodist polity. Others grow out of Allendale's particular calling and needs.

At Allendale, committee work should be ministry, not bureaucracy for its own sake. A budget is a theological document. A building calendar is a hospitality document. A staff conversation is a care document. A trustees meeting can be about mission. A church council agenda can be about the Spirit's direction. The question underneath every committee is: How does this help us love God, love neighbor, and participate in God's liberating work?

Good structure protects the community. It keeps power from becoming too concentrated. It creates ways for people to participate. It helps the church make decisions with prayer, information, accountability, and shared wisdom. It also helps preserve memory so the church is not constantly starting over.

Committee structure can become unhealthy when it turns inward, protects comfort, resists change, or treats procedure as more important than people. Allendale has to keep asking whether our structures serve the gospel or simply preserve the institution. The Spirit can work through meetings, but the Spirit may also call meetings to change.

Serving on a committee is one way people offer their gifts. It may not always feel glamorous, but it can be deeply holy. The church needs people who can pray, plan, count, repair, listen, organize, question, and follow through. Love needs structure if it is going to last.

**Another question: How can church structure help ministry without getting in the way of the Spirit?**

## **98. Why did Allendale stay United Methodist?**

**Allendale stayed United Methodist because we believed the Spirit was not finished with this denomination, and because leaving was not the only faithful form of resistance. For decades, The United Methodist Church harmed LGBTQ people through exclusionary language, bans on same-sex weddings, and restrictions on queer clergy. Allendale had every reason to be angry. Many of us were angry. That anger was holy because the harm was real.**

**In 2019, the denomination doubled down on anti-LGBTQ exclusion at a Special General Conference. For many progressive churches, including churches like Allendale, leaving seemed possible or even expected. A temporary disaffiliation pathway was created during that era of conflict. Many assumed progressive churches would use it to escape. Instead, many progressive and moderate United Methodists organized, stayed, built coalitions, and kept working for full inclusion.**

**Allendale stayed because we are deeply Methodist. We believe in grace that goes before us, meets us, changes us, and sends us. We believe in connectionalism. We believe in social holiness. We believe in open tables, shared ministry, public witness, and a church big enough to be reformed by the Spirit. We did not want to surrender the Methodist tradition to those who used it to exclude.**

**Staying did not mean quiet compliance. Allendale blessed same-sex weddings when church rules said we could not. We stood in tension with denominational authority because we believed faithfulness required it. We trusted that unjust rules should be challenged, and we were not alone. Across the connection, queer clergy, allies, congregations, bishops, and organizers kept pressing the church toward repair.**

**In 2024, The United Methodist Church removed the long-standing anti-LGBTQ language and restrictions. That change did not erase the harm. It did not return lost years, restore every calling, or heal every wound. But it did open a new chapter. Allendale stayed long enough to help witness that change from within.**

**We stayed because the church is more than its worst paragraph. We stayed because our ancestors in the tradition include field preachers, women who preached before they were recognized, Black Methodists who challenged racism, and queer clergy who refused to disappear. We stayed because Methodism at its best has always known how to become more vile for the sake of grace.**

**Allendale stayed United Methodist to help make the church more faithful, more inclusive, more honest, and more alive. Staying was not passive. Staying was part of the struggle.**

**Another question: When is staying a form of resistance, and when is leaving a form of faithfulness?**

## **99. Why does Allendale use pronouns?**

**Allendale uses pronouns because names and pronouns are part of how we honor people's dignity. When someone tells us their name or pronouns, they are offering us a way to recognize them truthfully. Using those words is not political correctness. It is basic care. It is one way we practice loving our neighbor.**

**For many cisgender people, pronouns may not feel like a big deal because they are usually called by the right ones without having to ask. For many trans, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people, pronouns can carry a lot more weight. Being misgendered over and over can become exhausting, painful, and dehumanizing. Being called by the right name and pronouns can feel like being seen, respected, and allowed to breathe.**

**Allendale uses pronouns because the church has often been unsafe for queer and trans people. Churches have mocked, ignored, corrected, erased, or debated people's identities while claiming to speak for God. We want to practice a different kind of faith. We want people to know that their bodies, names, stories, and identities will be treated with reverence here.**

**This is deeply theological. In scripture, names matter. God calls people by name. Jesus sees people others overlook. The Spirit gathers many kinds of bodies into one body of Christ. The image of God is not limited to one gender, one expression, one body, or one way of being human. When we honor someone's pronouns, we are not pretending to know everything about gender. We are doing something simpler and holier: receiving the person in front of us with care.**

**Using pronouns also helps shift the burden away from trans and nonbinary people. When everyone is invited to share pronouns, it becomes less like one person has to explain themselves and more like a community practice of hospitality. It says, "We do not want to assume. We want to know you as you are."**

**At Allendale, pronouns may show up in name tags, introductions, email signatures, worship leadership, small groups, or community gatherings. No one should be forced to share pronouns if they are not ready or do not feel safe. The goal is not pressure. The goal is creating a culture where people can be named truthfully and treated gently.**

**We will make mistakes. When we do, the faithful response is not defensiveness. It is correction, apology, and practice. "Thank you for telling me. I'm sorry. I'll do better."**

**Pronouns are small words, but small words can carry large love. At Allendale, using pronouns is one way we say that every person is more than an assumption. Every person deserves to be addressed with dignity. Every person belongs in a community where being known truthfully is part of being loved.**

**Another question: What helps you feel seen and respected in a community?**



## **100. What is Allendale's Social Covenant?**

**Allendale's Social Covenant is a shared agreement about how leaders of Allendale will live, serve, lead, disagree, repair, and love together. It is not a rulebook for perfect people. It is a covenant for real people doing real ministry with different gifts, limits, wounds, histories, communication styles, and capacities. It gives us a way to practice community with more honesty, grace, accountability, and care.**

**At the heart of the covenant is the image of God. Allendale commits to recognize each person as made in God's image, especially in moments of tension, disagreement, or weariness. That means we do not reduce people to their worst moment, their sharpest email, their anxiety, their mistake, or their disagreement with us. We begin with dignity.**

**The covenant calls us to value one another's gifts, faith journeys, time, capacity, and boundaries. It asks us to listen actively, respond with empathy, and presume best intent. Presuming best intent does not mean ignoring harm. It means we try not to begin with suspicion. We make room for clarification, context, and grace while still taking responsibility for impact.**

**The covenant also asks us to keep learning about bias, power, privilege, and the places where our understanding is limited. This is important for Allendale because Beloved Community does not happen by good intentions alone. We have to keep noticing whose voices are centered, whose voices are missing, who feels safe to speak, and how power moves through the room.**

**Allendale's covenant calls us to nurture, protect, and amplify diverse voices in leadership and community. It asks us to be sincere and open while honoring confidentiality. It asks us to speak with one another, not about one another, addressing concerns directly rather than through gossip, triangulation, or assumptions.**

**The covenant does not avoid conflict. It expects conflict. It calls us into timely, direct, grace-seasoned conversations. It asks us to see difference as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat. It calls us to resolve conflict promptly and responsibly, seeking counsel when needed, and understanding accountability as a practice of repair rather than punishment.**

**Forgiveness is part of the covenant, but not cheap forgiveness. Reconciliation is described as an ongoing process involving both grace and responsibility. That is deeply Allendale. We believe in grace, and we also believe in truth. We believe in kindness, and we also believe harm has to be named and repaired.**

**Finally, the Social Covenant is a living agreement. We revisit it. We name when we fall short. We gently call one another back to it. At its best, the covenant helps Allendale become what we preach: a community of grace, courage, repair, accountability, and love.**

**Another question: What kind of community practices help people tell the truth without losing one another?**

### **101. What does it mean to “become more vile”?**

John Wesley once preached in the fields because the people who most needed good news were not always inside churches. Respectable religion did not like it. Wesley knew that preaching outdoors, among ordinary people, workers, the poor, and those excluded from polite religious society, would damage his reputation. Still, he chose the field over respectability. He said he was willing to become “more vile” if that was what faithfulness required.

To become more vile does not mean becoming cruel, reckless, rude, or careless with people. It means becoming less attached to respectability when respectability stands in the way of love. It means being willing to be misunderstood by the comfortable if that is the cost of standing with the vulnerable. It means choosing the gospel over the approval of people who prefer a church that stays quiet, safe, and well-behaved.

Allendale is sometimes treated as if we sit outside the big tent of Methodism, as if our public witness, our queer and trans inclusion, our justice work, our music, our protests, our theology, and our refusal to be quiet make us less Methodist. But if Methodism is only a tent for polite religion, then it has forgotten the field where it was born. Allendale is not outside the Methodist story. We are standing in one of its oldest streams: grace for the people religion overlooks, holiness that becomes social, faith that leaves the building, and a willingness to become more vile for the sake of the gospel.

Methodism was born with holy trouble in its bones. Wesley preached outside. Early Methodists organized working people. Women preached before the church knew how to honor them. Black Methodists built institutions when white Methodists made dignity impossible. Queer clergy and allies broke unjust rules so love could be blessed. Again and again, the Spirit has pushed the church beyond the boundaries of what respectable religion was willing to allow.

At Allendale, becoming more vile means letting go of the need to be seen as a “proper” church by people who are more offended by disruption than by injustice. It means welcoming people other churches have harmed. It means blessing queer and trans lives without apology. It means using our building for community survival. It means preaching good news to the poor and not just comfort to the comfortable. It means singing songs that tell the truth, showing up at city hall, standing against racism, resisting policies that harm the vulnerable, and refusing to confuse silence with peace.

Becoming more vile also means being honest about ourselves. We cannot claim the courage of the field while protecting our own comfort. We cannot celebrate Wesley’s risk while avoiding our own. We cannot talk about liberation while centering institutional safety. If we want to become more vile in the best Methodist sense, we have to keep asking where respectability has made us timid, where fear has made us quiet, and where the Spirit is calling us outside the walls.

The church does not become vile for shock value. We become more vile because Jesus keeps leading us toward people and places respectable religion often avoids. Jesus was born among the poor, touched the unclean, ate with sinners, confronted power, crossed boundaries, and was executed outside the city gate. If we follow him, we should not be surprised when faithfulness carries us beyond polite approval.

To become more vile is to become more free: free from the fear of what people will say, free from the need to protect the institution at all costs, free from the lie that holiness must look respectable, free to love boldly, tell the truth, widen the table, and join God wherever grace is already moving.

Allendale's call is not to shrink ourselves until the wider church finds us acceptable. Our call is to be deeply, stubbornly, historically Methodist: warmed by grace, sent to the margins, organized for love, and willing to risk reputation for the sake of liberation. If that looks strange to some people, we are in good company. The Methodist movement has always been at its best when it was a little too alive, a little too unruly, and a little too committed to the people Jesus kept centering.

**Another question:** What would Allendale risk if we became more faithful than respectable?

# Conclusion

If you have made it to the end of this guide, you have not reached the end of the conversation. You have entered it more deeply. Faith is not a box of settled answers we carry around to feel safe. Faith is a living relationship with God, with one another, with scripture, with the world, and with the holy mystery that keeps calling us beyond fear into love.

Allendale Questions, Allendale Answers was written as a doorway. It offers language for people trying to understand Christian faith through a Wesleyan and liberation-shaped lens. It names what United Methodists have often believed, what Allendale is trying to practice, what the church has gotten wrong, and what the Spirit may still be asking of us. These pages are not meant to close down curiosity. They are meant to open up deeper wrestling, braver discipleship, and more honest community.

The questions in this guide lead us back to practice. How will we worship? How will we read scripture? How will we share power? How will we use our building? How will we respond to harm? How will we receive people who have been told they do not belong? How will we follow Jesus when faithfulness costs us something? How will we become a church where grace becomes public, love becomes organized, and liberation becomes visible?

The work ahead will require humility. We will make mistakes. We will need correction. We will have to repent, repair, listen, learn, and try again. A living church is always being converted. A faithful church does not fear growth. It trusts that the God who began a good work among us is still forming us for the sake of the world.

So keep asking questions. Ask them in worship. Ask them in Bible study. Ask them at the table. Ask them in committee meetings, hospital rooms, city council chambers, protest lines, recovery circles, and quiet conversations after church. Ask them when belief feels strong and when belief feels thin. Ask them when you are angry, hopeful, confused, grieving, or ready to begin again.

And as you ask, keep listening for the God who meets us in mystery and mercy. Keep looking for Christ among those the world pushes aside. Keep trusting the Spirit who gives courage, imagination, and breath. Keep practicing a faith that can tell the truth, widen the table, bless bodies, resist harm, and still sing.

There is room here for your questions. There is grace here for your becoming. There is work here for your hands. There is a community here for the journey.

And God is already moving among us.