



# General (and Timeless) Rules for Churches Navigating a Pandemic

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**M**y mother died at the height of the first wave of the pandemic. She did not contract COVID-19, but the events surrounding her death and the beginning of our grief journey are forever shaped by the presence of the virus and by the worldwide lockdown amid which her death occurred. At the time, the statewide number of deaths was twice that of normal.<sup>1</sup> Nothing looked like it was supposed to. Every communal ritual with which we were familiar was suspended. We held no visitation with extended family, neighbors, or lifelong friends. The graveside service was restricted in number, attended by only six family members. The pastor discreetly declined the luncheon invite we wanted to extend. He did three funerals that week.

As our grief journey progressed, it became apparent that though nothing looked “normal,” our experiences were not dissimilar to those of other families losing a loved one. We were tended by extraordinary people living out their vocation to care for families in the tenderest of times. Hospice nurses and social workers who attended my mother the last week of her life were still their caring,

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Maag, “A Staggering Toll: NJ’s Death Rate in April Is Nearly Double Average,” *NorthJersey.com*, May 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ss9cjlym>.

*In a time when everything seems to be upset, there is a wisdom in refocusing on the core nature and purpose of the church and its congregations. In this case the Methodist reformer John Wesley provides us with such a refocusing. Through his General Rules for the church we are called back to our mission, and back to the calling God has given us.*

compassionate selves. The funeral directors were sensitive and guided us to attend to details we might have otherwise neglected.

And through it all, the church was there. Our various congregations prayed for my mom during the last weeks of her life, then prayed for us as we began our grief journey. Love was made tangible in the form of cards, phone calls, texts, and porch deliveries of flowers and meals. Respective family pastors made themselves available to each of us in our grief. There were awkward, hesitant, even difficult moments, but my family never stopped experiencing what it meant to be held in love by the body of Christ, even if gathering together was not possible.

### THE REALITY OF THE MOMENT

It is my contention that the church has continued to be the church of Jesus Christ throughout the pandemic. Admittedly, my experience of church throughout spring 2020 is somewhat one-sided. I was cocooned with my family in a bubble of love-soaked grief. Meanwhile, clergy and laity alike, in congregations of every denomination, felt unmoored from familiar practices that grounded their experience of church. The earnest Lenten fasts of the faithful begun several weeks earlier became more like a famine as folks wondered how long after Easter they might be exiled from one another. Pastors and church leaders were suddenly on a tsunami of a learning curve of what it meant to do “remote” or “virtual” worship—when they weren’t busy filing for the Paycheck Protection Program or CARES Act assistance. For many pastors, any encroaching personal existential crisis was (necessarily) kept at bay as they responded to the accompanying crises of job loss, isolation, economic strife, illness, and death within their congregations. The pandemic was happening in a maelstrom of political polarization, racial tensions, and social unrest. Churches, and the pastors that led them, bobbed like lifeboats in a sea of uncertainty.

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Through it all, pastors and congregations sought how to operate safely, yet navigate their way through uncharted territory. From my vantage point, looking across my Facebook sea of friends, colleagues, and seminary students, I observed clergy and church leaders taking on the reality of the moment armed with trustworthy principles that had helped create stalwart communities of faith. I discerned the presence of the practical theology of John Wesley’s General Rules at work within the people I know and love as Methodists. The General Rules operated like a rudder, largely out of sight but providing wisdom and guidance to

those who sought, with the best of their being, to keep their boats from capsizing in perilous seas.

To say Wesley's General Rules were in the forefront of pastors' minds during the pandemic might be naïve.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Martin Luther's treatise *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* struck a helpful chord and was republished in full in a web edition of *Christianity Today*.<sup>3</sup> Several excerpts appeared as thought-provoking memes and internet posters. The General Rules were not written for any such crisis, yet Wesley's first rule, to do no harm, certainly had relevancy, and with a resounding urgency, United Methodist bishops advised congregations to suspend worship for a few weeks out of an abundance of care for the most vulnerable folks in their congregations. Though there are valid critiques that such an understanding of the first rule literally takes it out of its context, it is noteworthy that across the Methodist connection, many churches made the agonizing decision not to gather a week before any state government-mandated shelter-in-place orders were given.<sup>4</sup>

## THE GENERAL RULES

When invited to write for this edition of *Word & World*, I agreed because I believe that faithful Christian communal discipleship is not simply a matter of the things we *do* as a church community. Our practices of faith are lived out of a posture of what it means *to be* Christ-followers. The church does not exist for the sake of itself—it is called into being by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to signal God's active presence in the world. What we do as the people of God is an expression of who we are as Christ-followers. The earliest Methodist communities signaled to eighteenth-century England that they were committed to being the hands and feet of Christ in particular ways through the General Rules, namely to 1) do no harm, 2) do good, and 3) participate in God's grace by "attending upon all the ordinances of God."<sup>5</sup> The General Rules are more than a list of don'ts and dos for Christian living. They form an ethos, or a particular culture, of Christian character, purposed toward the end of growing in Christlikeness. The three General Rules, and the practices each rule entails, are grounded in the general rule Jesus commanded: to love God and neighbor with every fiber of our being.

<sup>2</sup> David Lowes Watson, "Aldersgate Street and the General Rules: The Form and the Power of Methodist Discipleship," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood, 1990), 34.

<sup>3</sup> Fortress Press granted *Christianity Today* permission to republish Luther's 1527 letter to Johann Hess in their web edition on May 19, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ysnn6jur>.

<sup>4</sup> UM Bishops began making their appeals to their congregations as early as Thursday, March 12, 2020. California was the first state to announce shelter-in-place orders on March 19. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Timing of State and Territorial COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Orders and Changes in Population Movement—United States, March 1–May 31, 2020," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 35 (September 4, 2020): 1198–1203, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935a2.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies* (1743), in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 9. The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, Bicentennial Edition, ed. Rupert E. Davis (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 73.

Just as it is with any invitation to speak to pastors on behalf of the churches they shepherd, I knew the weight of the task. I am a seminary professor experiencing my first parental loss. I needed perspective beyond my own. Therefore, field research for this essay consisted of more than a dozen conversations with pastors and church leaders from across the Methodist connection. They were simply invited to talk and share their experiences of pastoral leadership through the pandemic. With the exception of a clergy couple, all conversations were one-on-ones or written reflections. They serve in a variety of staffing capacities—solo, lead, or associate pastors, along with district superintendents—each offering leadership to congregations straddling a wide array of contexts: rural, suburban, urban; large-membership and small churches; and multiple charges. Despite the variety of contexts, common themes emerged: Community. Engagement. Lament. Creativity. Adaptability. Winnowing. Essential. Regardless of where these pastors attended seminary, where they presently serve or how long they had served in the pastorate, they and their congregations shared similar pressure points and tensions as a result of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

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Many Methodist congregations are, on some level, familiar with the General Rules. Certainly, clergy learn about their historical significance when studying the origins of Methodism. The earliest Methodist communities were “united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”<sup>7</sup> Each of the three rules are followed by specific practices or means of grace to assist with discipline. David Lowes Watson’s research on the class meeting a generation ago helped unearth the General Rules for contemporary scholars.<sup>8</sup> Their contemporary significance for Christian spiritual formation has been discussed by Kevin Watson, Michael Cartwright, and Andrew Kinsey, as well as in Reuben Job’s popular *Three Simple Rules*.<sup>9</sup> Andrew Thompson’s scholarly work demonstrates the usefulness of

<sup>6</sup> Pastoral service ranged from five to thirty-five years with the majority of pastors having served fifteen to twenty years. They represent nine different Annual Conferences across four Jurisdictional Conferences within the US. Seminaries represented include Asbury, Chandler, Drew, Duke, Perkins, Princeton, and Yale.

<sup>7</sup> Wesley, *General Rules of the United Societies*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Watson, *A Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley’s General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009); Michael D. Cartwright and Andrew D. Kinsey, *Watching Over One Another in Love: Reclaiming the Wesleyan Rule of Life for the Church’s Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Reuben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

the General Rules as a method of practical theology.<sup>10</sup> The General Rules are part of the Methodist vernacular as demonstrated by a “Wesley Bros” cartoon by Charlie Baber.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, at least to my knowledge, the order of church planters belonging to New Faith Communities of the North Carolina Annual Conference sponsors T-shirts featuring the first and second rule in the Benedictine tradition of creating industry to support ministry.<sup>12</sup> The General Rules may have been, as David Watson claims, the “basis . . . by which Methodism was known during its formative years,”<sup>13</sup> but they are also, as Andrew Thompson asserts, “a viable guideline for discipleship in the present.”<sup>14</sup>

The General Rules continue to endure because they have relevance for contemporary Christian communities—even ones navigating a pandemic. The General Rules specify a particular way of life by participating in means of grace or Christian practices. The first two rules—do no harm, and do good—concern themselves with prudential means of grace because they depend upon wisdom and reason. They don’t always look the same in all circumstances. As Thompson points out, these means depend “on context for the form they take, and they are dependent on the exercise of practical wisdom for identifying” that the forms are actually a means of grace.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the General Rules operate as guiding principles, dependent upon context for the ways in which Christians do no harm, do good, and even participate in God’s grace.

Often congregations have guiding principles codified in congregational mission statements. So much about ministry amid the pandemic needed reimagining that the questions being asked weren’t always “What are we going to do?” and “How are we going to do it?” Pastors and church leaders would also ask, “How does this (new activity, mode of worship) help us fulfill our mission as a church during the pandemic?” or “Why are we doing it?” In answering these questions, they were able to discern whether they were upholding the principles they espoused.

To be sure, not every pastor with whom I spoke talked about their guiding principles in terms of the General Rules. The General Rules were my conceptual framework, not theirs. Several, however, did reflect on them during the course of the conversation. The two district superintendents readily warmed to the concept, possibly because their vantage point of overseeing many congregations provided them with a broader perspective to notice patterns that pastors might not notice due to the immediacy of pastoral demands. Regardless, what is offered here is not a rewrite of the General Rules per se. It is, rather, a discussion of the ways in which

<sup>10</sup> Andrew C. Thompson, “The Practical Theology of the General Rules,” *Asbury Journal* 68, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 6–27.

<sup>11</sup> Charlie Baber, “Wesley Bros Look at Three General Rules,” *United Methodist Insight*, October 5, 2017, <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/practicing-faith/wesley-bros-look-at-three-general-rules/>.

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see “NFC Store,” *Shelby Giving*, <https://www.shelbygiving.com/App/Form/96098663-f964-4670-9812-db75434fdcaf>.

<sup>13</sup> Watson, “Aldersgate Street,” 34.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, “Practical Theology,” 14.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, “Practical Theology,” 20.

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## DO NO HARM

At first blush, the initial recommendation by UMC bishops that congregations suspend in-person worship for two weeks seems to correspond to “do no harm.” The appeal was made out of an abundance of care for the vulnerable members of congregations—a way to demonstrate love for neighbor, even if it did go against Christian tradition. It was then, in a time of great uncertainty about the spread of the virus, prudent. Yet, it not only goes against Christian inclination and practice; it also, strictly speaking, goes against Wesley’s words about “avoiding evil of every kind.”<sup>16</sup> The first rule’s intent was to admonish behaviors and practices that would inhibit the fruit of the Spirit from flourishing. Yet at the same time, given the immediate context, this newest appropriation of the first rule was ultimately an effective bite-sized tweet about the strange new reality in which we needed to figure out what Christian community looks like.

I labor at making the fine point about Wesley’s original intent of the rule here because so often our twenty-first-century inclination is to frame things positively. There are unhealthy and unhelpful behaviors that can be a detriment to spiritual and emotional health as well as the general welfare of a community. The COVID-19 pandemic, like any pandemic, is not just harmful to human health. Pastors regularly urged their people to not let themselves get overwhelmed by the unrelenting bad news. They often found themselves issuing advice and counsel to their leadership teams and congregants along the following lines:

- Do not doom-scroll. Do not be buffeted by the winds of the never-ending news cycle, letting the latest story dictate your outlook. Do not be overly pessimistic.
- Do not allow yourselves to be arrogant. Let us determine what it means to work in cooperation with local officials concerned with public health and safety.

<sup>16</sup> Wesley, *General Rules of the United Societies*, 70.

- Do not ignore the very real conditions of the pandemic. People are suffering. Do not be in denial about the need for sadness and lament in appropriate measures.
- Do not impose monolithic mandates we can't reverse when conditions change.
- Do not do nothing! Doing nothing is as harmful to mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being as congregating can be to the body. Be the church! Don't try to be another church—be the congregation you are. Declare the goodness of God and demonstrate that to those who need to hear the good news.

Several pastors admitted that the practical wisdom they dispensed often served as helpful advice for them to hear too.

## Do Good

The second rule encourages Christians to do “good of every possible sort and as far as is possible.”<sup>17</sup> Its focus is on loving neighbor through practical means—those acts of mercy and justice that flourish in persons as they bear the fruit of the Spirit. The myriad of significant ways congregations have lived into being the hands and feet of Jesus is incredible. Some ministries were expedient, such as a small team of volunteers retrieving sorely needed PPE and N95 masks originally packed and stored for disaster-relief mission teams that they might be redistributed to frontline health workers. Other, more long-standing, traditional ministries were given new life and direction through coordination with other churches, charities, and social services for creative partnerships such as Meals on Wheels, Diaper Bank Network, and interfaith hospitality networks. Congregations leveraged their assets, seeking strategic and intentional responses by offering emergency drive-thru meals or sponsoring a local walking track. Ministries also looked after hearts, minds, and souls through ministries like Grief Share or Care Buddy networks. Efforts such as these are about sowing hope. Pastors regularly related that their most faithful disciples who volunteered were often in high-risk categories due to advanced age. Their willingness to serve was born out of an understanding that they've been blessed and out of seeking to be a blessing to others.

I would like to mention that doing good for others does not exclude doing good to self. Pastors can be notoriously neglectful of their own self-care. The last year has been exhausting and demanding. Several acknowledged their stress, but not many have given it much intentional thought. A few volunteered that the compounding stresses coming from the pandemic followed by widespread public demonstrations in the aftermath of George Floyd's death meant they sought a trusted counselor or found a professional coach to help foster healthy ways of being. For many clergy—not all—the pandemic has helped them appreciate the

<sup>17</sup> Wesley, *General Rules of the United Societies*, 72.

connectionism of the UMC in ways they never anticipated. Most, if not all, UM conferences dedicated materials and resources to help local congregations. Several conferences reimagined their Clergy Care Initiatives by delegating resources of time, pastoral coverage, or even funding so that pastors may avail themselves of consecutive days of leave, Sabbath coverage, or ongoing personal well-being. Being kind to oneself can reap rewards as it helps one to extend kindness to others.

## PARTICIPATE IN GOD'S GRACE

If the first two rules foster love for neighbor by not inflicting harm and seeking to act with kindness and compassion, the third rule shifts the focus to expressing love for God. Wesley's language, "attending upon all the ordinances of God,"<sup>18</sup> does not always translate easily, but the practices of public worship, proclamation, Lord's Supper, prayer, Scripture study, and, to a lesser extent, Christian conferencing are familiar to Christians in every century. They are known as the instituted means of grace—those acts of devotion to God in which Jesus participated, offering an example to us. The third rule brings coherence to all three rules as a way of Christian living. Without the third rule, the first two rules become ethical actions and moral obligations anyone might do. The third rule places persons in a posture of dependency on God and divine grace availed to us that we might live into the first two rules with Christian love and charity.

### *Worship*

Thanks to the plethora of social media platforms, Christian public worship has continued amid the pandemic—though in a very different way than previously conceived. Irrespective of what influenced decisions to utilize Zoom, livestream, taped, hybrid, outdoor, or hand-delivered worship materials for household-led worship, pastors quickly began asking themselves questions that went beyond the practical logistics of what socially distant worship looked like. Worship, after all, isn't about technical aspects of distribution, but how the people of God come together to express love and need for God, that they might live into what it means to be the visible representation of Christ on earth. Pastors and worship leaders regularly asked themselves, "What is essential about our time together?" and "What does it mean to offer meaningful worship such that persons can engage with God and one another—not just consume content?" Of course, the decision to move worship to an online platform was a pragmatic one that left little room for a variety of options. The clergy couple I interviewed, who pastor individually with three congregations among them, had a newborn infant and two kindergarteners in March. Their decision to join forces and unite their congregations via livestream

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, *General Rules of the United Societies*, 73.

using their combined talents for music and song allowed them to co-pastor what became affectionately referred to as the Church of the Kitchen Table.

### *Lord's Supper*

For a host of theological and pragmatic reasons, Holy Communion during a pandemic is complicated. Issues of sacrament are layered with sanitary concerns, even if the meal is called a Love Feast. The result is that no one is completely satisfied with the form of sharing—or lack of sharing—in what is usually considered one of the most significant practices of Christian worship.

### *Prayer*

When pastors talked about prayer, something in their demeanor changed. Prayer, for them, has been a profoundly significant practice during the pandemic. Many discussed their vital need for prayer—even if a few ruefully admitted that at first, they felt too busy or consumed with managing crises to pray. Several found the opportunities to offer regular times of prayer, whether daily online or weekly drive-thru services, to be an important time of pastoral contact. One pastor commented that the uptick in the comment boxes during prayer was deeply moving and made “live prayer” a profound moment during the worship services. Several pastors remarked that they felt as if they were thrown a lifeline when congregants reached out to say they were praying for the pastor in specific ways that could only be divinely inspired.

### *Christian Conferencing*

Admittedly, Christian conferencing is not officially listed in the General Rules, but it is often referred to as a means of grace and a significant aspect of Methodism. Christian conferencing is more than a moment when the larger body assembles for worship or lingers afterward over light refreshment. Christian conferencing is the sharing of life, deep relationship, spiritual friendship, and investment in each other's lives. As the pandemic has worn on, fellowship often feels truncated—even for those who have been ready, willing, and able to gather virtually or outdoors.

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## CONCLUSIONS AND TAKE-AWAYS

The intent of this essay is not to dismiss the difficulties faced by congregations trying to do Christian ministry in the pandemic. Rather, it is written in hopes of encouraging folks who have sought to cling to their Christian identity of being a Holy Spirit-empowered people to orient others to the presence of God in this world. Just as the General Rules provided early Methodists with ways of being in the world, they continue to offer us guiding principles to be the church in unfamiliar ways during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has revealed to the church insights about our current reality and our future possibilities. In addition to all the technological possibilities, many congregations have learned what it is to be a faithful community of disciples. Where things are weak, there will undoubtedly be a season of winnowing. But where there is strength in the body of Christ, there will be new life and continued growth. Being a church in a time of pandemic is as much about being the church when a virus does not hold the word captive. It is about participating in a radical way of living that announces the goodness of God's presence in the midst of our hurting, broken world. ☩

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