

Module 6

The Discipline – Statutory Law

In his overview of this final module, Dr. Mark Gorveatte has provided some extremely helpful snapshots of the “Statutory Law” part of *The Discipline*. If you become an active minister in The Wesleyan Church, you will want to know the particulars of this book. Here are some of the points that he highlights in his overview.

Membership

Historically, membership in The Wesleyan Church has not simply been a matter of being a Christian. Both biblically and historically, there are models of groups that pursue specific missions, understandings, or that “bind themselves” to certain commitments without thereby denying the Christianity of those who disagree with them or do not follow the same practices. Think of the Nazirites. Think of those with specific convictions in Romans 14 and the different groups within the early church. Think of the monks of the Middle Ages. Think of the different churches of the Reformation. The Wesleyan Church has *always* had more particular membership requirements than what is necessary to be saved. Otherwise, we would have no reason to exist in the broader church.

The Wesleyan tradition has certain distinctive beliefs that other traditions do not (e.g., entire sanctification). It has practices that are somewhat distinctive (e.g., allowing for multiple approaches to baptism). We do not deceive ourselves into thinking that anyone following the Bible will inevitably look exactly like us or that we only bind ourselves to what the Bible directly commands. As the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 has many members with varying spiritual gifts, the church universal has many denominations with varying emphases and strengths. If God did not want it this way, we would all be Roman Catholic.

Article 6 of the Constitution gives the minimum of what is required to be a member of The Wesleyan Church. It includes a commitment to abide by the Articles of Religion (Article 2) and the Elementary Principles (Article 4). At present, one *should* abide by the Guides and Helps to Holy Living as a member (Article 3), although you *must* follow these to be a minister or leader in the church.

At the previous General Conference, it was argued that the previous model was “Believe - Become - Belong” (551). A new model of “Believe - Belong - Become” was advocated. The way this model was presented effectively made the Guides and Helps to Holy Living aspirational of the general membership rather than required. It was only required of ministers and leadership. No doubt this philosophy of membership will continue to be discussed.

Membership begins with the local church. Pastors must examine candidates for membership to ensure they meet the criteria and consider their unique circumstances. They are then received publicly into that local church by following some version of the ritual found in Chapter 2 of the Ritual section of *The Discipline* (paragraphs 5550-5595)

Local Church Governance

The Wesleyan has structured its local church governance in a way that both aims to empower the local church and forestall unnecessary conflict. Unlike those systems where either pastors are imposed on churches from above or where pastors are entirely called locally, The Wesleyan Church gives the local church the final vote while the district approves and oversees the minister.

The pastoral staff is chosen by the lead pastor, and to avoid potential division, all the staff of a local church must resign when the lead pastor leaves. In this way, a lead pastor has the authority to choose his or her own staff – which can of course be the same as the staff for the previous pastor if he or she so chooses. As Dr. Gorveatte mentions, pastors now come to a church with the assumption of an “extended” call, with votes a matter of request by the pastor, local church, or district.

Dr. Gorveatte also describes how budgeting has evolved from being entirely congregational to being managed by the local board, with annual financial reports presented to the full membership.

Interconnectedness

Each way of structuring a denomination has its strengths and weaknesses. The Wesleyan Church was designed to maximize these strengths and minimize the weaknesses by what Dr. Mark Gorveatte calls “interconnectedness” or “mutual submission” between the levels of the church.

The local church has maximal freedom within the broad boundaries set by *The Discipline* and its district. This brings the strengths of what is called a “congregational” approach to church structure. Nevertheless, there is district and general authority as well. These individuals are not chosen for life – avoiding some of the weaknesses of an “episcopal” structure – but they do provide checks and balances against a local church that might go off the rails.

A local board cannot simply remove a pastor. A local congregation can, and the district board can. As we saw in the previous section, the local church calls a pastor and the district approves.

The Trust Clause

A matter of some controversy in recent days is an aspect of Wesleyan Church property that goes back to John Wesley. As a token of mutual accountability, church property is co-owned by the local congregation and the district of which it is part. In a sense, every local Wesleyan church is co-owned by all the other Wesleyan churches in the district.

This feature of Wesleyan interconnectedness is called the “Trust Clause” (paragraph 4610). It means that a local congregation cannot decide to join a cult and leave with the church property. Since district boards are populated by fellow lay and ministerial individuals from the rest of the district, this co-ownership is not likely to face some of the challenges that other denominations have faced over church property. The trust clause is a protection that local churches do not

become heretical or leave the denomination under the hypnotic spell of some charismatic leader. Rather, the principle of mutual submission prevails.

Decisions on selling or buying property thus must be approved by the district board or district conference. If a church leaves the denomination, agreements on property must be reached as it is not solely the local church's property.

Ministers

The process of becoming a minister and the overall requirements are denomination-wide. But in keeping with the principle of interconnectedness, the process is administered on the district level and involves a local church. For example, a ministerial candidate must be sponsored by a local church. The educational and training requirements are shared in common by the general church. Meanwhile, the District Board of Ministerial Development interviews and approves each candidate.

Ministers then take ordination vows to joyfully submit to *The Discipline* and church's authority. The minister also has some freedom within the overall parameters of the church. For example, it is recommended that communion be given monthly, but a minister can choose to do it quarterly. It is up to the minister whether to allow for infant baptism or only believer's baptism.

Changing the Discipline

It should be clear by now that some aspects of *The Discipline* can be changed more easily than others. For example, as is appropriate, it would take a two-thirds aggregate vote of all the General Conferences of The Wesleyan Church to alter the Articles of Religion. However, other parts of *The Discipline* only require a simple majority of a General Conference to change, and districts can also have their own "Standing Rules."

Local churches can initiate changes to *The Discipline* by making a resolution and recommending it to the District Conference. If the district approves, it moves to the General Conference. These proposals to the General Conference are called "Memorials."

Then a special committee on memorials reviews these proposals and either recommends them or does not recommend them. If recommended, they are automatically brought to the floor of the General Conference for a discussion and vote. A modified Robert's Rules of Order is used (see a downloadable PDF in module 6). However, all the district Memorials are mentioned and can be brought to the floor with a motion and sufficient support.

Some Terms

LBA – Local Board of Administration – oversees operations of the local church between local church conferences

LCC – Local Church Conferences – the meeting of all the members of a local church in decision-making mode

Board of Trustees – those in the local church who oversee property and legal matters relating to the local church

Nominating Committee – one of the most important committees in a church, they present the LCC with names as candidates for elected offices such as being on the LBA.

DS – District Superintendent

DBA – District Board of Administration – oversees operations of a district in between District Conferences

DBMD – District Board of Ministerial Development – those without the district who oversee the process of ministerial credentialing

ASR – Annual Service Review, required of all active ministers in a district

GS – General Superintendent

GBA – General Board of Administration – oversees the operations of the general church in between General Conferences