

belong

Tools for Discipleship
& Community



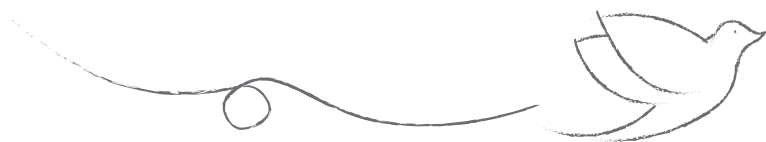
Welcome & Introduction

What Are the Belong Resources?

Welcome to Belong, a suite of resources designed to help church leaders, small group facilitators, and individual disciples deepen their faith through exploring baptism, Holy Communion, and membership vows. Whether you're a pastor seeking theological grounding, a lay leader facilitating group discussions, or a lifelong United Methodist eager to strengthen your understanding of discipleship, Belong equips you to engage the sacraments as tangible experiences of God's grace and membership as a sacred covenant of community.

Why This Matters

United Methodists are committed to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, a mission deeply rooted in the sacraments and the communal promises we uphold as church members.





Baptism initiates us into Christ's Holy Church, incorporating us into God's mighty acts of salvation and offering new birth through water and the Spirit. Baptism is a visible expression of God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, marking our lifelong journey as disciples.



Holy Communion spiritually strengthens us, nourishing our relationship with God and with one another. Through Communion, we actively remember Christ's self-giving love, celebrate our unity as the body of Christ, and experience ongoing transformation.



Membership Vows affirm our shared commitment to live out our faith together through prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. These vows remind us that discipleship flourishes in community and that each member contributes uniquely to the life and mission of the church.

Belong provides robust resources for meaningful teaching, impactful small group discussions, and profound personal reflections, empowering individuals to grow spiritually, intellectually, and practically.

Who This Is For

Audience

Benefits & Applications

Pastors & Lay Leaders

*Deepen theological understanding;
lead meaningful worship and
confirmation classes*

Small Group Facilitators

*Equip groups for transformative
conversations about faith and
discipleship*

**New & Prospective
Members**

*Clarify beliefs, affirm faith
commitments, and fully engage
with United Methodist traditions*

Disciples Seeking to Grow

*Connect personal faith journeys
to broader church teachings and
practices*

Belong is more than a study guide—it's a helpful guide into intentional, lifelong discipleship. Whether preparing for baptism, confirmation, or reaffirming your faith, these resources support you, your leaders, and your congregation in embracing the fullness of Christian community.

Understanding the Belong Resources

A Comprehensive Approach to Discipleship

The Belong resources are designed to strengthen discipleship by deepening our understanding of baptism, Holy Communion, and membership vows. Each resource plays a unique role in helping individuals and congregations engage with, reflect on, and actively live out their faith. Whether you're a pastor preparing a sermon series, a small group leader facilitating Bible study, or a disciple looking for personal reflection, these materials offer theological depth, practical guidance, and interactive experiences.



The Five Key Resource Types

Each component of the Belong series serves a specific purpose, and together they create a comprehensive discipleship journey:

1. Foundations Books

- Provide theological depth and scriptural grounding.
- Ideal for pastors, church leaders, and educators seeking a solid biblical and doctrinal foundation on baptism, Holy Communion, and membership vows.
- Useful for sermon preparation, leadership training, and personal study.



2. Explore Guides

- Designed for group discussions and interactive learning.
- Encourage participants to ask questions, reflect, and engage personally with the sacraments and membership vows.
- Ideal for confirmation classes, new member programs, and small group studies.



3. Workbooks

- Offer space for deep personal reflection and spiritual application.
- Help individuals connect theological insights with their personal faith journey.
- Great for individual discipleship, retreats, and personal study.



4. Video Series

- Professionally produced six-part video series for each topic (baptism, Holy Communion, membership vows).
- Features United Methodist theologians, pastors, and church leaders explaining the sacraments and vows.
- Can enhance sermons, small group discussions, or individual study.

5. Lesson Plans & Perspectives Articles

- Lesson Plans provide structured session outlines to guide discussions and teaching.
- Perspectives Articles offer insights from church leaders worldwide, sharing how baptism, Holy Communion, and membership vows are practiced in different cultural and congregational contexts.
- Ideal for pastors, educators, and those seeking a worldwide view of United Methodist discipleship.

Choosing the Right Resources Overview Chart

<u>Resource</u>	<u>Purpose</u>	<u>Best For</u>	<u>Format</u>
Foundations Books	Deep theological and scriptural foundation	Pastors, church leaders, educators	Print & Digital
Explore Guides	Interactive, engaging group discussions	Small groups, adult education, confirmation classes	Print & Digital
Workbooks	Personal reflection and deeper application	Individual study, retreats, leadership development	Print & Digital
Video Series	Engaging video teachings for each topic	Sermons, small groups, new members classes	Digital
Lesson Plans	Structured guidance for teaching sessions	Pastors, group leaders, educators	Digital
Perspectives Articles	Insights from United Methodist leaders	Church leaders seeking cross-cultural understanding	Digital

How These Resources Work Together

To maximize the impact of the Belong series, churches can combine resources to meet diverse discipleship needs. Examples include:

- **Small Group & Personal Discipleship:** Engage with Workbooks to connect teachings to daily life, supported by Explore Guides and corresponding Video Series, with key readings from Foundations Books.

Example: A lay-led Bible study employed Workbooks to facilitate personal and spiritual reflection on sacramental experiences.

- **Sermon Preparation:** Draw from Foundations Books, supplemented with insights from Perspectives Articles.

Example: A pastor leading a sermon series on Holy Communion utilized a Foundations Book, incorporating insights from Perspectives Articles to illustrate worldwide practices.

- **Confirmation or Membership Classes:** Use Explore Guides, Workbooks, and Lesson Plans for engaging discussions, reflection, and practical application.

Example: A congregation preparing new members for baptism and confirmation combined Explore Guides with the Video Series, helping candidates understand and embrace their vows.

- **Discipleship Training:** Use Lesson Plans, Videos, and Foundations Books to equip church leaders, lay servants, and ministry teams with a deeper understanding of sacramental theology and practical ways to lead others in faith formation.

Example: An annual conference integrating Lesson Plans and Videos into discipleship training, providing practical tools for local church leaders.

Key Excerpts from the Belong Resources

Each Belong resource is written to help individuals and communities grow in discipleship by rooting their faith in United Methodist theology and practice. The following pages contain extended excerpts from the Foundations books and the Explore Guides for Baptism, Holy Communion, and Membership Vows—chosen to give church leaders a clear sense of how these materials inform, inspire, and invite reflection.

<u>Pages</u>	<u>Resource</u>
11-12	The Meaning of Baptism: Foundations
13-14	The Meaning of Baptism: Explore
15-16	The Meaning of Holy Communion: Foundations
17-18	The Meaning of Holy Communion: Explore
19-20	Our Membership Vows: Foundations
21-22	Our Membership Vows: Explore

Introduction

Toward Continued Engagement with the Biblical Narrative

How do we understand what United Methodists are doing in Baptism? The introduction to “The Baptismal Covenant I” points the way. The pastor or deacon says,

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Through the Sacrament of Baptism

we are initiated into Christ’s Holy Church

We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation

and given new birth through water and the Spirit.

All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.¹

Through Baptism, we are born anew by the free gift of God and placed within this family called church. As with most families, we inherit a narrative; in this case, God’s mighty acts narrated in scripture. The narrative we inherit is not only one of the past but also one that continues to unfold and take shape in our own lives, here and now. Through Baptism, we become part of that unfolding narrative of God’s grace.

¹ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 87. For an updated version reflecting changes mandated by the 2008 General Conference, see <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>.

Although we say, “All of this is God’s gift” that does not mean there is nothing left for us to do, nothing expected of us. From Abraham and Sarah, through Moses and the prophets, through Mary the Mother of Jesus, and the many who heard the call of Jesus and followed him, the scriptures are filled with examples of God’s faithful people responding to God’s gifts. One of the greatest gifts we can offer to those we love is the opportunity to do something significant, and perhaps even more, the opportunity to accompany us on such tasks. So it is with God, with faithful people today who follow on the way of discipleship. That call is part of God’s gift to us. With that in mind, in the Baptismal Covenant, the church gives us three questions to help us grow in a lifetime of discipleship.

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?¹

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?²

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church, which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?³

To each question, baptismal candidates and/or their parents and sponsors respond, “I do.” Our response is not merely for

¹ *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 88.

² *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 88.

³ *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 88.

What is grace and what does it have to do with Baptism?



Grace is the unending love that God has for all people for all time. We do not have to earn God's grace. It is freely given to us. God loves us just as we are, and through that radical love, we are changed more fully into who God created us to be—compassionate, just, generous, and forgiving.

United Methodists talk about three expressions of grace:

- **Prevenient:** “the grace that draws us toward God and is often at work in us long before we’re aware of it” (Mark Stamm, *The Meaning of Baptism in The United Methodist Church: Foundations*, 9).
- **Justifying:** “God’s work in which we come into right relationship with God, experiencing the forgiveness of sins and release from guilt” (Stamm, *The Meaning of Baptism*, 9).
- **Sanctifying:** “God’s work in which we are made holy, that is drawn ever more deeply into the love of God, neighbor, and all creation” (Stamm, *The Meaning of Baptism*, 9).





While we talk about these graces in a linear fashion to help us better understand each expression, these graces flow into one another for our whole lives. Without prevenient grace, we could not receive justifying grace. And without the experience of justification, we could not be put on the path of sanctification. The lifelong process of sanctifying grace relies on the presence of God's prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace precedes anything humans might do. It is the unconditional love of a parent who finds each child to be miraculous and amazing. It is unmerited and flows freely toward us for no reason of our own and is freely given at every age and stage of life. Prevenient grace (God's love) is ongoing for all time.

Justifying grace is God's radical accepting love of who we are; through that radical accepting love, we are changed. The assurance of God's love allows us to see where we are still learning and ask for forgiveness. Then we are put on a journey of transformation—called sanctification—that leads us to freedom from old cycles and traits that harm us and others.

The Biblical Witness

A number of Bible stories help us understand the meaning of Holy Communion. A starting point is the account of Jesus' meal with his disciples in the upper room on the night he was betrayed (Matt. 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; and Luke 22:7-23). These stories tell us how on that night Jesus took bread, gave thanks to God, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples with the words "This is my body." They tell us that after the supper, he took a cup of wine, again gave thanks to God, and gave it to his disciples with the words "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26-28). In 1 Cor. 11:23-26, Paul provides the earliest account of these origins, reminding the church of the tradition he received from Jesus and that he now hands on to us. The stories recounting Jesus' words and actions at the table in the upper room are called the *institution narratives*. They tell us something about how Holy Communion began and why it is important to the church. More importantly, they recount Jesus' command that the church continue to celebrate this meal in his name and for his remembrance.

The stories from the upper room focus on the importance of Jesus' self-giving, his faithfulness to God in the face of death, and his continued care for his disciples. Set in the context of the Jewish Passover meal, these stories invite our attention to the relationship between the events of the Passover (Ex. 12:1-28) and Jesus' death on the cross. In the Exodus story, Israelites use the blood of lambs to mark their doorposts as a sign to God not to bring judgment upon their households. In the gospel stories of the Last Supper and crucifixion, Jesus' blood serves as the sign to

God not to bring judgment upon the people for their sins (Heb. 9:11-28).

Other stories, such as those of the feeding of the multitudes (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44 and 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13, 25-59), also help us understand the meaning of Holy Communion. These stories are connected to the meal in the upper room by the description of Jesus' actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. Each story, set in a context of Jesus teaching the disciples, shows Jesus caring for those who have followed him. They suggest that Jesus satisfied the crowd's spiritual hunger with his teaching and their physical hunger with bread.

Like the stories about the feeding of the multitudes, the Gospel of John (6:25-51) reminds us of the story of the Exodus and Israel's journey in the desert (Ex. 16:1-17). John helps the church remember that this was neither the first nor the last time that God would provide food in the wilderness. God provided for Israel throughout its forty years in the wilderness with the gift of manna and quail, even when Israel tested God (Ps. 78:17-31; 95:8-9). Now Jesus provides the disciples with "food that endures for eternal life" (John 6:27). Jesus tells the disciples that he is the "bread of life" and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry or thirsty (John 6:35).

Several accounts of Jesus' appearances to the disciples after his resurrection are also marked by Jesus' actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. They tell us that, in his resurrection, Jesus remains with us and cares for us. In Luke 24:13-35, Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and begins to explain to them all that had happened. Although the disciples do not recognize Jesus while on the road, they invite him to join them in a meal. After Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives bread to them, the disciples' eyes are opened and they recognize him. In a similar



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Sanctifying grace is the process of transformation and Resurrection. We can see God's imprint on ourselves and every other human being and living thing. We see God's movements in our world and join in.

Introduction

Welcome to this discussion of membership vows in The United Methodist Church. Perhaps you are working with people who are joining this church by publicly professing their faith in Jesus Christ; others may be transferring from another Christian communion, and some may have been United Methodists for many years. In any case, reflection on these vows is important because the vows give us an outline for our common work of Christian discipleship.

According to *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, members make a covenant to do the following:

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of their sin;
2. To accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression;
3. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord;
4. To remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world;
5. To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in their power to strengthen its ministries;
6. To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service, and their witness;
7. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.¹

We will discuss each of these in turn.

¹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2016 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶217, 157.

These membership vows express God's call to discipleship, to a ministry held in common by all Christians. God bids us to fulfill that calling wherever we go, whatever we do. Like the founder of our Methodist movement, John Wesley, we believe that "the world is our parish,"¹ which means that we should build no fences around our gathering places and put no barriers on the scope of our outreach. The church participates in God's mission and witness, and neither of those stops at the church doors. We accept these implications about our ministry to the whole world, but we also know that Christian discipleship is a profoundly local reality. We are called to embody our faith in the midst of a very specific local congregation and community, in the midst of people with real problems and peculiarities, in the midst of people who know about our eccentricities and weaknesses. The task of loving God and all humanity begins with the challenge of loving our sometimes-cranky neighbors and the members of our local church. These membership vows call us to practice both the universal and local aspects of discipleship.

The fact that we ask people to make such vows should remind us that church membership is a serious discipline. From time to time, we may be tempted to forsake this calling. Be reminded, however, that we do not bear the burden of membership alone, in our own power. We take these vows in the context of God's grace, and in the community of faith assured that the Holy Spirit strengthens us and makes our faithfulness possible. Remember where we normally hear these vows. I quoted them from The Book of Discipline because the vows hold legal standing in our church. For legal reasons, it is important for us to be able to say who is a member of the church, how one attains that status, and the responsibilities that membership entails. Be that as it may,

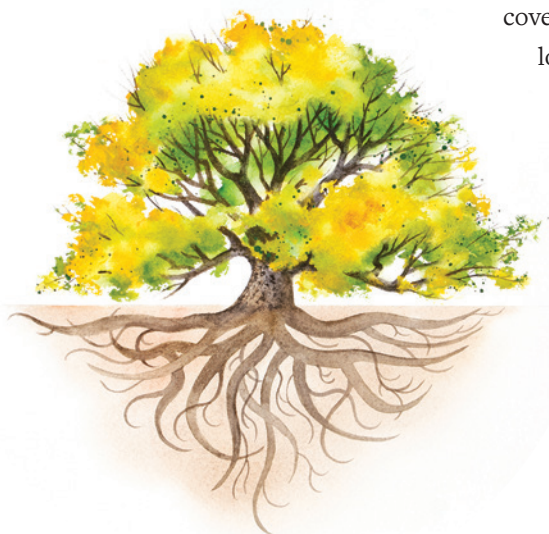
¹ From "Journal from August 12, 1738, to November 1, 1739," by John Wesley, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume I (Zondervan Publishing House, reproduced from an 1872 edition), 201.

United Methodist Membership Vows are rooted in the Baptismal Covenant

Baptism is a sacrament, a holy experience of God's grace. During Baptism, we acknowledge the love that God freely extends to us and are claimed as God's children. During the ritual, we are initiated into the community of faith and our journey of discipleship. This incorporates us into Christ's church, but in which church will we live out our faith?

This is where the vows of membership come in. The next step is choosing where we will grow as disciples, contribute to a community, and develop Christian relationships. In The United

Methodist Church, we make covenant promises to the local congregation to cultivate that part of our faith journey with a particular group of people. "Taking our membership vows in the context of the baptismal covenant reminds us that all Christian



commitment is rooted in God's grace" (Stamm, *Our Membership Vows in The United Methodist Church: Foundations*, 6). With God's grace, we can have a safe space to grow in our faith, work through conflict, and nurture our spiritual gifts in our local congregation.

What is confirmation, and what does it have to do with membership?

Because United Methodists baptize infants and young children, we practice a ritual called *confirmation*. This ritual is usually done in adolescence and marks the first time baptized Christians publicly confirm the intention to live the vows taken on their behalf at their baptism. When they confirm this intention, remember their baptism, and take the membership vows, they become professing members of the local congregation and The United Methodist Church.



PRAY: Dear God of community, thank you for giving us a group of people to love and be loved by. We know that each member of this faith community will help us understand a new facet of ourselves and you. Help us see your divine image in each person in our church and help them see you in me. Amen.

Frequently Asked Questions

*Who are the **Belong** resources designed for?*

The **Belong** series is for any disciple who want to deepen their understanding of Baptism, Holy Communion, and Membership Vows in the United Methodist tradition. The materials can be used in churches of all sizes and settings.

What formats are available?

Most resources are available in print and digital formats through the UMC Discipleship Ministries online store. Videos and downloadable leader materials are provided free of charge.

What languages are available?

- Currently available: English, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish
- Coming soon: French, Swahili, and others

If your church serves a multilingual community, check the website for updates or contact Discipleship Ministries to request future translations.

Can laypeople lead a group using these resources?

Yes. All the Foundations booklets are designed for guidance of deeper theological and biblical content, while the Explore guides and lesson plans are written in accessible language to be facilitator-friendly. No theological degree is required—just a desire to listen, ask good questions, and create space for spiritual growth.

How do I decide which resource to start with?

Begin by asking:

What's happening in your church right now? Are you preparing for baptisms? Receiving new members? Teaching about Communion?

Who are you leading? Youth? New members? Lifelong Methodists looking for renewal?

What level of depth are you looking for—practical engagement (Explore), theological depth (Foundations), or something more reflective (Workbooks)?

The **Choosing the Right Resources Overview Chart** on page 7 offers a helpful side-by-side comparison to guide your decision.

Can I use just one type of resource, or do I need the full set?

You can start with any single resource—they can be used as stand-alone resources. But using them together provides a richer experience. For example, a small group may use the Explore guide alongside the video series, with the leader referencing the Foundations book for added depth.

How do these resources help build mature disciples?

Each resource is rooted in the conviction that sacraments and membership vows are not just rituals—they are means of transformation. The Belong series invites people to explore grace, commit to service, resist injustice, and grow in faith within their local congregation. It's not just about learning—it's about living as followers of Christ in the world.

Are these appropriate for confirmation or new member classes?

Yes. Many churches also use the Belong series for:

- Confirmation preparation (especially the Explore guides and videos)
- New member classes
- Reaffirmation of baptism or membership vows
- Church-wide studies on sacraments and discipleship

Sample lesson plans are available to help you structure multi-session studies or one-time classes.

Where do I order the resources?

All Belong resources are available at store.umcdiscipleship.org.

Use discount code
BELONGSAMPLE at checkout.

You can also scan this QR code to be taken directly to the full Belong collection on the Discipleship Ministries website.





Resources for United Methodists



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