

I recently caught on to a cultural phenomenon which was new to me, but may not be new to you. This is the Great British Baking Show. Have you heard of it? This is a British television show that is a competition among amateur bakers to compete against one another in a series of rounds, attempting to impress a group of judges, and with their baking skills, one by one being eliminated until there is a winner that's named. The show launched in 2010 in Britain, Great Britain, and is now distributed around the world on Netflix and a variety of broadcast country in over 150 countries.

Now this is one example of people coming together to share an experience in which they're connected around the same thing. But in this case, there's even a deeper level of connection. And that deeper level of connection came in the form of a Facebook group called The Great British Baking Show Bake-Along. In this Facebook group, you are invited not just to watch the show, but you're invited to actually bake the recipes that you see them sharing on the show. So every week there's a new challenge that's posted, a recipe that's shared, and you're invited in your kitchens at home to bake this creation, some of which I've never heard of before, and then post your pictures to share with other people. This has been a lot of fun in our family. And it is something that connects us with people around the world in really, a pretty neat way. It's been fun for us and others share their joy in it as well.

Now when I think about this television show and the opportunity to connect, I think of at least two things that are similar to that phenomenon and the United Methodist Church. The first is that we like to bake. We like to cook as United Methodists; baking, meals, casseroles, whatever it is to [inaudible 00:01:51]. You name it, we're pretty good at it. The second, I believe, is that we're moved to connect with one another in a common mission. In the Great British Baking Show there's a particular recipe that we might connect around, and as United Methodist Christians, we're connected around a single mission: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Now on that Facebook group, when you look at the pictures of recipes that people share, there is a wide variety, just as the same in the United Methodist Church. As you look at congregations around the world, there is a wide variety. And yet we share some things in common. This is our focus for the sermon today.

You may have heard the United Methodist Church referred to, in some cases, as the connection. This idea of being connected with one another came from the very beginning. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, put in place a structure and an organization with the purpose of helping us accomplish a common mission, to reach a common and shared goals. He recognized the need of a system of organizing, a system of communication and accountability, and an interlocking system of what was known as that time as classes, and societies, and conferences. These correspond with the organizations today, of small groups, and Sunday school classes, local churches and a variety of conferences across the state, and around the world.

Well, what does it mean to be connect with others? We recognize that no single church is the total body of Christ. As United Methodists we are moved to connect with one another across the state and around the world. Some of the evidence of our connectional nature is in our system of appointing clergy to serve the mission field; our work to support new places of worship for new people across our States of Kansas and Nebraska, and around the world; our conference staff and ministries, to aid local churches and mission efforts; from seeking to begin efforts to educate people in Africa through the formation of a

university, to tornado relief and disasters right here in Kansas. All of these things are the work and evidence of the connection.

Now with some of these things in mind, I want to share with you some of the nuts and bolts of our organizational gatherings that help us work as United Methodists from right here in Berryton to around the globe. I just want to share a condensed, a organizational chart perhaps. If you want to learn more about these things, pick up the United Methodist handbooks on your way out. But I just want to give you just a taste of what each of these are.

We begin right here at Berryton United Methodist Church. As United Methodists we recognize that the primary place where disciples are made, is right here. It's in this community. It's in this congregation. Berryton United Methodist Church, along with churches across the globe, are the most significant location for the church to accomplish its mission.

A new opportunity for us to connect this year is in the Shawnee and Douglas network. Every congregation across Kansas and Nebraska is part of a small group of congregations who gather with the belief that we are better together. And that when we work together, we can more effectively share God's Love with those who may not yet have heard it, and we're living in many of the same communities. Our network, this network includes the congregations of Berryton, Big Springs, Highland Park, Lecompton, Shawnee Heights, Stull, and Tecumseh. When you consider these congregations and the communities that they're a part of, you might begin to see some of the similarities. We also might see some of the ways that we already are working together.

The next level of organization for us is the Topeka District. This is a regional group of churches that's overseen by a clergy person known as a District Superintendent. That's my boss in the church, is Kay [Scarborough 00:05:52]. She's the Topeka District Superintendent. And she helps oversee and shepard churches from the Topeka area up into northeast Kansas.

We're also part of the Great Plains Annual Conference. This is a larger body of churches, of United Methodist Churches across Kansas and Nebraska. Now if you've been a part of the church here for a long time, you'll remember of course, a former conference of the Kansas East Annual Conference. The Great Plains Annual Conference came into being several years ago when Kansas West, Kansas East, and Nebraska came together to form a new annual conference. The annual conference has staff, programs, budgets, elects delegates to serve at higher levels in the life of the church, and is helps invite, connect, train and credential clergy to serve the mission field. There's an annual gathering and in just a few months it'll be again here in Topeka. If you'd like to observe the annual conference, it'll be here at the end of May.

We're also part of the South Central Jurisdiction. Now this is a larger group in our churches that ranges from Nebraska down to Texas, from New Mexico to Louisiana. They meet every four years, and they consist of delegates elected from every annual conference. Their primary work is to elect and assign bishops to lead annual conferences, and some members of general church agencies. Now there's jurisdictions, there's five in the United States and there's ... They're known as Central Conferences, across the world. In some cases, they develop programs that are distinct to them. One of those that is distinct to the South Central Jurisdiction is Lydia Patterson Institute. It's focused on education in the State of Texas.

Of course our global organization is the General Conference. Now this is the only body that officially speaks for the entire church. They gather regularly every four years to address legislation which would affect every congregation, affect the entire connection. Now they're meeting right now in St. Louis as a special session that was called in response to questions and issues surrounding human sexuality in our congregations and across our connection. This conference will end on Tuesday, and we'll have a chance together next Sunday to talk more about the results of that conference, and how ever that may or may not affect our congregation.

Now as you consider how United Methodists are connected across the globe, you might also consider a wide variety of settings. There are urban churches; there are rural churches; there are congregations that worship less than 25; there are congregations that worship more than a thousand. There are congregations that are more progressive; there are congregations that are more traditional or conservative. No matter where United Methodists gather, no matter what they look like, we are moved to connect with the shared mission: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We find the heart of our mission in Jesus' Words from the Scripture passage for today. In the Gospel according to Matthew, these are the last words that Jesus speaks to His disciples before He ascends into Heaven. I just want to remind them of you, read them again. Jesus says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Look: I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is why all of this organization exists. It's why Methodists get together in every group, for the global gathering that's happen right now in St. Louis, to our local church, right here in Berryton. We are moved to connect to this very same mission across a wide variety of diversity.

As United Methodist Christians, we find ourselves ... United Methodist Christians find themselves in different places, and we hold those things in tension. One of those tensions that exists in the way that we practice our faith, is between grace and holiness. You might think about grace, you remember this is God's freely given and unmerited love that we don't do anything to deserve. God offers it freely to us. The chance for salvation, to be made right with God, it's freely given. And yet we also are called to live a holy life, moving on to Christian perfection in which were are perfectly demonstrate love of God, and love our neighbor. It's freely offered and yet we are called to perfection. Now how do those things come together and yet we hold them in tension as United Methodist Christians?

We also hold in tension an understanding that our faith is about ourselves, it's about transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. It's about being our heart's own heart, strangely warm and changed by God's Grace. But it is also about changing our society, changing the communities that they live in. It's not just about me and Jesus. It's about making a difference in the world. It's about being a part of God's Kingdom, coming on Earth as it is in Heaven. Both personal holiness and social holiness. As United Methodist Christians, we hold both of these things together.

We have a faith that engages the intellect. We invite you to ask hard questions about our faith. We don't want you to check your brains at the door. We want you to bring your very best thought to

understanding our faith. A faith that seeks understanding. And yet we're also a faith, an experience of God's Holy Spirit with us. An experience of the heart, holding the head and the heart together in our faith as part of who we are as United Methodist Christians. We believe in the sovereignty of God. That in the end, God's Will will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. God holds all things in God's hands. And yet we also believe that as human beings, as individuals, we have free will. We have the chance to say "yes" to God's Grace, or to turn away from God's Grace. God is sovereign and we have free will. We hold these things together.

These unexpected connections are part of who we are. It's part of our DNA as United Methodist Christians. And as you think about across the globe, not only across Kansas and Nebraska, but across the United States and around the world, we look at many issues and say, "Well there is good on this side. There is good on the other side." And no matter where we stand as individuals, we stand there humbly and say, "This is what I believe." And yet, I might be wrong. So I'm willing to listen to you. To hear, and to understand. But most importantly, to listen to God's Holy Spirit, and how God is inviting all of us to live together.

As United Methodists we seek a faith that's not extreme on one end or the other, but instead an extreme center. Where we hold these things in tension; where we wrestle with the way that we understand the Bible, practice our faith, live in community with others, and yet seek to share this very same mission: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is why we exist. To share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. And the good news for us is that it is Jesus who sends us on this mission, as recorded there in Matthew. God sent those very first disciples and Jesus sends us into our communities and beyond. It is God who keeps us connected, and is the Holy Spirit who works through our diversity to share God's Love in the world.

So as you live, as the United Methodist Christian, stay connected with other people for accountability and support. Recognize and appreciate diversity. And make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Will you pray with me? O God, we are moved to connect with the power of Your Holy Spirit. To connect to the source of all life and love, Your Son, Jesus Christ. And to connect to a world that's so desperately hurting. God, we confess that we find ourselves hurting at times. We make mistakes and we need your forgiveness. So we ask that You forgive us, O God. We're sorry for the ways that we've messed up. Thank You for Your Son, Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again for our sakes, that we might have life and experience life that really is life. Please, O God, fill us with Your Holy Spirit. Help us to follow You with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Send us out in connection with others across our communities and around the world, that we might live faithful lives, sharing Your love with all that we meet. We pray all these things and offer ourselves to You, in Jesus' name. Amen.