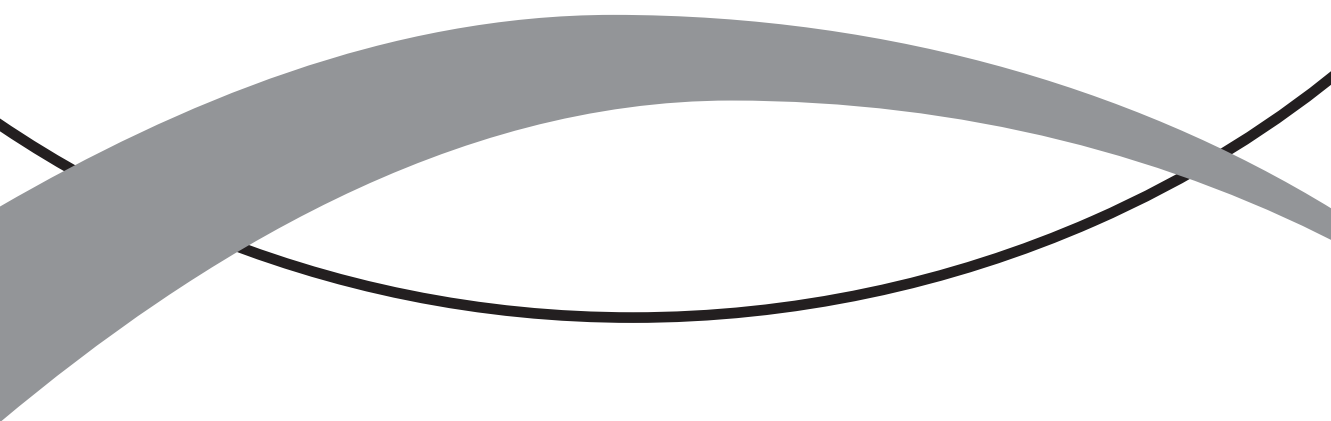


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**UNITING CHURCH ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE MIDDLE EAST**

Vol. 28, No.1



Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

<i>AssMin</i>	Assembly Minutes
<i>BOU</i>	Basis of Union
<i>CS</i>	Covenanting Statement
<i>RP</i>	Revised Preamble
<i>UCMC</i>	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
<i>UCAConst</i>	Uniting Church Constitution
<i>UCAREgs2025</i>	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
<i>UIW2</i>	Uniting in Worship 2

Institutions and Organisations

<i>UCA</i>	Uniting Church in Australia
<i>UAICC</i>	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
<i>WCC</i>	World Council of Churches
<i>ASC</i>	Assembly Standing Committee

This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

<i>UCS</i>	Uniting Church Studies
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Is the Basis of Union in Error Regarding John Wesley's Sermons?

Glen O'Brien

Abstract

This article argues that there is a dating error in Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union which states that 'the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793).' There were several editions of Wesley's sermons published during his lifetime beginning from 1746, but there is no 1793 edition. In the Model Deed of 1763, the 'Forty-Four Standard Sermons' were declared to be authoritative standards for Methodist preaching. It is most likely that '1793' was an error and that '1763' was the intended date, given the definitive status of the Model Deed. The existence of this textual gloss forms the basis here for a brief provocation on the need for a critical evaluation of Wesley's sermons for the Uniting Church.

Introduction

The status of John Wesley's sermons in the Uniting Church is somewhat like a vestigial organ. It exists but is no longer operational in any really meaningful way. Paragraph 10 of the Uniting Church's Basis of Union states that 'the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793).'¹ This was very important for Methodists at the time of union, especially since Methodist ministers were put on notice at their ordination that they would not preach any doctrines contrary to what was contained in them or in Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. Ordinands today do not study these sources, and Ministers of the Word do not feel under obligation to align their teaching with them. The historic attachment to them, even among Methodists, may have been somewhat totemic in any case. Because Wesley's sermons have long been in the public domain, they are readily available online, though these are often simply facsimiles of nineteenth-century editions, lacking any critical notes or scholarly introductions. I insist on students using the current critical edition but in the era of online learning and the proliferation of eBooks, such a rule is difficult to enforce. The *Forty-Four Sermons*, dealing as they do with what might be considered outdated soteriological themes, are perhaps not the most interesting of Wesley's sermons for today's readers. In any case, they constitute only about one third of Wesley's available published sermons. Sermons such as 'A Catholic Spirit' continue to appeal to ecumenically minded Christians and eschatological sermons such as 'The New Creation' and 'The General Deliverance' contain rich material for those with eco-theological interests.² Anita Munro is currently engaged in research on Wesley's *Standard*

¹ *Basis of Union*, para 10.

² John Wesley, 'Catholic Spirit,' in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2: Sermons II* (34-70), edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 79-95; Sermon 60, 'The General Deliverance' in Wesley, *Works* vol. 2, 436-50; Sermon 63, 'The General Spread of the Gospel' in Wesley, *Works*, vol. 2, 485-99; Sermon 64, 'The New Creation' in Wesley, *Works* vol. 2, 500-510.

Sermons and finds them to indicate unresolved tensions between Reformed and Evangelical streams within the Uniting Church.³ This ambivalence around the status of the *Sermons* is highlighted by what appears to a dating error in Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union. The demonstration of this error here will be used as a springboard to a brief provocation on the need for a critical evaluation of Wesleyan source materials for today's Uniting Church.

Identifying the Error

There were several editions of Wesley's sermons published during his lifetime, beginning from 1746, but there is no 1793 edition. Archive copies of drafts of the *Basis of Union* show that the date of 1793 first occurs as a hand written gloss in a typewritten March 1968 draft. There is no date included in the later May 1968 draft, but the September 1968 draft includes the 1793 date.⁴ In the Model Deed of 1763, Wesley's 'four volumes' of sermons and his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* were declared to be authoritative standards for Methodist preaching.⁵ It is likely, given the definitive status of the Model Deed, that the reference to a '1793' edition in the *Basis* is an error and that '1763' was the intended date. The 'four volumes' referred to in the Model Deed are the ironically titled, 'Sermons on Several Occasions,' a formula usually reserved for sermons preached at court or other distinguished places, rather than in the fields and marketplaces where Wesley normally preached to ordinary people. These forty-four came to be referred to by Methodists as the 'Standard Sermons'. There had been earlier editions with fewer sermons before 1746 and there would be later collections that varied in both number and in content. American Methodists came to subscribe to a collection of fifty-three sermons and there are 151 sermons in the current edition of the *Works*.⁶ Many of the later sermons are far more interesting than the Forty-four but are rarely encountered by casual readers. British Methodism (the stream from which Australian Methodism derives) in the Chapel Model Deed of 1832, engaged in a complex debate about which edition of the sermons (different editions had slightly different contents) should be seen as definitive and settled on the Forty-four. After seeking legal counsel to determine the matter in 1914, this was reaffirmed.⁷

In order to support my claim about the error, I have re-read Albert Outler's discussion of the various editions of Wesley's sermons in the 'Introduction' to *The Works of John Wesley vol. 1* (in the current critical edition of the *Works*) which may be taken as an authoritative treatment.⁸ There is no reference there to any 1793 edition of the Standard Sermons.

³ Anita Munro, 'Competing Appeals to Authority: John Wesley, the Basis of Union and the Nature of Faith,' forthcoming in *Creeds, Confessions and Contexts*, edited by Paul Goh and Geoff Thompson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2026).

⁴ Information provided by Damian Palmer of United Theological College, in a comment on my Facebook post of 9 October 2025.

⁵ 'The Large Minutes, A and B (1753–1763).' In *The Works of John Wesley vol. 10 The Methodist Societies. The Methodist Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 869–70. The text of the Model Deed is also found in, 'Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev Mr. Wesley and Others; from the Year 1744 to the Year 1789.' In *The Works of John Wesley, vol. VIII: Addresses, Essays, Letters* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 330–31.

⁶ Contained in the first four volumes of the *Works*, all edited by Albert C. Outler and published by Abingdon Press between 1984 and 1987.

⁷ John Lawson, *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), xix–xxi.

⁸ Albert C. Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 1, Sermons I: 1–33* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1–100.

I have in my library (as I am sure many UCA ministers do) the Epworth Press edition of *Sermons on Several Occasions* which was first published in 1944. My copy is the 12th impression of 1975 (very close to the time of union).⁹ This was likely to have been the edition on which probationers were examined at that time. Its title page states that it consists of 'forty-four discourses, published in four volumes, in the years 1746, 1748, 1750, and 1760 (fourth edition 1787); to which reference is made in the Trust-Deeds of the Methodist chapels, as constituting, with Mr. Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, the standard doctrines of the Methodist Connexion.'¹⁰ No mention is made of any 1793 edition here or in John Lawson's *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons* (first published in 1946) which was used by probationers in preparing for examinations.¹¹

Generative AI searches 'hallucinated' some misleading information, including the spurious statement that a 1793 edition of Wesley's Sermons was published posthumously, a claim for which there is no verifiable data in any published sources of which I am aware. It is likely to be a rather lazy 'AI slop' extrapolation from the fact that Wesley died in 1791 so any purported 1793 edition must have been 'published anonymously.' A rather better AI result provided by a prompt from Rod Benson, after the AI's 'thinking time' of 1 minute and 6 seconds (rather long for a response to a prompt by Generative AI), came up with nothing definitive. 'The best-supported explanation is that it is a misdating that crept into the drafting of the Basis of Union (or an early background paper) and then became conventional in UCA usage. The historically accurate anchors would be 1787 (4th ed.) or 1796–99 (5th ed.), not 1793.'¹²

No 1793 edition of John Wesley's Sermons exists. Even if it did, it would be inexplicable why Methodists in 1977 would have appealed to this as a standard rather than the 1763 edition established in the Model Deed and later legally verified by the British Methodist Conference. I am convinced that the 1793 date given in the Basis of Union is an inadvertent error, possibly a '9' replacing an intended '6'. Whose hand made the amendment remains unknown. That no one noticed the error at the time may be put down to the admittedly bigger issues that were on the minds of the architects of the Uniting Church.

Before considering the place that Wesley's sermons might have for the Uniting Church's present discourse, it is necessary to explore their precedent function in Methodism, including their legal status and their broad content.

The Authority and Use of the Sermons

The idea that a corpus of sermons could serve a norming function for preaching existed in Anglicanism before Wesley. He often referred in defense of key aspects of his Protestant theology, including justification by faith and the relation between faith and good works, to Thomas Cranmer's 'Edwardian Homilies' of 1547.¹³ Wesley's lay preachers had no formal education and were without the benefit of theological degrees

⁹ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1975). The dust jacket carries the title, *John Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons*, while the title page has *Sermons on Several Occasions*.

¹⁰ Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, title page.

¹¹ Lawson, *Notes on Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons*.

¹² Information provided by Rod Benson in a comment on my Facebook post of 9 October 2025.

¹³ The 1547 volume of Homilies was followed by 1563, 1567 and 1571 editions during the Elizabethan Settlement under Archbishop Matthew Parker. Gerald Bray, ed. *The Books of Homilies: A Critical Edition* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015).

or homiletical training. Some kind of preaching model and theological guardrail was necessary, though it did not entirely prevent from appearing the kind of theological novelties that intense periods of religious revival inevitably produce.

The standard set by the Model Deed of 1763 which established the Sermons and the Notes as authoritative sources, obtained right down to the time Australian Methodists entered the Uniting Church in 1977. Ministerial candidates in Australian Methodism were required to inform the Superintendent Minister that they had read and approved the Sermons, to pass an exam on both the Sermons and the *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, and to promise that if their views became contrary to these sources that they would 'quietly retire from the ministry.' At ordination, they were once again interrogated as to their adherence to these standards and were subject annually to the question of the District Synod, whether they still believed and taught 'our doctrines.'¹⁴ It does not appear to be the case that such stringent expectations were ever really enforced but they constituted a strong cultural affirmation of the value of Wesleyan source materials, something which has now entirely disappeared from the Uniting Church.

The standard sought was more theological than stylistic, since ministers were not asked to preach the way Wesley preached but to ensure that they preached the same doctrines. It is very likely that Wesley himself adopted a style when preaching that was very different from the cool, formal logic of the published sermons. There are many topics in his record of sermons preached that never found their way into publication. He preached without notes sometimes for over an hour. Once he was familiar with the developed theme of an often-repeated sermon he would formulate it into an essay for publication.¹⁵ Of course, by 1977 (and long before) many Methodists were, quite properly, addressing matters in their sermons different from those which exercised Wesley, yet they continued to be guided by their overall themes, such as the universal availability of divine grace, the centrality of love, and the transformative power of personal and social holiness.

The Sermons Today

Anita Munro is currently engaged with summaries of the Standard Sermons, revisiting the evangelical faith she encountered as a child and exploring at greater depth source materials that shaped the Methodism of her childhood. In her summary of Wesley's Sermon 16, 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount 1' (the first of Wesley's thirteen sermons on the Sermon on the Mount) she issues a trigger warning:

This material contains explicit evangelical Christian content, including strong statements of belief, calls to conversion, and language that may assume or promote a particular religious worldview. Readers who have experienced religious pressure, spiritual trauma, or coercive faith environments may find some sections distressing, intrusive, or emotionally activating. Proceed with care and pause if you feel uncomfortable.¹⁶

¹⁴ Edward H. Sugden, ed. *Wesley's Standard Sermons*. 2 vols (London: Epworth, 1921), 18.

¹⁵ Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 87–88.

¹⁶ Anita Munro, 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount 1: John Wesley – Sermon 16 – A Summary,' *Rainforest Ruminations* <https://anitamonro.substack.com/p/upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mountain> 3 March 2026, accessed 4 March 2026.

Such a warning might suggest that the evangelical theology in Wesley's sermons is so problematic as no longer to be helpful for today's Uniting Church constituency. As a counter-example, the United Methodist Church, having finally settled its half-century-long sexuality debates is currently undergoing a remarkable renewal of its Wesleyan ethos in its efforts to embrace its new Queer-affirming position.¹⁷ While the traditionalists who went on to form the schismatic Global Methodist Church often appealed to John Wesley in their rejection of LGBTQI+ inclusion, those who remained behind did the same from a progressive stance.¹⁸ Ashley Boggan has reclaimed John Wesley's decision to submit to being 'more vile' in his decision to engage in field preaching by developing material for a newfound 'Wesleyan Vile-tality' which includes a radical Queer-affirming Methodism.¹⁹ The Nazarene scholar, Keegan Osinski, has drawn on a representative number of Wesley's sermons to construct an affirming Wesleyan theology.²⁰ Clearly it is possible to derive quite distinct approaches from identical source materials. Deep exploration of Wesley's sermons and an appropriation of their key ideas is possible without simply reinstating the eighteenth-century ideas that underlay them.

One early twentieth-century edition that was very influential was Edward H. Sugden's (1854-1935) critical edition of 1921.²¹ Sugden was the first Master of Queen's College, University of Melbourne, and his work shows what can be done to take Wesleyan source materials and ask how they might be read in light of the operative theology of Methodists of a later age.²² While Sugden's exegetical observations are now, of course, quite dated, it is interesting to note how often he takes issue with Wesley's interpretive decisions, in light of evolutionary science and the liberal-evangelical theology of his own time.²³ On the other hand, he strongly supported Wesley's idea of 'entire sanctification' on the basis of prevailing psychological ideas.²⁴ In reference to Pope Pius' claim in the 1907 encyclical *Pascendi gregis*, that theological development ended with Thomas Aquinas, Sugden rejected the idea that Methodist theology could not go beyond John Wesley. Such an idea borders on 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit [who] did not close His [sic] work in 1791 when Wesley died. The Church that finalized its doctrine at any point in its history has signed its own death warrant.'²⁵ Sugden's approach remains a model of what can be done through a critical approach to Wesley's sermons that, not content simply to reiterate or distil their contents, engages with them in light of contemporary scholarship and the present needs of the church.

As for the dating error which is the cause of this provocation, given the constitutional authority of the *Basis of Union*, there may be no remedy available, and we will simply have to live with it. It is interesting to wonder why, over the almost sixty years between the 1968 draft of the *Basis* and now, nobody ever noticed the error. Could it be symptomatic, perhaps of a general neglect of Wesley studies in the Uniting Church? The official Methodist standards having been appropriately name-checked, the UCA moved on to its more pressing work of embodying its ecumenical future. The need for a critical evaluation of Wesley's sermons (and other

¹⁷ 'GCAH Announces New Center for LGBTQ+ United Methodist Heritage, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/gcah-announces-new-center-for-lgbtq-united-methodist-heritage/> 2 May 2024, accessed 4 March 2026.

¹⁸ Glen O'Brien, 'John Wesley's Catholic Spirit and United Methodist Schism,' *Holiness: An International Journal of Wesleyan Theology* 10:1 (April 2025): 20–30.

¹⁹ Ashley Boggan, *Wesleyan Vile-tality: Reclaiming the Heart of Methodist Identity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2025).

²⁰ Keegan Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021).

²¹ Sugden, *Wesley's Standard Sermons*.

²² For a collection of essays on Sugden, see Renate Howe, ed. *The Master: The Life and Work of Edward H. Sugden* (Melbourne: Uniting Academic Press, 2007).

²³ Glen O'Brien, 'Reading Wesley's Sermons in Edwardian Melbourne,' in Howe, *The Master*, 109–124.

²⁴ O'Brien, 'Reading Wesley's Sermons,' 118–20.

²⁵ Sugden, *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, vol. 1, 181.

writings) for the UCA is long overdue. Ecumenically oriented churches whose progressivism has emerged from their evangelical origins (such as The United Methodist Church and The Methodist Church of Great Britain) have set a precedent for the appropriation of Wesleyan thought to address present concerns. The UCA is in a position to do the same but can only do so through an intentional attempt to discern whether such source material continues to function as a Continuing Witness in its life.²⁶

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²⁶ In 2024, the 17th Assembly adopted *The Belhar Confession* (1986), *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) and *Laudato si'* (2015) as formally recognised by the UCA as documents of 'Continuing Witness' with study materials prepared for the use of presbyteries and congregations. "Assembly Recognises Continuing Witness," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, <https://uniting.church/assembly-recognises-continuing-witness/> 16 July 2024, accessed 4 May 2026.



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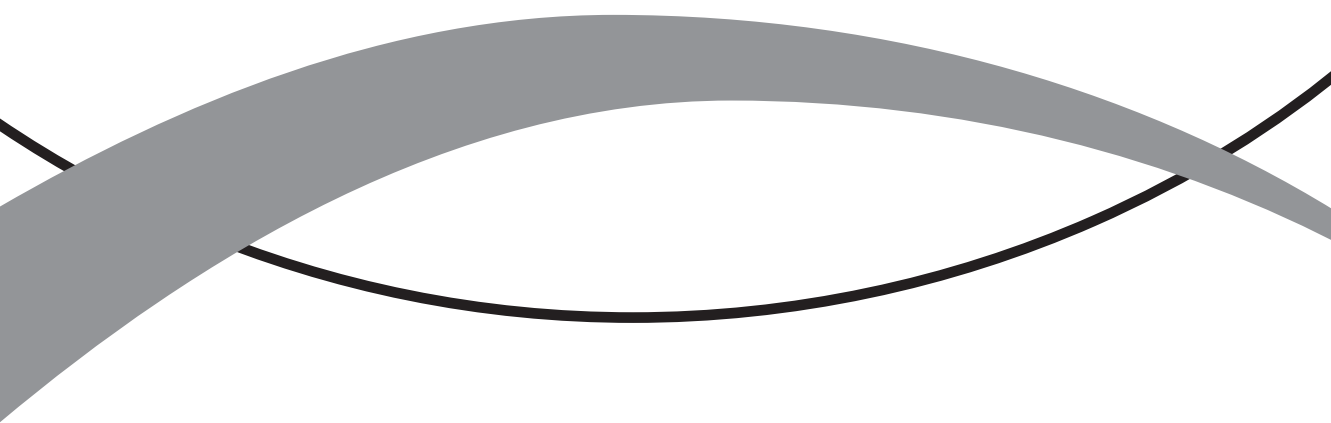
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