



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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Dear Siblings in Christ,

As we find ourselves at the beginning of a new school year, the excitement and anticipation of what lies ahead are palpable across our communities. I witnessed this optimism of hope while on a recent trip to Target. Though I entered the store on what was intended to be a quick stop for dry-erase markers, I found myself captivated as I watched young families gather their school supplies. It wasn't only about checking items off a list, but you could feel the joy and expectation as children selected these supplies that would enable learning. I am aware not all can afford the items and am so thankful for the many churches in our area stepping up to fill this gap. Back-to-school season is a time when we, as the body of Christ, are called to be especially attentive to the needs of our children and youth, our educators, and our communities.

In his sermon "The Education of Children," John Wesley reminds us of the profound responsibility we bear in nurturing and guiding the young. Wesley emphasized that the education of children is not merely the imparting of knowledge but also the cultivation of virtue, the fruit of the Spirit, one's moral compass, and part of our journey of sanctification. As he wisely noted, "When we train up children in the way they should go, we are laying the foundation of all happiness, both in this world and that which is to come."

Reflecting on the Wesleyan commitment to education, historian Gary Best wrote: "John Wesley was as much an educator as a preacher. Methodist involvement in education stems from his passion for education, which was rooted in his understanding of the Bible and centuries of Christian tradition—that the Church should be engaged in constantly seeking and understanding what is the truth by which we should live...[For Wesley], education at its best was a life-long process guided by the Holy Spirit towards personal and social holiness, and it was the best possible tool for evangelism, for training in godliness, and for the betterment of society."

With these words in mind, let us consider how our churches can actively engage in the education and formation of children in our communities. This is an opportunity to extend our reach beyond the walls of our sanctuaries, to connect with local schools, neighborhoods, and families in meaningful and transformative ways.

Opportunities for Connection:

Partnerships with Schools: Reflecting Wesley's call to cultivate virtue in our youth, we can establish or strengthen partnerships with local schools. By volunteering as mentors, providing essential resources, or offering spiritual support to students and staff, we participate in shaping not just the minds but the hearts of the next generation. Individuals and groups from our churches could consider

adopting classrooms or grade levels to ensure each teacher has what they need, and each student has what they need to create an optimal learning environment. Clergy and church leaders should be intentional about meeting with principals, counselors, and school board members to dream about ways in which we can partner.

Community Outreach: Wesley urged us to care for the physical and spiritual needs of others. In this spirit, consider organizing back-to-school drives, offering meals, or creating spaces where families can find both material and emotional support. We need not wait for the next crisis—on the front end, we can connect with a school’s PTO/PTA to become intentional partners. Further, we can offer gift cards to school counselors for children so that they and their families can have agency and dignity when selecting their supplies or clothing. These acts of service are embodiments of the love of Christ and echo Wesley’s teachings on the holistic education of children.

Prayer and Support: Prayer is foundational in Wesleyan theology, and as such, we should commit ourselves to praying for students, educators, staff, administration, and families. Host a blessing of the backpacks or school buses or organize local prayer groups dedicated to lifting up the school community throughout the year.

Building Relationships: Wesley believed in the importance of a nurturing environment for children, one that fosters spiritual growth and moral character. Encourage your congregation to build relationships within the community by engaging with schools, attending local events, and supporting families. Throw on your favorite school colors or your church T-shirts and show up to games, concerts, and plays. Tailgate together. Pay attention to what is on your school calendar. Be present when your school board meets. These relationships are critical in guiding our children.

Mental Health: As excited as children may be for the year ahead, going back to school also marks a change in routine, uncertainty that comes with meeting new friends, and possible anxiety over being separated from parents or siblings. Share spiritual practices with students, parents, and guardians that may help. Additionally, consider children’s messages that remind them how to be a good friend, how to care for and share with others, and that Jesus is with us always. As the church, take time to talk openly about bullying and connect your children and families with anti-bullying resources.

Our churches in the Dakotas-Minnesota Episcopal Area are already beacons of hope and support. This school year, let us deepen our commitment to the holistic education and well-being of our children and communities, just as Wesley envisioned. By doing so, we not only follow his teachings but also answer Christ’s call to love and serve our neighbors.

As your Bishop, I am committed to walking alongside you in this important work. Together, let us pray for wisdom, compassion, and courage as we strive to make a difference in the lives of our children and the broader community.

May God bless and guide us all as we embark on this journey.

In Christ’s service,



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