SOFTWARE & TECH

United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015

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Introduction: A Guide for Worship and Scripture Reading

For pastors, worship leaders, and lay members of the United Methodist Church, the word "lectionary" carries significant weight. It is not merely a list of Bible verses; it is a carefully curated roadmap that guides congregations through the story of Scripture over a multi-year cycle. The **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015**represents a specific and important adaptation of the broader ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). This version, officially recognized for use in United Methodist worship, offers a structured approach to reading the Bible that connects the life of the church with the rhythms of the Christian year. Understanding this lectionary helps preachers plan sermons, educators prepare lessons, and individual believers deepen their engagement with God's Word. In this article, we will explore the background, structure, key adaptations, and practical significance of this essential liturgical tool.

What Is the Revised Common Lectionary?

Before diving into the specifics of the 2015 adaptation, it is necessary to understand the foundation upon which it is built. The Revised Common Lectionary is an ecumenical lectionary used by a wide range of Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church, and many others. It was developed in the years following the Second Vatican Council, which prompted the Roman Catholic Church to revise its own lectionary. Protestant scholars and liturgists saw an opportunity to create a shared set of readings, fostering unity among different Christian traditions. The result was the Common Lectionary, first published in 1983, which was later revised and published as the **Revised Common Lectionary**in 1992. The RCL organizes Scripture readings into a three-year cycle (Years A, B, and C), corresponding to the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time.

The Three-Year Cycle Explained

The lectionary operates on a repeating cycle of three years. Each year focuses on one of the Synoptic Gospels. Year A features the Gospel of Matthew, Year B features the Gospel of Mark, and Year C features the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of John is woven throughout all three years, particularly during the seasons of Lent and Easter. Each Sunday includes four readings: an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, a reading from the Epistles (or Acts during Eastertide), and a reading from the Gospels. The 2015 adaptation for the United Methodist Church follows this same ecumenical framework but includes specific modifications to align with the denomination's doctrinal standards and liturgical practices.

Why a Specific 2015 Adaptation for the United Methodist Church?

The question naturally arises: why does the United Methodist Church need its own version of the Revised Common Lectionary? The answer lies in the need for clarity, accessibility, and denominational distinctiveness. While the RCL is an ecumenical resource, individual denominations often make small adjustments to it. The United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015 was developed by the United Methodist Publishing House (Abingdon Press) to provide an official version that is easy to use for pastors and congregations across the connection. This edition includes several important features that make it distinct. It offers the complete texts of all four readings for each Sunday and major holy day, presented in the Common English Bible (CEB) or the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), both of which are widely accepted in United Methodist circles. The 2015 edition also includes additional resources, such as introductions to the liturgical seasons, suggestions for hymns and prayers, and notes on the lectionary's history and use. It is designed to be a practical tool for worship planning, not just a list of Scripture references.

Key Features of the 2015 Lectionary

The **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015** incorporates all the readings from the ecumenical RCL but presents them in a format that serves the specific needs of United Methodist worship. One key feature is the inclusion of the "Lectionary Psalm" in a form suitable for responsive reading. The psalms are often the most challenging part of the lectionary for congregations to use in worship, and the 2015 edition provides a version that is easy to follow. Another significant feature is the inclusion of extra readings for days that are particularly important in United Methodist tradition, such as World Communion Sunday, Human Relations Day, and other special Sundays designated by the denomination. These additions ensure that the lectionary reflects the missional priorities of the church. Furthermore, the 2015 edition includes notes on the season of the year, giving worshippers context for how the readings fit into the larger story of salvation. This is especially helpful during seasons like Lent and Advent, where the readings are tightly tied to themes of preparation and repentance.

Readings for Special Days and Seasons

The lectionary does not only cover the regular Sundays of the year. It also provides readings for major festivals and holy days, such as Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, Pentecost, and All Saints Day. In addition, the **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015** includes readings for other significant days in the life of the church, such as Thanksgiving Day, Baptism of the Lord, and Transfiguration Sunday. For each of these days, the lectionary provides a full set of four readings, allowing the congregation to focus on the themes of the day. This comprehensive coverage makes the lectionary an indispensable resource for any church that follows the liturgical calendar.

How the Lectionary Shapes Preaching and Worship

The use of a lectionary has a profound impact on the life of a congregation. Rather than allowing the preacher to choose their own texts week by week (which can lead to an imbalanced diet of Scripture), the lectionary ensures that the church hears from a wide variety of biblical genres and authors. Over the course of the three-year cycle, the congregation is exposed to the major themes of the Old Testament, the teachings of the Apostle Paul, and the distinctive voices of the four Gospels. The **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015** helps preachers avoid the trap of focusing only on their favorite passages. It forces the preacher to wrestle with difficult texts, including those that are challenging or uncomfortable. This leads to a more mature and holistic understanding of Scripture. For the congregation, hearing the same readings on the same Sunday as Christians around the world creates a powerful sense of unity. A United Methodist in Texas can know that on a given Sunday, they are reading the same Gospel passage as a Lutheran in Germany or an Anglican in Kenya. This visible connection to the global church is a gift of the lectionary.

The Value of Liturgical Seasons

The lectionary is organized around the seasons of the church year. This liturgical structure helps the congregation enter into the story of Jesus Christ in a cyclical way. Advent is a time of waiting and expectation.

Christmas celebrates the birth of the Savior. Epiphany reveals Jesus to the world. Lent is a season of reflection and repentance. Easter is the great celebration of the resurrection. Ordinary Time allows the United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015 to be lived out. This guides the church through these seasons with intentionality. It ensures that the readings for each Sunday are appropriate to the season, helping the congregation to live within the story of salvation.

Practical Tips for Using the Lectionary in Ministry

For pastors and worship planners, the **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015** is a resource to be used creatively, not a rigid yoke. Here are a few practical suggestions for how to get the most out of it:

- Plan ahead: Look at the readings for an entire season at once. This allows you to see the big picture and plan a sermon series that flows from week to week.
- Read all four texts: Do not only focus on the Gospel reading. The Old Testament, Psalm, and Epistle reading each contribute a unique voice to the theme of the day. Sometimes the most surprising connections come from reading all four together.
- Use the Psalm as a response: The psalm is often the congregation's response to the first reading. Use it liturgically, not just as something to read through quickly.
- Adapt for your context: While the lectionary provides the texts, you are free to choose which one to preach on. Some Sundays the Gospel will be the main focus; other Sundays the Old Testament reading or the Epistle might demand more attention.
- Invite lay readers: The lectionary makes it easy to involve lay members in leading worship. Clear readings for each Sunday allow anyone to read with confidence.

The Relationship Between the Lectionary and United Methodist Doctrine

The **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015** does not exist in a theological vacuum. It is deeply connected to the doctrinal standards of the United Methodist Church. The lectionary readings consistently point to the central Christian affirmations: the grace of God, the saving work of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the mission of the church. Because the lectionary covers such a broad range of Scripture, it naturally supports a Wesleyan emphasis on Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The four readings for each Sunday allow for connections to be made between the Old and New Testaments, showing the unity of God's redemptive plan. The lectionary also reinforces the importance of the sacraments. The readings for baptismal and eucharistic themes appear at appropriate times in the cycle, helping the congregation to understand these means of grace more deeply.

Ecumenical Unity and Denominational Identity

Using the Revised Common Lectionary places the United Methodist Church firmly within the mainstream of ecumenical Christianity. It signals a commitment to shared worship and common Scripture reading with other denominations. At the same time, the 2015 adaptation allows for distinctively United Methodist emphases. The inclusion of readings for denomination-specific Sundays and the availability of the CEB translation, which is prepared by a team of scholars from multiple traditions including United Methodists, gives this edition a particular relevance. This balance between ecumenical unity and denominational identity is a hallmark of the 2015 lectionary.

Comparisons with Other Lectionaries

While the **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015** is the standard for United Methodists, it is not the only lectionary in use. Some other denominations and independent churches use different systems. The Roman Catholic Church uses a version of the Lectionary for Mass that is similar but not identical to the RCL. The differences are usually minor, affecting a few specific readings. The Episcopal Church also uses the RCL but has its own set of prayers and collects. The lectionary used in the Orthodox tradition is entirely different,

following a one-year cycle of readings. For United Methodists, the 2015 adaptation of the RCL offers a stable, well-tested, and widely accepted foundation for worship. It is a resource that the denomination has officially endorsed, and it is used by the vast majority of United Methodist congregations that follow a lectionary.

Conclusion: A Tool for Faithful Discipleship

The **United Methodist Revised Common Lectionary 2015**is far more than a planning tool for pastors. It is a gift to the entire church. It invites congregations to walk through the story of Scripture in a disciplined and thoughtful way. It connects local congregations to the global body of Christ. It challenges preachers to proclaim the whole counsel of God, not just their favorite texts. And it provides a rhythm for the Christian life, helping believers to live in the story of Jesus Christ from Advent to Ordinary Time and back again. Whether you are a pastor preparing next week's sermon, a lay reader standing at the lectern, or a Christian seeking to deepen your engagement with Scripture, this lectionary offers a reliable and enriching path. It is a testament to the power of shared Scripture to unite, teach, and transform the people of God.

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