# **United Methodist Polity for Leaders**

*4 credits Online/Asynchronous/Zoom Check-Ins*

Dr. Randall Miller, Adjunct Professor (formerly, Assistant Professor of UM Studies, Ethics, and Leadership at the Pacific School of Religion)

Email: [Randall4015@gmail.com](mailto:Randall4015@gmail.com) (I will usually respond within 48 hours)

**Course Dates:** March 22, 2020-May 26, 2020

**Zoom Check-Ins:** April 8, 22, and May 13 (from 2:30-3:45 PM MT)

*Polity is a living process because the church is a living, continuous, yet ever-changing community. One generation’s verities are the next generation’s straightjacket. In each era the church has to work out the political engagements that will structure the people of God for effective witness to the gospel. – Thomas Frank*

*While polity includes the rules, procedures, and practices of the Church, it is so much more. Polity is grounded in our history and doctrine, and has evolved in response to the changing environments in which the UMC has lived. – Anne L. Burkholder and Thomas W. Elliott, Jr.*

**Course Description​**

This course will provide the background necessary for understanding and appreciating the evolution of United Methodist polity and examines the current operation of that polity. This course offers practical ministry-oriented information with a focus on effective conversations that will enhance successful local church ministry. We will explore the present polity of the United Methodist Church and discover the various ways to organize the local church for mission. We will also seek clarity regarding the best way to serve within our unique appointment process.

Keep in mind that we’ll be learning about UMC polity at a time when the formal structures and relationships within the global UM fellowship are under growing strain. The growing populations of United Methodists in the Global South, the diminishing numbers in Europe and the U.S., the move towards schism and the recent formation of a new conservative denomination, and increasingly diverse theological interpretations and social stances, raise important questions about the ties that bind us together.

This course is designed to meet the polity requirements for candidates seeking ordination as Deacons or Elders within the United Methodist Church.

**Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this course, class participants will be able to:

* Identify key elements of the church’s constitution, including the leadership and decision-making functions of the Council of Bishops, the General Conference, and the Judicial Council.
* Explain other significant concepts, regulations, and processes described in the UM Book of Discipline, especially those impacting the local church.
* Interpret the mission and goals of the administrative and program agencies working at the general church level of our global connection.
* Compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of congregational vs. connectional church polities.

**Course Schedule​**

This course utilizes an online and primarily *asynchronous* format, which means that for the most part, class participants will not be working online at the same time. Instead, students will work alone and in small groups to complete class assignments.

The exceptions to this asynchronous format are three Zoom check-in sessions when the professor and all class participants will meet online at the same time: April 8, April 15, and May 13 from 2:30-3:45 PM MT. Participation in these online check-ins is mandatory, so please enter the three dates and times in your calendar and make it a priority to be in attendance.

**Required Books**

* *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* - 2016 (978-1-501-83321-2) ([Link to free online version at Cokesbury.com) (Links to an external site.)](https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions). Please don’t buy the hard back edition; it will soon be out-of-date.
* Thomas Edward Frank, ​*Polity, Practice and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*,​ Updated Edition, 2006, Abingdon Press (978-0687335312)
* Laceye C. Warner, *The Method of Our Mission: United Methodist Polity & Organization Paperback*, 2014, Abingdon Press (978-1426767173)

**Course Information and Instructions:**

Much of the focus of this course will be on reading and understanding the current edition of the United Methodist Book of Discipline which reflects the current polity of the church. Please sure that the Book of Discipline edition you are using for the course is the 2016 edition.

As you will notice, the BOD is structured around specific sections. We will take on the material in the BOD one section / one week at a time with corresponding content from *Polity, Practice and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* and/or additional supplementary readings for which provide links or upload the file. Frank’s insights into the history and the general content of the BOD is always valuable.

There will be a tight reading schedule for each week that will be related to the various sections of the BOD.  Some sections are longer than others.  Some will also call for a closer reading than others!  For example, since the local church will be a primary place of ministry for most of you...we will read that section very closely to understand the various dynamics of local church structure and function.

**Assignments & Grading**

The chart below depicts the assignments for this course and the percentage of your final grade attributed to each assignment:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Posts on Canvas (10 posts x 4%) | 40% |
| Participation in Zoom Check-Ins (3 check-ins x 10%) | 30% |
| Final Presentation on a Pre-Approved Topic | 30% |
| **Total** | 100% |

As indicated above, there are four key assignments that will determine your final grade:

* Every two weeks, students will be required to complete an **open-book quiz**, covering important topics and concepts from previous weeks. You will have from 12 PM MT on Friday to 7 PM MT on Sunday to take and submit your completed quiz.
* As noted above, all class participants are required to attend and actively participate in three (3) mandatory **Zoom check-in sessions**. Each Zoom check-in session will be organized around a specific case study related to UM polity issues.
* In addition to attendance, each class participant will be asked to **lead the discussion during one Zoom check-in session**, either by themselves or with an assigned partner(s). Specific instructions for leading the discussion will be provided at a later time.
* Finally, every student will be asked to **prepare a visual presentation with script on a pre-approved topic** related to UM polity issues. This presentation will be graded by the professors and shared with the other students in the course.

Grading scale

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A+ | 100-96 |
| A | 95-91 |
| B+ | 90-86: |
| B | 85-81 |
| C+ | 80-76 |
| C | 75-71 |
| D+ | 70-66 |
| D | 65-61 |
| F | 60-below |

***Late Assignments:****Grade will be significantly reduced for assignments turned in late, without advance approval from the professor.  Late Assignments will not be eligible to receive an A+ or A. In the event of extenuating circumstances please contact the instructor prior to their due date.*

***Incompletes:*** *Adjunct Faculty are asked to refuse all requests for an Incomplete Grade from students.*

[**Attendance Policy (Links to an external site.)**](https://iliff.bloomfire.com/posts/2819851-attendance-and-special-days)

This is an online, asynchronous course, except for mandatory attendance at the three, prescheduled Zoom sessions. Failure to attend any one of the Zoom sessions will lead to a failing mark for this portion of your final grade (Zoom Check-In Sessions = 30%). Additionally, students are expected to keep up with their reading and other assignments.

**Course Schedule**

**Getting Acquainted**

Welcome to United Methodist Polity. Please read through the syllabus, make sure that you’ve ordered or have available each of the required texts, and that you’re ready to go next week when the course commences.

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

1. Please post an introduction of yourself that includes your name, your academic institution, your chosen vocation, and how far you are in the ordination process (if this is your chosen vocational path.
2. Please respond to the posts of at least three of your classmates to help make our online learning community a welcoming place.

**Week One: 3/22-3/28 – The Constitution**

The UM Constitution provides the basic foundation for the denomination and encompasses the articles of religion, the overall organizational structure, and outlines the role, authority, and responsibilities of important church bodies.

This Week’s Readings:

1. Book of Discipline (2016) Page 1-103
2. Frank (Polity, Practice, and Mission of the UMC) Page 41-140
3. Warner (The Method of our Mission) Page 13-65

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

Those new to United Methodism or unfamiliar with its organization on the general church level may be surprised to find that its decision-making structures bear a close resemblance to the tripartite structure of the United States government in that there is a presidential, judicial, and legislative bodies that hold each other in check. *Please post a paragraph (100 words) in which you identify the three bodies within United Methodist that play the roles just described.*

**Week Two: 3/29-4/4 – Judicial Administration**

This week’s readings focus on the judicial functions of the United Methodist Church, including the role and function of the Judicial Council and investigations, trials, and appeals for both clergy and laypersons.

This Week’s Readings:

1. Book of Discipline (2016) pages 777-819
2. Frank (Polity, Practice, and Mission) pages 311-328

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

Now that you’ve learned about the role and function of the Judicial Council:

1. Please read one of their recent rulings of your choice, which can be found at <http://www.umc.org/decisions/search>.
2. Please post a paragraph (150 words) in which you identify the issue or problem under discussion and summarize the finding of the Judicial Council. We know you’re not church attorneys, but do your best!
3. Please also respond to the post of at least two other classmates.

**Week Three: 4/5-4/11 – The Local Church**

A part of what makes United Methodism so distinctive is the importance we place on democratic styles of decision-making, the emphasis on both ordained and lay ministries, and the focus on the local congregation. This session focus on the functioning of the Local Church and is crucial to organizing and leading UM congregations.

This Week’s Readings:

1. Book of Discipline (2016) Pages 147-221  (if you are short on time, this is where to focus)
2. Frank (Practice, Polity, and Mission) Pages 173-194
3. Warner (Method and Mission) Pages 109-127

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

As a UM pastor you will be expected to lead your local congregation in the ways described in the BOD and will be held accountable for doing so by your district superintendent and bishop. Please post a paragraph (150 words) that demonstrates:

1. Your understanding of Church Council membership as described in the BOD and the options that will be available to you and the church.
2. Your understanding of the difference between a Church Conference and a Charge Conference.  What is their function, make up, and purpose?
3. Please also respond to the posts of at least two of your classmates.

**\*\*\*Zoom Check-In, April 8, 2:30-3:45 PM MT\*\*\***

**Week Four: 4/12-4/18 – The Ministry of the Ordained**

The UM Book of Discipline asserts that both clergy and laypersons are called to ministry, but that the ministry of ordained persons is distinct and set apart and organized into specific orders, each of which have assigned responsibilities and privileges.

This Week’s Readings:

1. Book of Discipline (2016) Pages 223-321
2. Frank (Practice, Polity and Mission) Pages 195-228
3. Wagner (Method of our Mission) Pages 69-91

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

Please post your insights into the following topics and issues;

1. Describe your understanding of the unique responsibilities and distinct differences related to (a) Elders, (b) Deacons, and (c) Local Pastors. Given these distinctions, why are YOU on the track you are on?
2. If you wanted to start a new ministry that doesn't exist anywhere, how could you as an Elder or as a Deacon (choose one) use the rules of your Order to do this?   What would you start, if you could?
3. Respond to at least two of your classmates in regard to their insights.

**\*\*\*Zoom Check-In, April 15, 2:30-3:45 PM MT\*\*\***

**Week Five: 4/19-4/25 – The Superintendency**

In United Methodism, bishops or episcopal leaders are a unique combination of spiritual and administrative leaders. Not only are they to preach, educate, and inspire others through their prophetic stances, but bishops must also preside over annual conference sessions, make yearly decisions about clergy assignments, and oversee broader ministries and missions within their episcopal areas. Furthermore, in comparison to both Roman Catholic and Anglican leaders, UM bishops have a more limited scope of power and authority.

This Week’s Readings:

1. Book of Discipline (2016) pages 323-362

2. Frank (Polity, Practice, and Mission) pages 229-253

3. Warner (Method and Mission) pages 93-108

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

Many observers have noted that like other major denominations, including the largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptists, the United Methodist Church in the U.S. is in a state of decline. Fewer younger members are joining local congregations and the generation of the baby boomers is aging out.

1. Reflecting on what you’ve read about the role of episcopal leaders, what actions would you take as a newly elected bishop to revitalize United Methodism in your area (150 words),
2. Please respond to the posts of at least two other students.

**Week Six: 4/26-5/2 – The Conferences**

Organizing ministry, mission, and administrative tasks in relationship to various conferences goes all the way back to the start of the Methodist Movement and the meetings that John Wesley presided over with a heavy hand. Though the idea of organizing through conferences has evolved over the past two centuries, the annual conference remains the basic building block of UM polity and the General Conference is still the highest decision-making body.

This Week’s Readings:

1. Book of Discipline (2016)  Constitution: paragraphs 11, 32-41
2. Book of Discipline paragraphs 500s and 600s  pages 363-519 - START by reading about Annual Conferences (par. 600s), then turn to General Conference and finally to Jurisdictional Conference, Central Conference, and ecumenical relations (par. 500s)

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

Various portions of the United Methodist Church are considering schism or separation as a way of dealing with what are considered by some to be irreconcilable differences related to theology, social stances, and the structural ways our denomination engages in ministry and mission. Very recently, a group of United Methodists have announced the formation of a new denomination, the Global Methodist Church, and a number of annual conferences are considering whether to join that venture. Please post a response (150 words or less) that addresses the following questions:

1. Based on your reading of what the BOD says about the role and responsibilities of conferences (annual, jurisdictional, central, and general), what would you say are the decision-making roles of the various conferences in regard to church schism.
2. What is your sense of the direction that your annual conference may be headed in terms of whether it will separate or not?
3. Please respond to the post of at least two other students.

**Week Seven: 5/3-5/8 – Administrative Order**

At the general church level, the ministry and mission of the church is carried out by general agencies, commissions, and other bodies. Our current administrative structure was established at the Uniting Conference of 1968, with some significant revisions and additions along the way. In the face of significant changes in membership, geographical location, etc., significant numbers of United Methodist are now wondering how to better organize our work at general church level to meet the needs of an increasing global denomination.

This Week’s Readings:

(Please skim the BOD sections)

1. Book of Discipline (2016) pages 521-731
2. Warner (Method and Mission) pages 147-174

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

1. Please pick one general agency or commission described in the readings and describe in 150 words or less, its purpose, role and function in the UMC.
2. Please respond to at least two students’ posts.

**Week Eight: 5/9-5/15 – Church Property**

Unlike in a congregational polity in which all property and monetary assets belong to an individual congregation, in our United Methodist connectional polity church property and assets belong to the annual conference. This ecclesial and legal notion is embodied in what is now called, “Trust Clause,” but this practice also stretches back to the early part of the Methodist Movement. Please read the BOD sections below very carefully. As a United Methodist pastor, you will be expected to uphold and interpret the Trust Clause to your congregants.

This Week’s Readings Assignments:

1. Book of Discipline (2016) pages 733-776
2. Frank (Polity, Practice and Mission) pages 299-309

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

In 150 words or less, please describe the various components of the Trust Clause and summarize their implications for the ministry of local congregations.

**\*\*\*Zoom Check-In, May 13, 2:30-3:45 PM MT\*\*\***

**Week Nine: 5/16-5/23 – The Social Principles**

The Social Principles became a part of Methodism at the start of the 20th century and are a direct outgrowth of the Social Gospel Movement, which was led by and broadly embraced by Methodist clergy and laypersons at the time. Over the past 8 years, United Methodists of various theological persuasions and geographical locations came together in a project to revise the Social Principles. These revised Social Principles are waiting approval at one of the upcoming General Conferences.

This Week’s Readings:

1. UM Book of Discipline (2016)  The Social Principles pages 105- 146
2. Frank ( Polity, Practice, and Mission) pages 141-150
3. Revised Social Principles (please skim!): <https://www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/social-principles-2020-607>

Assignment: Posting on Canvas

The Social Principles have no congregation of their own; they lie forgotten on a shelf or serve as vital standards of faithful discipleship, based on clergy and laypeople’s willingness to teach, interpret, and act upon them.

1. Choose one topic covered by the either the current or the revised Social Principles.
2. In 150 words, please summarize the teachings contained in that Social Principle and discuss its importance for informing the work of the local church.
3. Please respond to at least two students’ posts.

Week Ten: 5/24-5/28 – Course Wrap-Up/Completing Final Presentations

There are no readings required for this week. Instead, you’ve been given time to complete your visual presentations and scripts and post them to canvas. Then, you’ll pick the presentation of one other student and provide comments and feedback.