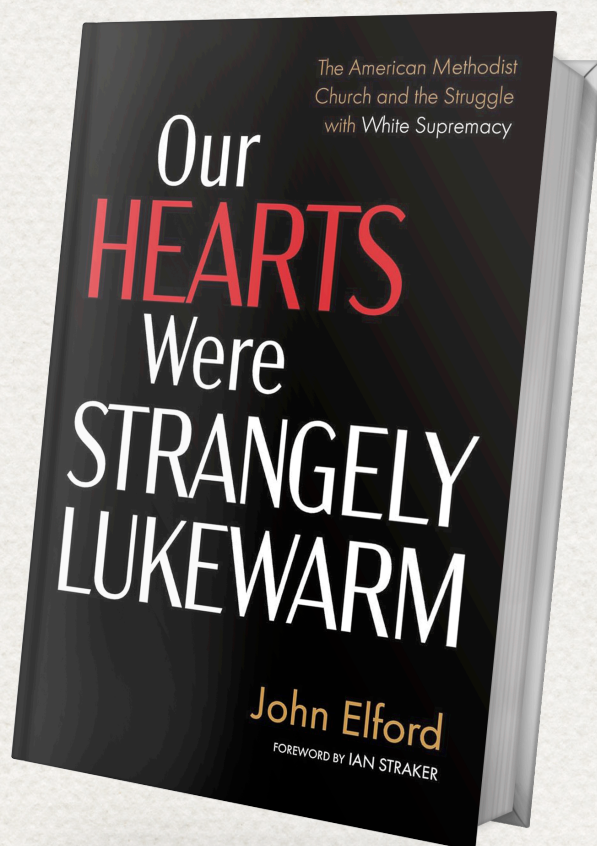


# GCORR Book Study Guide

## *Our Hearts Were Strangely Lukewarm: The American Methodist Church and the Struggle with White Supremacy*

By John Elford

FOR SMALL GROUP & INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION



**RELIGION & RACE**  
The United Methodist Church

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This book study guide follows the outline of the book:

Session 1: Chapter 1 - Introduction

Session 2: Chapter 2 - John Wesley and the Institution of Slavery

Session 3: Chapter 3 - Methodists Struggle with Slavery

Session 4: Chapter 4 - From Civil War to the Jim Crow Church

Session 5: Chapter 5 - Methodists and the Civil Rights Era (Part 1)

Session 6: Chapter 6 - Methodists and the Civil Rights Era (Part 2)

Session 7: Chapter 7 - The Contemporary Struggle against White Supremacy (Part 1)

Session 8: Chapter 8 - The Contemporary Struggle against White Supremacy (Part 2)

To engage this study to 6 sessions, you may combine Sessions 5 and 6, and Sessions 7 and 8.

## KEY THEMES

White supremacy and racism aimed at African Americans was and still is part of the framework, systemic, and structure of the United Methodist Church. Throughout its history, whenever the church's top decision-makers had the opportunity to champion and model prophetic, racial justice in Jesus's name, they instead voted to ignore or even support racism against African Americans and other people of color in church and society

## BOOK SYNOPSIS

The thesis of *Our Hearts Were Strangely Lukewarm* is that the White American United Methodist Church (and its predecessor denominations) have historically been entangled with and acted as carriers of White supremacy by remaining silent bystanders or active accomplices in the enormous social, and systemic harm caused by anti-Black racism. The book charts a complicated and shameful story that few United Methodists know. Yet, knowing and facing this history with humility and repentance before God and one another is the only way the denomination will chart a different and better future for all. To achieve a church and world without racism, we must come to terms with the story of our past – the whole story

## KEY TERMS

Key terms are highlighted below, and most definitions are found in the chapter.

Terms include:

- Introduction: Anti-Black racism, racism, White supremacy, enslaved, enslavers, slavery
- Chapter 1: Chattel slavery
- Chapter 3: Black power, caste
- Chapter 4: Caste, KKK, lynching, segregation
- Chapter 5: Beloved community, separate but equal, desegregation, integration
- Chapter 6: Sit-ins, de jure, de facto
- Chapter 7: Color blindness, cross-racial appointment
- Chapter 8: Anti-racist, Brown v. Board of Education, reparations, Freedom Schools

## A NOTE FROM GCORR

We are aware of the binary nature of the book “Our Hearts Were Strangely Lukewarm” as much of the author’s discussion of history of white supremacy in the Methodist Church is engaged from a black-white point of view. This view is not to say that our Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Asian siblings did not experience racism during our Methodist Church history. Rather, Elford engages the discussion from the context of the 1939 split which created central jurisdictions in the U.S. - the conferences to which Black clergy and laity were relegated.

GCORR recognizes and names the fact that systemic racism harmed (and continues to harm) our Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Asian siblings at every level of the Church. We remain committed to our missional mandate – to dismantle racism by challenging, equipping, and leading the Church to become interculturally competent, build institutional equity, and catalyze vital conversations about religion, race, and culture now more than ever.

## OPENING PRAYER

God of all people everywhere, fill us with your spirit of wisdom today, that we might hear the truth; that in hearing the truth, we might do the truth; and that in doing the truth, we might all be set free. Amen.

## OPENING THOUGHT

“Perhaps an honest reckoning with the past, coupled with a firm dedication to a better future, will, at last, allow the church to truly lead this nation and the world, if not to a new heaven, at least to a new earth.” Dr. Ian Straker in the “Forward.” (p. ix)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Currently, the UMC is highly racially segregated. Why do you think this? Are there Black United Methodist clergy or laypersons in your community that you can engage in conversation with over our current segregation? Why might Black United Methodists not feel comfortable discussing race and racism in a mostly white church?
2. Recall a time when a Black person you know told you about a racist interaction they experienced. Did you listen with empathy? Did you dismiss or excuse the person who mistreated them? If so, why?
3. Before you read this book, were you aware of the extent of white supremacy and racism in the United Methodist Church? If so, where did you learn about it? If not, why?
4. Why do you think it is difficult for people to understand that anti-racism is central to being a disciple of Jesus Christ?
5. The author asserts that “facing White supremacy in the Methodist Church must be the work of White Methodists.” (p. 7) Do you agree with this statement? Give an example in which you have witnessed white United Methodists working to dismantle White supremacy in their local church and/or community?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Spirit of God, we have heard your call to share in building up the Kin-dom of God. Fill us with the desire to change ourselves and to change the world. Enflame our passion for justice into a commitment to address unjust situations and structures. Deepen our concern for our sisters and brothers in America and overseas who endure the burdens of poverty, war, exploitation and persecution. Let us enthusiastically play our part in the mission of the Church in the modern world. Amen.

*(Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, June 17, 2020, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org))*

## OPENING PRAYER

O Mysterious and Steadfast God, help me to be as fond of diversity as you are. Help all people everywhere to see diversity as strength and opportunity.

Open our eyes to value different skin tones as beautiful expressions of your creation.

Forgive us for the ways we exclude and stereotype. Lead each of us into a deeper awareness of the strengths of community, until we all become as fond of diversity as you are. Amen.

*(Sharon McCormick, adapted, January 12, 2021, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org))*

## OPENING THOUGHT

"The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection." (Wesley, Hymns and Sacred Poems, p. 21)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever stood up for truth or justice? How did it feel? Perhaps you wanted to stand up for justice but were unable to. What do you think were the reasons behind your reluctance?
2. There are groups in the church today who are using similar arguments that were used to justify before the enslavement of African Americans to support their own positions. What were some of those arguments?
3. Why do you think it was so difficult for Methodists to admit that enslavement of African Americans was wrong and act quickly to end it? What modern-day issues are parallel to this—issues where people make excuses to make their inaction tolerable or right? (Examples: immigration, healthcare, education, housing, prison, economics.)
4. Wesley is a model for using his voice and privilege on behalf of those who were marginalized and oppressed. What do you see as the main strengths of John Wesley's witness? What are the challenges for you to use your voice and privilege?
5. What sort of encouragement or motivation is needed to help people with privilege and voice use it to help those on the margins?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, we give you thanks for creating the world full of diversity and for making one human family of all the peoples of the earth. You reign over all the nations and are seated on your holy throne. You rule over all the peoples without partiality in respect to nations or races because righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. Forgive us for the times when we put walls around us with false pride and racial prejudice. Forgive us for the times when we were silent in the face of racism, private or institutional. Open our eyes to see Christ who is in people of every nation and culture. Break down the walls that separate us. Set us free from fear, hatred,

and racism. Bind us together with the unity of God's love. Restore oneness to the family of God. We pray in the name of Jesus who came, lived, and died for all humanity. Amen.

*(A Daily Prayer for Racial Justice and Reconciliation from Tabernacle United Methodist Church, Fredericksburg, Virginia, <https://tabumc.org/data/files/Prayer%20for%20reconciliation.pdf> )*

## OPENING PRAYER

Gracious and Holy God: we confess and lament that our nation was built on the backs of God's children violently stolen from their homes in Africa to create massive wealth for White Americans. We also confess and lament that our church, called to set people free, often turned away from the gospel work of emancipation. As we offer our sorrow and repentance for these sins, may we be strengthened by your spirit to see racial injustice today, to change, and to act for justice. Amen.

## OPENING THOUGHT

"We twenty-first century [United] Methodists must somehow come to terms with the fact that many nineteenth-century Methodists [in our predecessor denominations] who were well-versed in the horrors of slavery chose not to grapple with it at all and most days seemed perfectly at ease with it." (p. 46)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What evidence does Elford offer about the church's ability to "slide into compromise and complicity with slavery"? On what current justice issues do you see the church compromise in the name of "avoiding controversy" or "keeping the peace" among church members and churches?
2. Historically, "the white Methodist movement" earned the reputation of being neither "hot" (i.e., abolitionists) nor "cold" (i.e., enslavers). However, being lukewarm may be read as supporting the status quo, including white supremacy within our structures. How can Christians discern when to move from the middle to take a stand? What are clues from Biblical and theological teachings that can lead us?
3. Black laity and clergy were part of the Methodist movement from the beginning, although institutional racism caused some to start their own denominations. What are some ways that the United Methodist Church can and should center the voices and experiences of African American members and denominational "cousins" to confront and end racism?
4. Some passages of Scripture have been used historically by many white Christians to justify slavery. Where do we continue to use plain, literal readings from the Bible instead of the deeper principles in Scripture? How can we change that trajectory?
5. What stood out from the book about the denomination's General Conferences and bishops and their actions on past issues of racial justice? What factors played a role in the General Conferences as they faced slavery? With bishops? Do those same factors play a role today? How?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Sovereign Lord Jesus Christ, who took human form and broke down the walls that divide; We seek your forgiveness for not living out the truth that all are one in Christ, for the sin of racism. We pray for all those affected by the marginalization of prejudice and the violence of racist words and actions. We pray that we might uproot its cancerous and systemic hold on our own institutions. We pray that we might recognize in reverence your divine image and likeness in our neighbor and find joy in the resemblance. We pray in your name and seeking your glory. Amen.

*(The Right Reverend Justin Welby, The Archbishop of Canterbury Dec 3, 2021, [umcdiscipleship.org](https://umcdiscipleship.org))*



## OPENING PRAYER

Creator God, Dr. Martin Luther King reminds us that “history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.” We confess that we have allowed fear to silence us for too long. We have been silent as white supremacy and power; Christian nationalism, and jingoistic idolatry have been given the place of honor at the table. We know that “change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle,” and so we, in our confession, ask also for the strength and the courage to straighten our backs as we work for justice. Give us the boldness to take the risks necessary to become the people you are calling us to be; to be the churches you are calling us to be; and to be the denomination you are calling us to be. This we pray in your name. Amen.

*(American Baptist Churches of New Jersey, adapted, Feb 6, 2023, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org))*

## OPENING THOUGHT

“And this is also the continuing paradox of the White American Methodist church throughout history: the proclamation of love of God and neighbor somehow believed and lived alongside support of the inhuman bondage of Black persons, segregation, and Jim Crow.” (p. 48)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of “the appalling silence of good people.” The Methodist Church was silent about, even actively supported, White Supremacy. What is the denomination silent about today? What are pastors and church members silent about today? Why?
2. In the nineteenth century, Methodists often relied on the doctrine of “the spirituality of the church” to avoid dealing with slavery. Is the church supposed to speak only on spiritual matters? Can the church speak out about political matters? Would the church’s witness be different than a political platform? If so, how?
3. The Central Jurisdiction, a segregated jurisdiction for Black Methodist churches, was considered by some to be the “best solution” and a “good compromise” at the time. What are today’s “best solutions” and “good compromises” that we may, in retrospect, be ashamed of?
4. How did the post-Reconstruction MEC struggle and generally fail to integrate? Why did some efforts succeed while others were abandoned? What are your thoughts on the “union” of 1939?
5. How would you explain the 1939 union and the creation of the Central Jurisdiction to a young person? (Elford, p. 75)

## CLOSING PRAYER

Are you still calling my name, O Lord?  
Are you still wanting me to rise up and hope?  
You've been calling so long,  
You've been sending so long,  
What shall I do, O my Lord, what shall I do?

It is one thing to have faith  
That trouble won't last always.  
It is one thing to hope for an end  
To the ills that beset us  
The divisions that decrease us  
The hate that defines us.

But it is another thing all together  
To be part of the change,  
To say no more to racism,  
To change my heart and my world.  
What shall I do, O my Lord, what shall I do?

Are you still calling my name, O Lord?  
Are you still wanting me to rise up and hope,  
With hands and words as well as heart?  
You've been calling so long.  
What shall I do?

*(Derek C. Weber, February 17, 2021,  
[umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org) )*

## OPENING PRAYER

When our eyes do not see the gravity of racial injustice,  
Shake us from our slumber and open our eyes, O Lord.  
When out of fear we are frozen into inaction,  
Give us a spirit of bravery, O Lord.  
When we try our best but say the wrong things,  
Give us a spirit of humility, O Lord.  
When the chaos of this dies down,  
Give us a lasting spirit of solidarity, O Lord.  
When it becomes easier to point fingers outward,  
Help us to examine our own hearts, O Lord.  
God of truth, in your wisdom, enlighten us.  
God of love, in your mercy, forgive us.  
God of hope, in your kindness, heal us.  
Creator of All People, in your generosity, guide us.  
Racism breaks your heart,  
Break our hearts for what breaks yours,  
O Lord. Amen.

*("Racism Prayers" from the Social Justice Resource Center, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org), September 25, 2023)*

## OPENING THOUGHT

"Finally, the church was witnessing unequivocally to the absolute contradiction between segregation and the gospel!" (p. 83)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What has your local church taught you and your congregation about the history racism and White supremacy in your church and community? If there are Black United Methodist or other Methodist churches in town, what is your congregation's relationship with them? If you do not know, why do you think that is?
2. What social capital was at risk for white people who spoke out during the era of legalized anti-Black segregation in the United States? For Black people? What social capital is at risk for those who participate in anti-racism today?
3. What important steps regarding race were taken at the 1968 General Conference? Where were the failures? If you were old enough, do you remember that event and what your reactions were at the time? (Elford, p. 83-85)
4. Since 1968, the membership of the Council of Bishops and the churchwide agencies have become more racially diverse. However, general church membership in the UMC is still 90 percent white. What factors have contributed to the lack of diversity and inclusion of Black people and other People of Color in the church?
5. How much responsibility for the failure of the church to integrate rests with bishops? What could bishops do today to address past failures?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Who knows what signal, what internal sentry,  
prodded Rosa to sit when the bus driver said:  
“Get up and move.”

Was it her aching feet, as some have said?  
Was it her pounding head that could not wrap  
itself around the concept of such inequality?  
Or was it her aching heart, bruised from years  
of injury compounded with interest? Perhaps,  
it was just impossible for her to walk any  
longer with the spiny pebble of injustice in her  
shoe, in her life, in her spirit.

Only God knows the signal, the sentry, the  
prod required for each of us.

Oh God, let there be enough feeling left in me  
to feel your nudging when it comes. Amen.

*(Safiyah Fosua, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org), “Worship  
Resources for Black History Month,” November  
15, 2020)*

## OPENING PRAYER

Open our eyes to read the signs of the times. Open our ears to hear the voices of the poor and oppressed; the voices of our Black siblings who are enduring the violence and dehumanization of white supremacy and white privilege in our communities and in our institutions. Open our hearts that we might see anew and work together for a new way of being church. We ask this in the name of Jesus and the communion of Black saints who are with us and who have gone before us, that we, your church, might be transformed. Amen.

*(“Witnessing for Racial Justice Prayer Service,” a part of “Women Witnesses for Racial Justice: Sister Antona Ebo,” Future Church, Cleveland, Ohio, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org), October 8, 2021)*

## OPENING THOUGHT

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (p. 95)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Chapters 5 and 6 trace the pushback many pastors faced who spoke out for justice. How do you support people who speak out? What can you do personally and publicly to support them? How do you support churches who speak out for justice? What can be done to personally and publicly support them?
2. Were you surprised to learn that “kneel-ins” were used as a protest tool to combat segregation in churches?

Where are you on the practice of direct nonviolent action to fight injustice when other efforts to change the system are not working? (Elford, p. 99-103)

3. Do you agree with the statement that the UMC, in spite of changes in its structure and policies, did not really integrate? Why or why not? The author states, “Desegregation and integration are not the same. Integration or inclusiveness is more than desegregation.” (Elford, p. 114)
4. The former Women’s Division (now United Women in Faith) mobilized Methodist Church women to work against racism in the 1950s and 60s. What can we learn from their work that can impact dismantling racism efforts today?
5. How does our theological framework tend to work against direct action to end racism? (Elford, p. 114)

## CLOSING PRAYER

“We will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of individuals willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”

*(Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail”)*

# Session 7: Chapter 7 – The Contemporary Struggle against White Supremacy (Part 1)

# 07

## OPENING PRAYER

In our attention-deficit society, God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, we want to move on from the crises of the past – even if that past is counted in weeks or even hours, it seems. “Aren't you done with that, yet?” some wonder.

Yet how can we move on when there hasn't been real change in the hearts and minds of our nation? How can we move on when our structures and systems still oppress and demean, when divide and conquer is still the modus operandi of many of those who wield power in government and the marketplace?

It's not time to move on, God of all people, but it is time to move forward. It's time to not let our discomfort turn us around from bringing justice and reshaping the soul of a nation. It's time, past time, still time, to keep on walking, keep on talking, marching into freedom land. Amen and Amen.

*(Derek C. Weber, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org), February 25, 2021)*

## OPENING THOUGHT

“If White [United] Methodists continue to do nothing, the [United] Methodist system will continue to benefit White people at the expense of Black people.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might a Christian church benefit by examining its history regarding the U.S. slave trade, anti-Black

racism, legal racial segregation, and white supremacy? How might the congregation transform its mission and participation in its community considering its history?

2. How should the church address the income disparity between Black and White pastors and congregations in the interest of racial equity?
3. What do you see as the benefits to open itinerancy? Would your church be open to a cross-racial or cross-cultural appointment? What needs to happen in the church for CR-CC appointments to work better? (Elford, p. 130)
4. Based on your own personal experience, would you say that racism in the UMC has declined since the 1968 General Conference? How do you interpret the results of Robert Jones' statistical studies? (Elford, p. 129)
5. The author writes about the move many White Methodists have made to color blindness. What is color blindness? How is it different than anti-racism? Which concept do you believe is more effective in confronting racism? Why?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Save us, O God, from ourselves, from racism often cloaked in pious words, from the machinations of white supremacy hidden in calls for civility, from microaggressions thinly veiled in arrogance, from apologies when they don't give way to action,

from forgiveness without facing the truth,  
from reconciliation without reparation.

Deliver us, O God, from expecting siblings of color to continue to bear this emotional work, which is not theirs to do. Grateful for the long arc that bends toward justice, we pray: Grant us wisdom, give us courage for the facing of these days, by the power of the Spirit, all for the sake of the kin-dom that we share in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*("Prayers, Litanies, and Laments for the Commemoration of the Emanuel Nine"*  
[umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org), March 1, 2021)

# Session 8: Chapter 8 – The Contemporary Struggle against White Supremacy (Part 2) and Conclusion

# 08

## OPENING PRAYER

O God, there is so much misunderstanding and fear about the changing cultural landscape in our country. Help those who are afraid that their schools are being ruined by other cultures to see the rich new educational opportunities available as a result of the diversity. Guide those who find themselves in positions of power to embrace the diversity and differences found among their constituencies and create new and dynamic forms of power-sharing. Open the hearts of those who feel that their communities are being invaded and destroyed by the “other” so that they will find new ways of being in community. Help those who feel resentment because they think that the immigrants are taking all the job opportunities away from them, that they may trust in God's abundance. Amen.

*(Norman Hull, from Race and Prayer: Collected Voices Many Dreams, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org), February 26, 2021)*

## OPENING THOUGHT

“Most White people don't really want to know what to do about racism if it will require anything of them that is not inconvenient or uncomfortable”

*(Robin DiAngelo, “Forward”, Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, 2010)*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you start a discussion in your church about supporting the removal of past and current symbols of racism (the confederate battle flag, statues of former white racist politicians, etc.) from public spaces in your community? What are the challenges and how will you overcome them? What social capital is at stake for white Christians who support removal? For Black Christians?
2. Some white United Methodist congregations, in their history, have included members of white Christian nationalist and white supremacist groups in their church membership. What role should you take in confronting these groups and speaking against the harm they do? What should bishops and denominational leaders do to advance anti-racism as part of our corporate Christian witness and action?
3. How can your local church and/or annual conference center the voices and experiences of Black Methodists as your congregation and annual conference seeks to improve your policies and practices around worship, outreach, nurture, and Christian social action?
4. What do you think about the anti-racist actions taken by churches described toward the end of the chapter? What actions do you think your congregation might be ready for?



5. How do you react to Rahkim Sabree's comment about conditional anti-racists? Now that you've finished this study, what will you do to dismantle White supremacy? (Elford, p. 150)

## **CLOSING PRAYER AND BENEDICTION**

What can words do, O Word made flesh to dwell among us? What can words do in the face of such hatred, in the face of injustice, in the face of oppression? What can words do when it seems so much more is needed?

What can prayers do, O Lord who went to a lonely place to pray?

What can prayers do to change the plight of those who are being killed, pushed down, feared and hated in our society of imagined equality? What can prayers do when it seems so much more is needed?

What can one heart or mind or soul do, O God of whosoever will believe? What can any one do to change a tidal wave of contempt and neglect? What can one person do when it seems so much more is needed?

Remind us, Lord of life and of hope, that words can change a mind over time. Remind us that prayers can set feet to moving and hands to working. Remind us that one can find another and another and begin to build community, a beloved community that lives and speaks and prays differently. Remind us that change begins within and it begins now. Remind us.

*(Derek Weber, [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org),  
March 3, 2021)*



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