

**ABSTRACT**  
**GROWING TOGETHER:**  
**A STUDY OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**

by

Thad Harvey

This dissertation addresses the lack of discipleship in the Wrens United Methodist Church in the South Georgia Annual Conference. Discipleship small groups make a strong connection between discipleship and accountable, Christ-centered relationships. The research studied examples of discipleship in the Bible, Wesleyan bands and class meetings and their origins, and current ideas on discipleship from the broader Christian community.

The project trained twelve people through ten lessons to lead discipleship small groups. The ten lessons were held from September to November 2015 at Wrens United Methodist Church in Wrens, Georgia. All participants were active members at Wrens United Methodist Church and were prayerfully selected to participate in the training sessions. The project focused on training discipleship small group leaders in three areas: gaining a new understanding of discipleship, using the model for discipleship small groups, and forming and leading these groups. The study was qualitative, using weekly journals and pre- and postintervention questionnaires designed by the researcher to gather data. These instruments focused on discovering the practices that empowered the participants to be small group leaders who disciplined other people.

The study found the practice of group *lectio divina* to be an effective tool to help people build relationships centered on Jesus in discipleship small groups. The small

groups proved to be transformational in people growing closer to God and to each other.

Through the study the participants began to think about discipleship in terms of their relationships with God and others instead of beliefs and tasks. The people involved in the study also expanded their thinking and practice of prayer to include listening to God, regularly praying for others in the group, and praying for God to work through all aspects of their group life.

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A STUDY OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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by  
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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **PROBLEM**

#### **Introduction**

The broader Christian community is working to discover the meaning of being and making disciples. In *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard says the Church has focused on making converts instead of disciples (141). A much older fellow minister and former District Superintendent Ronnie Wills said he believed he and his peers have focused on making good church members instead of disciples. One of the most common definitions of a Christian disciple is a “self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ” (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 1813).

To narrow the focus on being and making disciples, this project is most interested in the relationships people form that help facilitate this process. Scripture does show Jesus’ disciples being the crowds that heard him speak. Instead, Jesus’ disciples were the people who followed him around, who shared life with him.

Early in ministry I pastored a small country church averaging about twenty three in attendance. The church leaders said they liked their church small because they knew everyone. In my third year, one of my key leaders lost his job of twenty-seven years when someone bought out the company for which he had worked for. After several weeks one of the other church leaders asked me how the man who lost his job was doing and wanted to know if he might be interested in a potential job opening. The troubling part of the story is that these two men had both been raised in this church from childhood were single and in their 50s. They lived a quarter mile apart with one house between them. They had both been very involved in the church their whole lives and were key

leaders. If I had to point out Christian men in the congregation, they were at the top of my list. I was perplexed that these two individuals had not been talking with each other right after the one lost his job.

I have witnessed this story in many forms throughout my years in ministry. In every church with which I have personally been involved, very few people really know each other. At one church I held home group meetings with six to twelve people, so we could get to know each other. Everyone was encouraged to answer two questions: How did you come to faith in Jesus Christ, and, what is one of your most powerful Christian experiences? A man turned to his wife and said, “Honey, I have never told you this before, . . .” and then told us all how he had come to faith in Jesus. They had already been married over thirty-five years.

These stories have made me aware of the problem many people have in our churches developing relationships in which they feel free to share their life and faith journey with others. These relationships do exist outside the bounds of most local churches. Alcoholics Anonymous does a wonderful job of structuring the meeting times and, more importantly, their sponsor relationships to make openness a key component. The relationship an addict has with his or her sponsor requires complete openness and honesty, where all struggles are shared. A church member who worked with people in recovery lamented not having a place in the church that he thought people could share openly about their lives or faith struggles.

In the beginning days of the Methodist movement, John Wesley created class meetings and bands for accountability and the sharing of personal aspects of life to help the participants go on to perfection. Wesley formed groups of three to five people called

bands. Most of the bands were all men or all women to help keep people accountable in their daily walk with Christ. They were supposed to meet weekly and report all their sin and temptation to each other. In a similar manner, the Walk to Emmaus provides an outside influence in the life of some of today's churches. After an Emmaus weekend people are encouraged to be involved in a reunion group to provide support as they live out their Christian faith. These groups are usually composed of three to eight participants and meet regularly to share their Christian life together. One of the focal points of each group time is sharing where they have been closest to God and where they have been farthest from the Lord in the last week.

In the current situation of many small to medium-sized United Methodist churches laity are not rising up to lead discipleship groups. In many of these churches, lay leadership is only descriptive of those who serve on committees, and most church committees are only focused on making administrative decisions. The laity need to be mobilized and equipped for a much greater purpose: to make disciples.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the study was to train selected small group leaders at Wrens United Methodist Church (WUMC) to use a discipleship model that incorporates Scripture reading, fellowship activities, missional projects, and personal reflection to help the participants grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and closer to each other in the Christian community. The participants needed to gain an understanding of the relational nature of discipleship, see the value in discipleship small groups, and gain the skills and knowledge necessary to be able to start and lead these small groups.

## **Research Questions**

Three questions guided the study. They are geared around discerning the specifics involved in being a disciple of Jesus Christ. These questions point to knowledge, attitude, and behaviors that helped or did not help people grow to a point of being willing to share their faith with others.

### **Research Question #1**

How did the participants understand their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to Christian community, and what were their perceptions about their ability to lead small groups before the study?

### **Research Question #2**

How did the participants understand their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to Christian community, and what were their perceptions about their ability to lead small groups after the study?

### **Research Question #3**

What components of the ten-week study were most helpful?

## **Definition of Terms**

Words and phrases find their best definition in context. Words such as disciple, community, and discipler are often understood differently. The understandings can be very broad and different or subtly nuanced. The definitions of these three terms as they are intended to be understood in this project follow.

A *disciple* is a person who is working to orient his or her life around the life and teaching of Jesus Christ by spending time seeking God through Christian practices such as Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, Christian service, and sharing faith with others. A

disciple is not simply a church member. A church member focuses more on supporting the institutional church through attendance, giving, and supporting programs or events, but a disciple focuses on being in relationship with Jesus and the people that make up the Church. A disciple works on growing into his or her responsibility to mature in Christian faith and to help others grow in their faith.

By definition a *community* is a group of people living in the same place together sharing similar characteristics. All churches fit the definition of community. In this project building community does not refer to increasing its size but in deepening community members' openness with each other. As evident in the introductory stories, people in churches and homes are living in a community that is often not very open. Building community refers to helping people grow closer together by sharing their lives and faith with each other, working towards being more fully known by others.

The last word that needs clarifying in this study is *discipler*. Disciplers are disciples who have begun to disciple other people. One key aspect of disciplers is that they take the initiative to keep in contact with the people they disciple. Another key aspect is that disciplers always disciples. Sometimes discipleship is done through peer relationships, and other times disciplers are still working directly with the persons who have disciplined them.

### **Ministry Project**

The project consists of evaluating a training method and discipleship plan to equip disciplers to lead their own Wesleyan-style discipleship small groups. The discipleship model was designed to help people in a small group come to know Jesus and each other

better and to empower and inspire the participants to take responsibility for their own Christian growth in order to share their faith with others.

At the church twelve disciplers were trained during ten lessons in how to use the discipleship model, how to conduct healthy small groups, and how to form their own discipleship small groups. The training sessions lasted 1 ½ hours per week and included reading Scripture together, praying together, learning skills to facilitate small groups, and serving and fellowshiping together. During the ten-lesson training period, one service event was planned for week seven and one fellowship event was planned for week nine.

### **Context**

The broadest context for this study was the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The goal was to help other pastors and laity learn the method by using the model with them as a group of preachers and sharing with them how this was implemented and its effectiveness at WUMC.

The secondary context is the local congregation. The goal was to structure this project in a way that the group participants would be able to become disciplers with their own group, drawing in more of the congregation. When others see the effectiveness of the model, they may also want to take part in the small group discipleship model.

The primary context of the study is the twelve people who are involved in the ten training sessions. As the pastor of WUMC I prayerfully invited all of the participants to take part in this study.



## **Methodology**

This study used qualitative methods through weekly journals and a short-answer questionnaire before and after the ten training sessions. The journals and questionnaires allowed the participants to express what they believed in their own words.

The pre intervention questionnaire helped determine what skills the group participants believed were necessary to facilitate a small group as well as their perceived ability to lead a group. The post intervention questionnaire assessed the participants progress by using the same questions from the pre intervention questionnaire.

Twelve participants met for ten lessons. Every week a teaching sheet was passed out to each participant for taking notes and for referring back to the information as the lessons progressed. After week two the group split because of the participants schedules. One group met during lunchtime and the other group met in the evening. In week three the groups decided on a service project for week seven. During week six the groups decided on a place and time to have the fellowship lesson. The other eight lessons were conducted in the WUMC fellowship hall.

## **Participants**

All active participants of WUMC were considered to take part in the study. I prayerfully selected twelve potential disciplers for participation in this study. This study included members and active nonmembers at WUMC.

## **Instrumentation**

Two instruments were used to measure the effectiveness of this discipleship model. The first assessment conducted at the beginning and end of the ten training lessons was the pre- and post intervention questionnaire. The second instrument was a

weekly journal as an e-mail response to one or more of three specific question sent to the disciplers to measure their weekly progress.

### **Variables**

Within this study were several variables. The dependent variable is the effect the model had on the participants. There were three intervening variables: differences in disciplers' faith, the interpersonal dynamics of the groups, and the openness of any particular group participant.

### **Data Collection**

The disciplers filled out the pre- and post intervention questionnaire at their first and last training session. Setting aside ten minutes during the session assured a 100 percent return rate. Throughout the entire process, the disciplers e-mailed answers to one or more of the three questions from weekly journals within two days of their group meeting. E-mail reminders were sent to all participants each week to help encourage the disciplers to keep up with their journals.

### **Data Analysis**

The questionnaire was studied to see what progress was made in the disciplers' understanding of making disciples through leading Wesleyan-style discipleship small groups. The questionnaire was also examined to see what progress was made towards the participants' level of commitment to making disciples of Jesus Christ. The journals were studied for common phrases and for an interpretation of the participants spiritual growth and sense of empowerment to share their faith and lead discipleship small groups.

## **Generalizability**

This study is unique to medium-sized United Methodists churches in the Southeast Jurisdiction. The limitations of this study included the interpersonal dynamics within a group that helped or hindered sharing. Other limitations of this study were the small sample size and myself as the only person analyzing the data. The effectiveness of this discipleship model is significant to other clergy in similar churches who are wanting to use a discipleship model. This study adds to the growing body of work for clergy in the South Georgia Annual Conference who are being asked to come up with their own discipleship plans. Models such as the one I used are helping clergy shift their focus to how they can more effectively be making disciples in their congregations.

## **Theological Foundation**

The theological discussion for the training of laity to run discipleship groups begins with a look at history through the ministry of Wesley. Wesley used James 5:16 as the scriptural foundation for his bands (77-78):

### **James 5:12-20 (NRSV)**

Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from

wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (Jas. 5:12-20, NRSV)

This passage lays out a guide for the way disciples can live in community with each other as they help one another draw nearer to God, refraining from sin and wandering away from their relationship with Jesus Christ. James illustrates how to live in an authentic Christian community with others as disciples wrestle with the sin they face, and strive towards sanctification, becoming holy as God is holy. James tells the Church that the body of believers is charged with the responsibility of entering into relationship with and pray for those who are suffering, sick, and sinning so that they might be healed. James does not claim these responsibilities are only a duty of the clergy but of the whole body of Christ.

James begins this section by giving the reader instructions for living as individuals in a community. Disciples should be the kind of people who do not need to have a signed contract to be held accountable to what they say and do. They should be the kind of people who say exactly what they mean without mincing words. The way disciples live with people should be based on how they live as a child of God alone and not on anything else. The simplicity and honesty of verse 12 greatly aids in understanding how to be authentic Christians.

In my experience I have met several people who have enough faith in the power of God to ask for church leaders to gather to pray for their physical healing. Having people want to gather church leaders to pray for their sickness that they claim is a product of sin in their life is a different matter all together. What is interesting is that seeking help for sin is a regular part of the church as seen in Alcoholics Anonymous.

The use of oil in this passage is one of those mysteries that I cannot fully explain. The text clearly states that the oil is not what heals the person, nor is it necessary to have many people praying. God is the one doing the healing, and for some reason God works through the effective prayers of the righteous. While community and ritual are not necessary for God to heal or forgive, something is holy about both of their involvement, and to neglect them is to neglect the full power of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of God's people. The whole act makes the community realize that they are necessary for each other, that they can be the physical body of Christ, one for another. The oil helps people know that God is doing something mysterious in this process.

Wesley used verse 16 as the biblical reason for having the Methodist bands meet and for what they should do when they met together. American Protestants have moved far away from the idea of penance in the Catholic church and accepted individualism as a Christian doctrine. Regaining the need to sharing struggles and temptations with a small group is necessary.

Verse 16 was also a text that the Catholic church used to support Penance. The Sacrament of Penance aided in bridging the divide between people and God since a priest was the only person who could hear confession and forgive sins. *Elders* are a body of godly people whom the church has set aside to provide leadership.

Verse 16 adds to additional understanding of Penance with the idea of mutual confession of sins. Disciples are called to openly and honestly pray for one another:

It requires enough humility to bow our heads to let another pray for us. It means honesty and the confession of personal and collective sins, without fear, with the freedom of love. It means opening ourselves to our brothers and sisters in the same way that we open ourselves to God in silent prayer. (Tamez 58)

The act of sharing life on this level greatly aids in building a sense of community among believers. It is essential that individuals' knowledge of each other's lives should not bring slander or gossip but truth, love, and correction. If people's sharing is for any other reason than building each other up, it can result in dividing a community.

Verse 16 also talks about the prayers of the righteous being powerful. It gives added emphasis to the call on every person in the community to be counted as a righteous person. Disciples can all be righteous people just like Elijah, who was only human.

Verses 14-15 address those who have a sickness that is debilitating. The biblical worldview drew a close relationship between sickness and sin; therefore, this section holds both physical sickness and spiritual sickness in tension. Appropriate tension is mindful that spiritual well-being is always more important than physical health. Verse 16 can be seen as setting up a regular practice of mutual confession to keep people from getting to the point where they are so sick they need to call the elders of the church.

Verses 19-20 seem to sum up this section, sharing the real spiritual dynamic present. "The epistle encourages the recipients to work to restore holiness and wholeness in the community rather than division" (Webb and Kloppenborg 106). The community that James is trying to form is one that will rally in support of the sick and show itself to be in solidarity instead of isolating those who threaten its possession of health and security (L. Johnson 222).

First Timothy 5:17 says that some elders were teachers and preachers. During the period of circuit riders in the Methodist Church, before the ordained clergy began locating, many laity were preaching and teaching in churches. The laity maintained the church because itinerant clergy could not always be present.

In Greg Ogden's book *Transforming Discipleship*, he points out that Jesus focused a lot of energy on training twelve disciples in order to turn the church over to them. He poses the question, "If we were to follow this model, what would it look like?" (139). Jesus does not limit the call to making disciples to a few specialists but it is a call for all people, everywhere (Matt. 28:18-20). Jesus' model leads disciples to rise up and share their faith and help others become followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus' model is not limited to transmission of information but includes a shared life, helping his disciples grow as they learn from his habits and from their own practice of ministry. Jesus' way focuses heavily on building relationships with the disciples. Training disciples to make disciples of Jesus Christ involves several components. First disciples must learn the meaning of being a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Then people need to be equipped with the relational skills and small group leadership skills they will need to build relationships and disciple others. Finally, disciples need someone who is continuing to disciple them through this process (Comiskey 700).

### **Overview**

The remainder of the dissertation is broken into four chapters. The second chapter is the review of relevant literature dealing with being a person who makes disciples. The third chapter examines the structure of the project in greater depth, particularly the research questions, participants, methodology, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 is an in-depth presentation of the data collected from the instruments. Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the research and examines implications for the application of the study in developing a model to train laypeople to make disciples.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Since I began this dissertation, the South Georgia Annual Conference has tried to make each church create its own discipleship plan. From conversations with fellow clergy and being a part of larger district conversations, the whole process has been very challenging for a number of pastors and churches. Many have given up out of frustration and done nothing, or very little, and other pastors had trouble getting buy-in with their churches. This push began three years ago, and most clergy are still challenged implement a discipleship plan. The idea of being a disciple and a church being intentional about making disciples is not something most of the leadership in these congregations is willing to do.

The purpose of the intervention was to train selected small group leaders at WUMC to use a discipleship model that includes Scripture reading, fellowship activities, missional projects, and personal reflection to help the community grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and to come closer to each other in the Christian community. My research sought to discover the meaning of being a disciple of Jesus Christ and to see what the church has done in the past that has helped make disciples. I particularly focused on Wesley's class and band meetings as part of the church's Wesleyan heritage that can be reclaimed and shaped to fit the current culture and needs. I am hopeful that through this project I can begin to create a church culture in which people can grow in their relationship with God and with others and become people who are making disciples of Jesus Christ.



## Disciples

A Conversation surrounding the idea of Christians as disciples through books, magazines, and conferences has been building for the past several years. In this conversation, some understand discipleship to be only for those who have a greater commitment to Jesus. This distinction causes a “two-level Christian experience in which only serious Christians pursue and practice discipleship, while grace and forgiveness is enough for everyone else” (Hull 124). Many Christians believe all that is necessary to be a disciple is to say the sinner’s prayer and be baptized, believing Jesus is the Son of God and saves them from their sin.

Some describe Christians as people who ascribe to certain truths Jesus taught. However, “believing without discipleship isn’t believing, it’s agreeing to a set of facts about a religious figure” (Hull 371). Too often, the test of faith comes down to people’s agreement with a set of doctrinal beliefs instead of the fruit people are bearing in their lives (376).

Discipleship is not limited to the beginning stages in a new Christians life or to a particular class taken outside of the worship service. Some believe that discipleship is about taking part in spiritual tasks such as Richard J. Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* or classes such as the United Methodist study entitled *Disciple I, II, III and IV*. Still others are inclined to label those who participate in the disciplines or programs as faithful disciples, thus also labeling the rest as unfaithful disciples. Often the twelve were not completely faithful and were still known as disciples (Wilkins *Following the Master* 30). Discipleship is not a task for elite Christians; it is the call for all who follow Jesus, who know Jesus as Savior and Lord. Discipleship is the way Christians follow after Jesus.

### **Christian as Disciple—Theology of Making Jesus Lord**

The concept of knowing Jesus as Savior is instrumental in Christian's lives as they seek forgiveness for their sins and begin a life-long relationship with Jesus. Living with Jesus as Lord has been a challenging concept for Christians to figure out throughout the history of the church. The idea of Jesus as Lord means disciples must submit their entire lives to Jesus' authority.

#### **Biblical Foundation**

Being a disciple is the most basic aspect of the Christian life. Christian disciples agree to follow Jesus and no other master (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 23). In Matthew 4:18-22 Peter, Andrew, James, and John left their work as fishermen and began to follow Jesus. They reoriented their whole lives around following Jesus. In Luke 14:25-33 Jesus describes the high cost of discipleship. Disciples must be willing to love him more than anyone and carry their crosses even to the point of giving up all their possessions. Jesus challenged the disciples to count the cost before deciding to follow him.

Jesus had many disciples, but the twelve hold a special importance. In Mark 3:13-15 (and also Luke 6:12-13), Jesus went up on a mountain and called those he wanted (i.e. the twelve) and named them apostles. Later, in Luke 9:1-2, Jesus sent out the twelve and gave them authority to drive out demons, cure diseases, and preach the good news. In this instance, these callings seem to be a result of their role as apostles. The dual distinction of the twelve as disciples and apostles clouds the understanding of what the life of a disciple should look like. This tension is held in balance, however, in Luke 10:1-11 when Jesus sent out seventy and gave them authority to proclaim the good news and heal the sick.

The story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-25, displays the high cost of discipleship. The man's question of Jesus is, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (v. 16). He had worked to obey the law yet was unwilling to answer the call to forsake his possessions. He was not willing to pay the price. The disciples' question at the end is, "Then who can be saved?" (v.25). This encounter strengthens the argument that salvation is not solely tied to assenting to right belief, or even right practice, but a deeper commitment to follow Jesus at all costs. This thought is vastly different than how most people are encouraged to come to a relationship with Jesus today. People are often asked to believe that Jesus died for their sins instead of being convinced that Jesus is worth following to the point that they would give up everything for him. The rich young ruler's encounter with Jesus reinforces the idea that being a disciple is synonymous with being a Christian.

For Christians, the premier example of a disciple usually focuses on Jesus' twelve disciples. Jesus' initial challenge to his disciples was to "follow me" (Matt. 4:19). The analogy of following Jesus is echoed in Hebrews 12:1-2; "Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." A disciple is regularly letting go of sin and continuing on a journey, following Jesus.

### **Review of Selected Literature**

True discipleship does not exist in degrees. It is the journey all Christians are called to travel and not a level of spiritual maturity for elite Christians. Discipleship, the widely accepted term that describes the ongoing life of the disciple, also describes the broader Christian experience. "Most Christians generally accept discipleship as the

process of following Jesus” (Hull 286). The word *disciple* is used at least 230 times in the Gospels and 28 times in Acts to refer to followers of Jesus in a general sense (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 26). Discipleship is a Christian’s whole way of life, and being a disciple should be synonymous with being a Christian. The Book of Acts points out that the name Christian was first given to the disciples at Antioch (Acts 11:26). Prior to this point in Acts the followers of Jesus were referred to as disciples. The great Christian Philosopher, Dallas Willard, writes about being a disciple::

A disciple is a learner, a student, an apprentice—a practitioner, even if only a beginner. The New Testament literature, which must be allowed to define our terms if we are ever to get our bearings in the Way with Christ, makes this clear. In that context, disciples of Jesus are people who do not just profess certain views as their own but apply their growing understanding of life in the Kingdom of the Heavens to every aspect of their life on earth. (*Great Omission* 135)

The Bible does not make a distinction between being a Christian and being a disciple.

Willard speaks to the reality that many Christians have only assented to certain views and have not answered the call to be followers of Jesus Christ.

The twelve disciples began to follow Jesus before they have any real idea who he was. Being a disciple is not a title Christians receive when they reach spiritual maturity but the decision to be an active follower of Jesus Christ. The beginning stages of a disciple’s life of following Jesus is reflected in Wesley’s trial bands. These trial bands were for people who were interested in learning about the Christian faith. The early days of Jesus’ disciples and Wesley’s trial bands were opportunities for people to experience prevenient grace, the grace that draws people to God, as well as time to learn about Jesus.

Because discipleship is a lifelong process and not something achieved like a Sunday school attendance pin, it is broad enough for people who have not lived up to the

expectations of being a disciple of Jesus Christ to still be called Christians (Ogden *Transforming Discipleship* 474). Paul voiced his frustration with one Christian community when he said they had still not moved from drinking milk to eating solid food (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Some disciples were drinking milk, others were eating meat, but they are all disciples.

People experience internal or external pressure to be perfect, to have life all figured out, or to have reached the goal faith. Life is a work in progress; faith is a journey. If a classroom of children is asked who can sing, the majority will raise their hands. If a group of adults is asked the same question, only a minority will say they do. People have let the idea of *specialists* creep into the way they practice their faith. Christians are not called to be star soloists impressing the world, but instead to proclaim that the Church is an orchestra of ordinary people trying their best to figure out how to live in the world (Boren 189). Disciples are not elite Christians, but people who are willing to follow Jesus even if it means they may make mistakes. The twelve apostles are great examples of people who followed Jesus and made mistakes.

Disciples' ability to accept their own imperfections do not give them approval to be uncommitted to following Jesus. John 6:66 clearly states that Jesus had some disciples who decided not to follow him anymore after they heard teaching that they thought was too hard. People can decide to follow Jesus, find the journey too hard, or not to their liking, and leave, choosing not to follow Jesus anymore. Discipleship is a journey that Christians are called to stay on no matter how arduous the path.

**More than a prayer.** In David Lowes Watson's book *Covenant Discipleship*, new light is brought to one of my favorite biblical stories, the Prodigal (Luke 15:11-32).

Watson says that the next day, after the celebrating was over, the son would have been expected to get back to work (35). The text does not mention what the youngest son did the next day because the story focuses on the excessively generous love of the father. Watson points out what would be the obvious conclusion to the story is that when someone is a son, he has work to do. This concept is often minimized in the Church's evangelistic efforts. The church tries to help open doors for people to leave the pig pens they are in and return to God who is ready and waiting to receive them back into the family of God. The church talks a lot about God's great love for all humanity, God's forgiveness, and the excitement of the celebration, but often fail to emphasize the need to get to work after being restored.

For many evangelicals, this conversation about discipleship has brought awareness to the idea that the church has been focusing on conversion and eternal salvation, and not paying enough attention to the life God is calling all Christians to live right now, right where they are (Robinson 23). United Methodists should understand this conversation, because the life of discipleship is summed up in the journey through prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Prevenient grace is the wooing grace of God that draws disciples into a relationship with him. Justifying grace is the grace from God that washes away sin and makes people right in God's eyes as they come into a relationship with Jesus. Followers of Jesus Christ receive sanctifying grace for the rest of their lives as they strive to "be holy as God is holy" (1 Pet. 1:16) going on to perfection in love.

**More than right belief or book knowledge.** Being a disciple of John or Jesus was not simply about learning material. The program-based model of church can too

easily turn the method of discipleship into a mere eight-week study. The industrial mindset of American culture has infiltrated the church and now Christians commonly think that if people will go to church, pray, read the Bible, and study it, they will magically become mature disciples. The transfer of information does not equal transformation of heart and life. The Bible does not claim that being a disciple means Christians should read their Bible and pray regularly (Willard, *Great Omission* 2587). Continued learning is only part of this stage in the life of a disciple.

First Thessalonians 2:8 says, “Not just content to pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did.” Discipleship includes sharing life, purpose, and a way of being. Paul uses fatherly imagery when talking about his process of discipling the Thessalonians: “We dealt with each of you like a father with his children, urging,... encouraging,... pleading” (Ogden *Transforming Discipleship* 1157). The writer of First Thessalonians emphasizes the need for parents to disciple their children, but the writer also points out the personal nature of discipleship relationships.

During my years teaching confirmation classes, I often talked with parents about their confirmation experiences growing up. They were thankful we spent more time talking about the details of a relationship with Jesus instead of spending the bulk of the time memorizing creeds, prayers, and key passages of Scripture as they did: “Faithful Christianity involves more than cognitive understandings of doctrines, creeds, and statements of faith. It is a way of life that is learned, experienced, and developed in community” (Csinos 61). The renewed focus on discipleship is bringing the need for a daily relationship with Jesus back to the foreground of Christian thought.

Discipleship revolves around the life of a believer following Jesus, actively listening to the Holy Spirit, and doing what Jesus says. It is not specifically memorizing the Bible and obeying the law but hearing the Spirit speak through them so disciples know how to follow Jesus.

**Being a follower of Jesus.** Wesley promoted the idea of sanctification, which is an instantaneous gift from God and the process that consumes most of a disciple's life. Holiness, as Wesley understood it, consisted of a lifestyle dedicated to Christ. He also "interpreted holiness in terms of love, and perfection in terms of perfect love" (25). The fruit of holiness is seen in people's actions, but the essence of holiness is a heart in love with God.

At the center of all Christians should be a heart yearning to live for the one who gave his life for all humanity. As believers grow in their relationship with God, using the means of grace, people find "a hunger and thirst after living right. It begins with a deep desperation in your soul that says, 'Give me Jesus or I die!' It begins with a relationship between the Lord and you" (Parrott 21). A disciple's life is focused on letting Jesus satisfy their deep hunger and thirst.

The disciple's life is the long journey of answering Jesus' call to "Come, follow me" (Matt 19:21). A disciple is more than a learner; he or she is a follower (Shirley 209). Discipleship is the process of transformation. It is not simply teaching information or trying to convince someone to be a moral person. Christian discipleship is the transforming process that occurs as believers fall in love with Jesus and allows him to renew their hearts continually. Scott McKnight talks about the differences in the members, the decided, the disciplined (31). Learning about Jesus, asking Jesus to be Lord



and Savior, is very different from taking up the cross and following Jesus as a disciple. If a person becomes a disciple a change in behavior, and life patterns will follow (Geiger, Kelly, and Nation 28). A disciple's life is continually being transformed into the image of the Creator. The challenge every disciple faces is to become like the teacher; thus, he or she is to imitate Jesus, minister in the same way he did, and become like him in the process (Chan and Beuving 16). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says the ultimate goal of a disciple is to be like the teacher (Luke 6:40). A disciple's life brings together faith and action, word and deed they we follow the master Jesus (Grace 150).

The concept of discipleship practiced in many United Methodist churches focuses on learning material with the hopes that an internal transformation toward stronger morality will occur: "Discipleship is not only an internal condition of believers, but also involves the active manifestation of their relationship with Jesus Christ" (Shirley 211). Paul uses the imagery of taking off the old nature and putting on the new in Ephesians 4:17-32. The transformation of the old self to a new one should include an outward change in behavior. Methodists know this process as the doctrine of sanctification and understand that they are on a lifelong journey of becoming perfect as God is perfect, focusing on being perfect in love. In many ways, discipleship is the tool or practical side of the process of sanctification. Steven W. Manskar defines discipleship:

[Discipleship] is looking at Christ, keeping our eyes on him, learning from him, and doing our best to imitate him. In other words, disciples are people who do the things Jesus did. They put into practice the things Jesus taught. They pray, fast and worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Disciples identify themselves with the poor, the weak, the strangers, the dispossessed and the despised ones of the world. (50)

Discipleship is the way a disciple lives following Jesus, living out the relationship with Jesus.

Throughout the book of Acts, the disciples fast, pray, and take time to focus on the needs of the poor in their midst. Acts 6:1-7, describes how the disciples increased in number and a problem developed with some of the widows being neglected in the distribution of food. The twelve called together the whole body and decided they needed to focus their energy on proclaiming and teaching the Word of God instead of tending to the widows. The people then chose seven disciples who stood before the apostles. The apostles laid hands on them and authorized and empowered them for this ministry.

Not all of the disciples were called to tend to the word of God, and not all disciples were called to oversee the distribution of food to the widows. Many different roles and functions exist in the church providing places where disciples to serve. *Disciple* is the general term, like Christian, while *apostle* is a distinction of a role or function, like preacher. The goal of being a disciple should be to follow Jesus by listening for his voice and doing what the Spirit says: “Discipleship from a Christian perspective is concerned with living an authentic Christian existence” (Frederick 556). For one person, living as a faithful disciple may mean being a teacher, while for the next it may be tending to the widows.

**Being like Jesus.** Jesus’ call on every disciple is unique, but some marks of discipleship that apply to everyone. John 8:31-32 says disciples must abide by Jesus’ word; John 13:34 says disciples must love others; and, in John 15:8 Jesus said his followers must bear fruit (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 120). The Gospel of John also contains five *just as* statements that universally apply to all who want to be disciples of Jesus Christ. John 6:57 says to live because God has given life to all disciples, just as he lives because God has given him life. John 10:14-15 points out that disciples must know

Jesus just as Jesus knows God. This does not mean knowing *about* him, but really knowing him. The next two *just as* statements come in John 15:9-10 and go hand in hand. Jesus said people must abide in his love, the same love he received from God. Part of abiding in this love means obeying God's commandments. He did not say, "Since you love me, please keep my commandments." Instead he said, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:10). Disciples are not going to be sinless like Jesus, they may not be perfect in that sense, but they are expected to strive toward becoming holy just as God is holy. The fifth *just as* statement in John talks about Jesus indwelling his followers, just as God is in him (17:21). In this same vein, after the resurrection in John 20:21, Jesus said, "As the father has sent me, so I send you" (Baker 39). The *just as* statements illustrate the many ways the followers of Jesus are called to imitate him as he follows God.

Jesus worked to bring about the transformation of the world. His disciples will naturally work for this transformation to happen in themselves and join Jesus in the continued work of opening doors for transformation in the world (P. Meadows, "Mission" 177). If disciples find that they are not willing to reproduce by discipling others, they need to ask themselves if they are really disciples of Jesus Christ.

The church needs to raise people out of a culture that is afraid to talk about its faith, empowering followers to be faithful disciples no matter what persecution may come:

Certainly the obedience Christ demands is great, the trials may be many, and the sufferings intense, but the true disciple really would not want it any other way. "To dodge these demands, trials, or sufferings is to leave the path of Christ and set out on a much more dangerous one. (Grace 153)

Jesus never promises his followers that discipleship is easy. Discipleship is costly, and discipleship is demanding.

The details of the discipleship process are taught through the Scriptures. John the Baptist's disciples were committed to learning John's teaching and way of life, as well as following his practices. In John 3:25, John's disciples questioned the Jews about purification, and in Matthew 9:14 they asked Jesus about his disciples' reason for not fasting. Questions concerning holy living and not the interpretation of Scripture are the focal point for disciples in Scripture (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 74).

The goal of discipleship is not convincing someone of right belief; it is training, equipping, and sending disciples out to make more disciples of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is a lifelong process that has several different evolutions but always involves a relationship. Discipleship relationships are evident throughout the Old Testament: "Most prominent among them are the relationships between Moses and Joshua, between Elijah and Elisha, and between Jeremiah and Baruch" (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 47). The New Testament highlights relationships like Paul and Timothy, in which Paul is discipling Timothy. This relationship illumines the need for a person to be disciplined by a more mature Christian. Also present is the example of Paul and Barnabas's relationship of mutual discipleship, illustrating the need for brothers and sisters in the faith to journey together. As disciples grow in their faith, they move back to the Paul and Timothy relationship, but this time as the one discipling others. Through this process people are never to make disciples for themselves, or become the disciple of another. Jesus is always the master (Copan 148). Disciplers should always be making disciples of Jesus Christ,

while also being Jesus' disciples. The primary goal in discipleship is to help people learn how to live with Jesus, hearing God speak and being willing to obey the Holy Spirit.

### **Patterns of Discipleship—Theology of Disciple-Making**

Making disciples is the primary mission of the church, yet it is one of the most challenging aspects of the Christian life. The church has used many different practices and approaches to fulfill its mission throughout history. The following section will explore the patterns of discipleship displayed in the Bible and in the history of the Church.

#### **Biblical Foundation**

Throughout the biblical story, relational discipleship occurs as a prevalent mode of training people. Elisha lived in relationship with Elijah and took over the ministry when Elijah was caught up in the whirlwind. Joshua stayed near Moses or in the tent of meeting, learning from Moses how to lead a difficult people and learning how to live as a child of God willing to follow and trust the Lord (Hull 478). Paul mentored Timothy, and Jesus spent three years in close proximity investing in the twelve.

In relational discipleship, spiritual growth happens naturally as people live with Jesus and each other on a daily basis. Sharing life provides the disciple the ability to grow in faith along the way, in the real world, learning truth and immediate application (Coleman, *Master Plan of Discipleship* 59). In Jesus' example we different components of his life with the disciples are evident:

Jesus taught the disciples (Mk 4:10-12), corrected them (Mt 16:5-12), admonished them (Mt 17:19-20), supported them (Lk 22:31-34), comforted them (Jn 20:19-22), and restored them (21:15-19). Jesus held up high standards of discipleship for his followers, but he was right there with them helping them to accomplish those standards. Since a disciple is always becoming more fully a disciple, the process of growth that

occurred in their lives is intended as an example and as an encouragement to the church. (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 119)

Jesus is always living in relationship with his disciples. Relational discipleship finds more biblical support through texts such as 2 Timothy 2:2, “And what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well,” and Acts 2:46-47 “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” Disciples are not to live in isolation. Discipleship is a communal process of disciples training each other.

The innovation of the printing press and the Reformation gave rise to a more academic method of discipleship without the relational component. The ability for common people to have their own Bibles, coupled with the theology of the Reformation, which said a person did not need to go through a priest to talk to God, fueled this approach to discipleship. Biblical support for academic discipleship is found in passages such as Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect,” and Acts 2:42, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The academic approach to discipleship gave rise to a systematic method that tended to focus more on right belief than right practice. Studying the Scriptures must lead beyond gaining biblical knowledge and coming to right belief. An academic study of the Bible coupled with an emphasis on application while being directed by the Holy Spirit naturally leads towards right practice, or holy living.

## **Review of Selected Literature**

This section examines a few historical shifts and developments in the arena of Christian discipleship. A historic look will bring understanding to the discipleship practices that work well and those that need refinement. My aim is to discover the necessary components for empowering the church to make disciples. In all of the methods that have been utilized through history to make disciples of Jesus Christ, the foundational component in all of them is a willingness to follow Jesus, learning from God and striving to grow in relationship with the risen Lord.

Heather Zempel, Pastor of Discipleship at National Community Church in Washington, DC, breaks down the major methods of discipleship into four categories: relational discipleship, experiential discipleship, academic discipleship, and personal discipleship. These four methods of discipleship will provide the beginning framework for an exploration of discipleship through history, then Wesley's efforts in discipleship and his influences will be examined. Wesley created a variety of ways for Methodists to grow as followers of Jesus Christ. His varied and evolving methods helped to reach people at all different stages in their spiritual growth. Wesley's varied discipleship practices are very helpful today because there is not a right method for discipleship for everyone. "By suggesting that a style of spirituality is the style for all, people lose sight of how they are being called by God to follow their own limited lights" (Muto and van Kaam 53). The challenge is to see how these methods help and balance one another..

**Relational discipleship.** First-century discipleship in the Jewish faith was expressed in a servant-master relationship (Matt. 10:24). When a disciple was accepted by a rabbi he would start as a beginner, who was not allowed to speak, and grow to a

place of being a full disciple of the rabbi, eventually being recognized as an equal with the rabbi (Wilkins, *Concept* 123). Rabbis did not simply teach facts and ideas; they drew their disciples into a new way of living (Csinos 51). Disciples in this model are bound to adopt the lifestyle, teachings, and values of the master because of proximity and intimacy (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 118). Memorizing the teacher's words, learning the teacher's way of ministry, and imitating the teacher's life and character are parts of the overall process of following a teacher (Hull 551).

The goal for disciples in this model is to become like the master. As disciples grow in their faith, they will naturally learn from the habits, beliefs, and practices of the person who is discipling them. The challenge as Christians, however, is not to make disciples of a person, but to make disciples of Jesus. Jesus does not call us to make disciples of themselves but to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Disciples are not to take the role of master; God alone fills that role (Hull 584).

First-century discipleship included the academic model of discipleship with the time spent memorizing the teacher's words and Scripture. The larger emphasis in this model is the amount of time a disciple spent with the rabbi. The Bible does not record any stories in which Jesus is teaching the disciples to memorize his teachings or Scripture, but the fact that the Bible contains four Gospels is proof that the disciples spent time memorizing Jesus' teachings and the Scriptures.

Through the relational method of discipleship, people grow closer to Christ as they grow closer to one another (Zempel). This way of discipling people was effective because learning through oral tradition was a cultural norm. This method is still very effective and has been an instrumental component of Church Multiplication Associates,



which have seen the growth of five hundred new churches in a few years because of their commitment to discipleship. Their discipleship model has centered around Life Transformation Groups, which consist of “a staple of Bible reading, story telling, personal accountability and prayer” (Hirsch 105). Discipleship groups can be the key component for providing community and accountability.

In an interview in *Christianity Today*, Tom Albin says he understands “discipleship to involve three interrelated dimensions: knowledge, experience, and a small group that can support me as I grow in grace and discover my place in the body of Christ” (Stafford 44). Discipleship small groups seems to be the predominant idea behind the church’s conversation on discipleship. It is only one component, but it is the weakest one, and I believe, the reason why Christian discipleship has been suffering. The ever evolving conversation in the church around small groups is deeply tied to the idea about being disciples.

**Experiential discipleship.** Other people groups were able to utilize different avenues of discipling people because certain innovations were more central to their culture. Religions like those of the Greeks and Romans utilized architecture, music, art, icons, and incense (Zempel). The experiential method of discipleship was central to the Israelites’ faith. Some examples are the use of the Psalms in worship and community life, the architecture of the Temple with the outer and inner courts and the Holy of Holies, and the sacrificial system. The temple objects and actions were things God instructed the people of Israel to make and do because they helped people understand who God was and how to be children of God.

When the Christian church became the official church of Rome, the experiential method of discipleship rose to the foreground. Paintings, sculptures, architecture, icons, liturgy, and other experiential practices became a prevalent vehicle for the transmission of the gospel. Stained glass windows were very useful to teach the stories of the Bible in a predominately illiterate society. During the Middle Ages, three primary influences affected the intentional discipling of the common person: the Eucharist, community life, and art (Hull 804).

One of the shortcomings of the Reformation is that Protestants often devalued many of the ancient practices such as the Eucharist, holy days, icons, and art. Protestants decreased the number of sacraments from seven to two, aiding to the diminished importance of some of the spiritual practices and completely stopping others (Hull 149). The Catholic and Anglican churches partake of the Eucharist weekly, and it is the central focus of the worship service. For many Protestant denominations, the sermon, or message, has now become the central focus their worship services. Many Methodist churches only celebrate communion monthly, and many Baptist or Pentecostal churches only celebrate the Eucharist quarterly.

Western and Eastern churches differ in some areas when it comes to experiential discipleship. Western settings often value lectures, small group Bible studies, and mentoring. Eastern Churches often connect better with symbols, ceremonies, and rituals (Song 260). Regardless of the method of discipleship, the believer becoming more like Christ is the intended fruit. God requires complete and total obedience, which is ultimately a call to holiness: “Be holy because I am holy”(1 Pet 1:16). Sanctification always requires disciples to walk with God in new ways. “If our encounter with God does

not require something of us, we have to ask whether it was really God we encountered” (Hirsch and Hirsch 77). Disciples should not leave encounters with God being exactly the same as when they entered them.

**Academic discipleship.** New innovations inevitably bring about other changes:

The linear arrangement of pews in churches did not exist before the printing press. The medieval church did not have pews—just a wide-open space for standing. “After the printing press, church seating started to mirror the page of a book. (Hipps 46)

The innovation of factories in the industrial revolution also shifted the approach to discipleship to mirror the production line.

Degree programs in academia and prepackaged Bible studies in churches, highlight the idea present in Churches, that if people go through a series of studies or classes, learn as set of information, then effective Christians or pastors will be produced. The academic focus at its worst divorces itself from application. When the goal in studying Scripture is to understand the original context, or who the author was, or some other good academic endeavor, it can leave people with a void, needing to hear a Word from God for their lives today (Maddix and Thompson 80).

The result of an academic approach that neglects the others is that the very heart of Scripture is taken away: “Scripture loses its functional authority when persons appropriate it for information alone rather than engaging it in potentially formative and transformative ways” (Maddix and Thompson 82). Academic discipleship is necessary, but it needs to include components that lead to application.

**Personal discipleship.** Personal discipleship has been a long-practiced method. It often begins with focusing on academic discipleship but moves past study for the sake of knowledge into personal application. This was the approach to spiritual formation used

by the Desert Fathers (Zempel). Monastic communities did well balancing the different methods of discipleship but always focused on personal discipleship. Bill Hull pulls out some of the basic monastic qualities or principles that are applicable today.

They chose a definite pattern of life—a life of humility, sacrifice, submission, and service. They saw the road to godliness as one of discipline. They saw value in living by a rule, sharing an agreed-upon life. They desperately needed each other to remain faithful. They practiced the disciplines that Jesus modeled—disciplines that freed them from slavery to their own body’s appetites and that connected them to God and reformed them spiritually. They applied themselves to serving others. The monastics committed themselves to restoring the way of Jesus to the church. (742)

The idea of personal application is not limited to monastic life. This same focus is evident from Jesus in Matthew 16:15 when he asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?”

This method of discipleship was instrumental in the spiritual formation of Wesley. The core of Wesley’s early formation was shaped in large part by his mother, Susanna. At one point in her children’s lives, she would spend one hour a week with each of her children, focusing on their spiritual formation and education. She tailored her instruction for each child according to his or her need (Henderson 38). Susanna’s approach was a driving force behind the forming of the Holy Club at Oxford.

I believe a rise in personal discipleship is happening today as a reaction to such a strong focus on academic discipleship. This method is prevalent with studies such as *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby, and *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Bill Hybels, which add personal application to reading the Bible. The modern expressions are still industrial in nature and lack some of the best personal aspects of having studies tailored for the person that were seen in Susanna Wesley’s practice. The ability to tailor lessons to the individual was possible because Susanna knew her children well. Components of

relational discipleship were also a vital part of Susanna's method. Each of these methods are distinct but rarely exist in isolation. The process of making disciples should incorporate aspects of all these methods as the church works to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

**A framework of three streams.** Hull outlines three streams of discipleship involved in the new monasticism: classical, spiritual formation, and environmental (Hull 163). According to Hull the “characteristics of the classic discipleship stream include one-on-one mentoring, a disciplined program of Bible study, Scripture memorization, and training in witnessing and speaking” (142). Today this stream is usually seen in the form of programs. These programs often emphasize academic and sometimes personal discipleship. People are becoming increasingly weary of practicing their faith by completing programs. Often, when people are done with a program they discover it did not produce a lasting change in the life. For many people, growth only occurs while they are completing the course, and when the course is done, their growth stops (Hull 145).

The spiritual formation stream has focused on recapturing ancient practices that were utilized by Jesus and his disciples, and the monastics communities. In Matthew 6 Jesus talked about aspects of this stream when he addressed the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These are some of the spiritual disciplines that were emphasized by the Jewish community to help people focus on God.

The Desert Fathers, an early monastic movement, came into being as a response to the perceived spiritual slackness of the church in their time. Their desire was to get away and seek God in solitude (Hull 733). They focused on cultivating a life of humility, sacrifice, submission, and service. According to the Desert Fathers, the way to follow

Jesus involved discipline that was practiced by living by a common rule with the support and accountability of the community. The practice of the disciplines that Jesus modeled were central to their desire to be free from the desires of the flesh, thus helping them to be more intimately connected to God. Some of the early monastic communities focused on remaining completely separate while others also incorporated the practices of serving others both inside and outside of their monastic community (745).

In Exodus 20 God spoke in ways perceived as a great storm. That imagery is countered in 1 Kings 19:11-13 with Elijah standing on the mountain. God did not speak through the strong wind, earthquake, or fire but through the sound of sheer silence. The current fast-paced society often only slows down to hear God if he is speaking in attention grabbing ways. “One of the spiritual formation stream’s greatest strengths is that it causes us to slow down twenty-first-century life long enough to ponder what’s going on in us and around us” (Hull 156). The practice of the spiritual disciplines helps to quiet the desires of the flesh and open peoples hearts to listen to the Spirit of God.

At the forefront of the spiritual formation stream is Renovaré, a group founded by Foster. In the late 1970s, Foster’s book, *Celebration of Discipline* brought the idea of practicing spiritual disciplines back to the forefront for many in mainline American churches. Foster discusses twelve disciplines that are divided into three categories. The Inward Disciplines are meditation, prayer, fasting and study. The Outward Disciplines are simplicity, solitude, submission and service. The Corporate Disciplines are confession, worship, guidance and celebration (v). Most of these disciplines are still lacking in the lives of many members of United Methodist churches in North America.

James Bryan Smith, part of the Renovaré group, wrote a workbook designed to help form small groups. These groups have continued to build on the foundation that was played by the Moravians' and the Wesleyans in their bands. The workbook is designed to help a spiritual formation group begin with eight specific sessions, including a balanced vision of faith and practice, the prayer-filled life, the virtuous life, the Spirit-empowered life, the compassionate life, the Word-centered life, and the sacramental life (7-8). The final session is aimed at helping spiritual formation groups find a method for continuing to gather together each week. As good as the resources are, the church still fights the tendency to treat them as yet another program to complete rather than working to reincorporate these principles or disciplines into everyday life.

The third stream is the environmental stream. This can be seen as psychological discipleship or relational discipleship. The idea of *community* is essential to the heart of the environmental stream:

In essence, this movement encompasses the ways people get along. One of the least-developed concepts in discipleship has been how the environment of a group determines what grows or dies within that environment. The most important issues in spiritual transformation are the presence of acceptance, integrity of relationships, and trust. (Hull 158)

Discipleship always involves relationships and the dynamics of those relationships are a critical factor in people's spiritual growth.

Hull introduces the idea of a new monasticism. He believes these three streams are coming together to create a well-rounded discipleship that has "the potential to transform the church in the next twenty-five years" (164). Hull's three streams carry many of the same emphases as the four methods of discipleship that began this

discussion. Moving forward the desire is to find a balanced approach to making disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Jesus as teacher.** One of the main avenues of learning from Jesus as the teacher is through the Bible. The Bible has become less utilized for discipleship and spiritual formation and “increasingly relegated to the realm of Christian Doctrine” (Maddix and Thompson 80). When the Bible is treated as a rule book or map for a Christian lifestyle its power is minimized, voiding the relationship with Jesus that the Holy Spirit brings as the text enters into God’s people. If the Bible is indeed the living Word of God, and Jesus is the teacher through it, then the question is how are God’s disciples going to respond to it (Grass 67).

**The United Methodist Church in the United States.** I want to focus in on the state of the United Methodist Church in the United States. Generally churches have ceased becoming places of making disciples for Jesus Christ. The church is viewed by many people as a place that exists to meet their individual spiritual needs, according to their preferences for music, preaching, and ways the church can serve their families (Hirsch and Hirsch 139). A large contributor to this mentality has been the rise of consumerism in American culture.

To meet this unquenchable thirst, the church has turned to the experiential method of discipleship. Worship services, and many age based ministries are focused on entertainment. This drive is partially due to the reality that the church is now competing for people’s attention in the world. Some churches go as far as talking about providing a Sunday morning experience instead of a worship service. The reality is that most people I



have encountered as a pastor in traditional services are treating their services as an experience, too.

The form of worship may be evolving, but a lot of energy is still being invested in providing a vehicle for people to experience God in a large group setting. In most Christian venues, the church is focusing its energy on playing music that appeals to their audience and having a preacher deliver a sermon in style and in content that will make people want to come back and hear the music and preacher again. The church's focus has shifted to appealing to peoples' consumer interests instead of working to make disciples of Jesus Christ (Hirsch 106).

The church has become a company trying to create brand loyalty and attract people that will come and support their church, their worship service, and their staff. Churches seemingly try and convince people to join so they can exist and draw more people in. Jesus knew that the crowds that were attracted to his charismatic presence were going to be the first to fall away when the demands of discipleship became difficult (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 643). The same problem occurs when the church is centered the around the personality of the pastor, with the focus on how they can get more people to come hear the pastor. The end goal in mind is to have more and more people coming in. What is lacking is the understanding that once people have a relationship with Jesus they need to focus more on going out than coming in: "A church that is turned in on itself will surely die. But a church that is intentional about its primary mission, a church that is spun out in loving service into the world, rediscovers itself day by day" (Chilcote 95). Disciples are called to be working to fulfill the mission of God, reaching out to the world.

Attendance at Wesley's class meetings was required if members wanted to go to the society meetings. After three absences, members would not be issued a ticket granting them entrance to the larger society meeting. This same model of Sunday school classes feeding larger worship services continued to exist for years in the Methodist Church. The class meetings have lost their potency and no longer exist as Wesley intended. Churches are now trying to persuade people who come to worship services to join Sunday school classes or other small groups.

Wesley's class meetings were also highly structured to provide community and accountability for its members. A frequent occurrence today is for Sunday school classes to be mini-worship services, complete with singing and someone delivering a lecture-based lesson. Sadly, the current system is long overdue for revitalization:

In 1870, the Sunday school committee reported that the "whole system of Sunday school instruction may be greatly improved. Practically, we are without a system, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that each one of our Sunday schools is a law unto itself."(McDonald 189)

The Sunday school structure is no longer accomplishing the goals that Wesley intended for the class meetings. The current approach to Sunday school has become part of the inward focus of the church.

Christians are called to go out into the world, but the church's structure and emphasis is on getting people to come in and support what happens inside the walls of the church. The goal is for the worship service to grow the inner life and lived out faith of Christians: "The result is that we have multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less with others" (Willard, *Great Omission* 1103). One potential reason

for the failure to make disciples is that the method and emphasis does not match the message.

For many Christians the sermon on Sunday is their only time of academic discipleship. Preachers often work to make their sermons applicable to life, thus attempting to incorporate a personal component into the congregants' life with Jesus. Most worship services do not incorporate the relational aspect of discipleship. In my perception, the belief that participating in the Sunday morning service adequately meets these three discipleship methods in a person's life is wrong. Clergy, as the leaders God has established in the church, have let themselves become little more than vendors of religious goods and services (Hirsch 110). Greg Ogden comments about the general perception he has of many worship attenders:

Worshippers see it as the responsibility of those on stage to provide an engaging, meaningful and entertaining show, while it is the worshippers' job to give an instant review of the worship service as they pass through the receiving line after worship. Doesn't it seem odd for people to make evaluative comments like "Good sermon, Pastor," or "I enjoyed the service this morning" about the worship of the living God? (Ogden *Transforming Discipleship* 207-10)

When worshippers evaluate the worship service they are taking on the role of a consumer judging the quality of goods or services received. At the root of the consumer mind-set is how people have allowed their senses to be dulled to materialism in the church. The desire for things diminishes the desire for God, both for the things of God and for doing the work of God. This mind-set causes churches to think that becoming bigger and providing more elaborate programs and services means they must be doing well. Building size and numerical growth have become a primary goal in many churches (Hull 766). The

church expects programs to make disciples of Jesus Christ, but only people can make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Programs are often a safe venture for people who do not want to pay the price of personally investing in the lives of others to help them grow closer to Christ (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 657). The program-based approach believes if a person goes through a program, or learns a set of material, they are then a disciple. The problem is that being a disciple is not about learning a set of information, or changing particular behaviors. Being a disciple is something that transforms a believer's heart, mind, and soul, which in turn changes their behavior (Geiger, Kelley, and Nation 18). One negative factor in all programs is that most churches do not have a system of how they plan on making disciples or a clear process to help people mature in their faith (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 514).

As leaders of the church, pastors are now often relegated to "program developers, administrators and caregivers" (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 376). Consumer-driven churches stand in judgement on pastors as to how well they are entertaining the congregation and how frequently they are visiting the elderly and sick (624). Laity are not solely to blame for this problem. Often clergy have accepted this role and promoted it themselves. Pastors face the challenge of how to begin training, equipping, and empowering their congregations for the work of ministry. Ogden contends that if pastors are going to lead the church, they need to move from seeing their primary role as teachers and caregivers to disciple makers that equip the laity to do the ministry of the church (Ogden, *Unfinished Business* 126). By living into their current role, many pastors have

made the church dependent on them instead of training and releasing disciples who are dependent only on Jesus.

Most of the leadership positions for the laity in United Methodist churches are for the roles that are more decision making and policy setting than servant oriented. Often the most influential leaders are the most vocal decision makers. When these leaders are not making the mission of the church, making disciples, their primary personal objective, it is easy to understand why the church is undisciplined (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 397). Most of the opportunities offered to people are institutionally focused and do little to work towards the mission of making disciples. M. Scott Boren talks about the inward focus the institutional church encourages for its participants:

All of their volunteer time is spent working in committees, singing in the choir, leading youth events for kids in the church, teaching in Sunday school, and attending up to three services per week. Sometimes it seems like the more committed to God a person becomes, the less he or she is involved with the neighborhood. This seems to be especially true of those who are paid employees of local churches. (1482)

The church has focused on sustaining the institution of the church instead of seeing the structure as a tool to fulfill the mission.

*Missional* has become a key word in broader conversations in the church:

“Missional churches see their primary function as one of actively moving into a community to embody and enfold the word, deed, and life of Jesus into every nook and cranny” (Brisco). In order to help the church shift into a missional mode of operating, church leadership needs to be encouraged to ask how they can be authentic Christians, both as individuals and as a body within their community (Kraus 12). This change can be a challenging shift because the church must reorient itself and decide that the congregants do not exist to keep the church structures going; rather, their church exists to be a light

for Jesus in their community. This kind of transformation can take place if the church is empowering the laity for the work of the church in its community. The biggest and most lasting impact is likely to happen if the pastoral leadership can act as a catalyst to create a culture where the laity decide they want to change and where they are empowered to discover ways to work and learn together to share Jesus in their communities (Sims and Lopes 63).

A conversation about the concept of a missional church must include talking about missional Christians. The institutional church starting to think missionally is good, but this transition will happen naturally if the followers of God become missional in the way they live out their faith. Missional spirituality happens when people share the love of God with their neighbors. Missional spirituality calls the body of Christ to love God and love their neighbors as they invite them to come to God (Helland and Hjarlmarson 284). This way of being is not broadly taught or accepted by most people in South Georgia Methodism.

The Sunday morning service is the main place most congregations receive any discipleship training. The lacking component in the Sunday morning experience is relational discipleship. Through a look at the historical movements of discipleship, the relational method has been the hardest one to keep in balance. Relational discipleship is happening in pockets of the church through cell groups, one-on-one discipleship models, home groups, house churches, a variety of other small group models and even in some Sunday school classes. Relational discipleship is a key component of the Walk to Emmaus' reunion groups. These groups are encouraged to be small, to meet weekly, and to share their close moments with God as well as the moments they have denied Christ.

Many of these groups are involved in service activities and focus on corporate and personal study of the Bible, even though service in the groups is not part of the Emmaus model.

Wesley believed that small groups were essential for the growth of the person. One of the keys to Wesley's success was that he called people to a high level of commitment. The lack of commitment has aided the decline as churches have moved away from their original missional ethos and passion for evangelism and making disciples. Much of people's faith has "degenerated into mere religious legalism maintained by institutions, rule books, and professional clergy" (Hirsch 103). The church needs to rediscover its God-given mission and the power of Christ to be disciples in the world.

Wesley's fear for the people called Methodists was that they would have the form of religion without the power. The power of religion comes only from the living Christ. "Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ" (Bonhoeffer 59). Discipleship small groups are not the only way for people to live as disciples, but they are a neglected and needed component in the plan to make disciples for the transformation of the world. My fear is that the church today will ultimately respond as did the church in Wesley's day with a relatively small number of participants in these types of groups.

Ogden references Cal Thomas in discussing the negative results of an undisciplined church:

Cal Thomas, a Christian syndicated columnist and social commentator, calls Christians to look at the quality of our discipleship instead of directing our indignation at the moral decay. He writes, "The problem in our culture ... isn't the abortionists. It isn't the pornographers or drug dealers or criminals. It is the undisciplined, undisciplined, disobedient, and

Biblically ignorant Church of Jesus Christ.” (*Transforming Discipleship* 189-91)

One of the largest problems in the church is that Christians do not take on the responsibility for passing on their faith. This happens in part because they are undisciplined, undisciplined, disobedient and biblically ignorant. Another factor is that many people in South Georgia Methodist churches assume the job of passing on the faith is only the job of the pastor, youth pastor or Sunday school teachers. Many churches focus on evangelism, teaching, fellowship, and worship, but neglect a focus on making disciples. If the focus is not on making disciples, the rest of what the church does will be hollow and lifeless (Shirley 212). The same is true of the attempts at embracing the current technology in worship or modes of communicating information to people through the Web. The church can use all the current means and methods, but if it is not focusing on people discipling people, ultimately it will not matter (P. Meadows, “Mission” 176). The priesthood of believers must rise up and take on the role of making disciples to which they have been called. People are not generally brought to know Jesus through the structure of the institutional church. They are brought into a relationship with Jesus Christ by other disciples who love God and love their neighbor as themselves (P. Meadows, “Wesleyan Wisdom” 1). Church programs can be useful, but programs can never be a substitute for relationships. “The gospel is not just a message we bring, but a life we live. ‘The medium is the message’; and, for Wesley, God’s chosen medium is the witness of ordinary people whose lives are made extraordinary by the holy love of God and neighbour” (Meadows 2). The current program-driven, attractional model of church does not fit the relational, missional model of discipleship that Jesus lived out with the twelve apostles. The current model does not fit the laity empowering, relational discipleship that



Wesley advocated. The church would be well served to examine the structure Wesley created and the heart behind it to help reclaim the meaning of being Jesus' disciples.

### **Watching Over One Another in Love—Wesleyan Theology of Accountability**

John Wesley worked to develop a structure for Methodists to help them grow in their relationship with God. Wesley knew people must become a part of a smaller group to remain accountable for their spiritual growth. The system of societies, classes and bands provide the foundation for the early Methodist movement.

### **Biblical Foundation**

At the very beginning of Wesley's Rules for Bands-Societies, he quotes James 5:16, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." This verse was the scriptural foundation for Wesley's small groups. The structure of the Anglican Church did not provide a way for believers to build relationships with each other to help hold them accountable. Wesley knew that preaching alone was not keeping people firmly rooted in a relationship with Jesus in which they were going on to perfection. Because many people lack long-term self-discipline, they need others to help hold them accountable (Hull 241). The church has been made for community to help each other. Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Discipleship groups were Wesley's tool for helping people go on to perfection.

### **Review of Selected Literature**

Wesley's ministry was about pursuing one goal—spreading scriptural holiness. He worked towards this end through preaching and the use of bands, classes, and

societies (Wesley 24). Wesley was a prolific preacher, but he knew that preaching alone was not bringing about lasting transformation:

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no *regular societies* [original emphasis], no discipline, no order or connection. And the consequence is that nine in ten of the once awakened are now faster asleep than ever. (Ward, Heitzenrater 21:424)

Wesley's desire was to have people awakened to God and then to grow in their relationship with Jesus. Field preaching alone was not accomplishing that goal. Wesley let his desired end shape the way he structured his ministry. For those who were Methodist, the desired result was to have "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him,... [being a people who] loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength" (35). Methodists should be people who have the joy of the Lord in their heart, and a soul that calls to God, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee my God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever" (35). Wesley molded a structure to support the goal of forming Christians who would be passionate as they lived out their faith.

Wesley is known for his structure of small groups that were at the bedrock of the Methodist revival. Wesley knew that preaching alone was not causing long-term change, and he found a way to help converts continue growing in the faith through God's sanctifying grace. The solution to this problem came through weekly small group meetings where people could help hold each other accountable for their discipleship (D. Watson *Covenant Discipleship* 38). Wesley's bands predated the first class meetings or

official Methodist society. In his journals, the first Rules for Band-Societies are found on 25 December 1738, and his first instructions for the class meetings are on 15 February 1742.

Accountable living had its roots with his mother Susanna and the principles she instilled in him. When Wesley went to Oxford, he took these principles and started the Holy Club. This was his first attempt at a small group that would help the participants stay accountable to their Christian growth and service:

The Holy Club meetings included prayer, Bible reading, sharing the experiences of the day, and encouraging one another. Their activities focused on three areas: the imitation of Christ, evangelism, and doing good to those in need, especially those in prison. (Hull 955)

The methodical nature of the Holy Club drew the nickname Methodists from outsiders.

Several people and groups influenced Wesley as he worked to reform the Church of England. One of his influences was French Catholic nobleman, M. de Renty. De Renty had “little gatherings of devout people who met weekly for prayer, reading devotional books, distribution of food to the poor, and discussion of personal religious matters” (Henderson 49). For de Renty, Christian service was the context in which people grew in personal holiness (Henderson 50).

*The County Parson's Advice to his Parishoners*, anonymously written, was also influential for how Wesley conceived and formulated his ministry. In Wesley's journals he records that the book “recommended the practice of mutual help to ‘the good men of the church’ as the most effectual means of supporting ‘our tottering and sinking church’” (5). He found hope that if he could get the people of the church to meet together for mutual help, accountability and study that the Church might turn around.

On Wesley's trip to America, he met the German Moravians and was greatly impressed with their faith, particularly the peace they had in the midst of the storms at sea during their trip. After he returned home from Georgia, he continued his relationship with the Moravians and was strongly influenced by their approach to discipleship. Before looking at the Moravians discipleship groups, their predecessor, Philip Spener is important to examine.

Spener, known as the Father of Pietism, heavily influenced Count Von Zinzendorf and the Moravians. Spener encouraged people to read and discuss the Bible in the *collegia pietatis* or small groups. He also encouraged members to read the Scripture privately and to read books of the Bible from start to finish so they could be understood the way they were written. He wanted small groups to run according to 1 Corinthians 14:26-40: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up." Spener's small groups also focused on helping the group members live out a life of faith and holiness and stay committed to God (Hull 917). Spener's method blends aspects of relational, experiential, academic, and personal discipleship:

Spener himself soon ascribed more and more importance to the *collegia pietatis*, which were given only passing attention in his *Pia Desideria*. If the church was to be renewed, he felt, a beginning would have to be made with the remnant of true Christians in every congregation. These had to be gathered and edified in private meetings in order that they might become a leaven to leaven the whole lump. As a matter of fact, such meetings were soon being held in many places. Contrary to Spener's intention, they sometimes became divisive. There was a tendency for the meetings to develop into little churches within the church. (Spener 307)

Spener was one of the godfathers of Count Zinzendorf who formed the Moravian community in Herrnhut, a small village in Germany, into bands or small groups. These

bands were geared to encourage interaction in the community rather than to provide personal spiritual formation (Henderson 59). Personal formation was an obvious by-product, but it was not the focus of the groups or the reason for their formation. In the Moravian bands, no teaching was allowed. They were limited to “intimate sharing, confessions and personal reporting of spiritual experiences” (60). The foundation of the Moravian bands was a great beginning point for Wesley’s small groups.

Wesley was impressed with the Moravian bands and first used them during his mission work in America:

Both at Savannah and Frederica a religious society was first formed, and then the most serious members of the society were divided into smaller groups “for a more intimate union with each other”, and the groups met three times weekly. (Davies 9:9)

Upon his return to England the bands became instrumental to his own work in reforming the Church of England.

**The Fetter Lane Society and The Foundry.** In May 1738 Wesley formed a new religious society that eventually became the Fetter Lane Society. They met weekly for preaching, either from Wesley or a Moravian leader, Peter Bohler. The goal of the Society was described simply. Societies were groups of people:

“having the form, and seeking the power of godliness”, 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. (Davies 9:69)

The Fetter Lane Society was distinct from the rest of Wesley’s attempts at classes or bands in that participants did not have to be members of the Anglican Church to be part of it. The only requirement was that the participants wanted to grow in love, and holiness. Although he insisted on members striving for holiness in some rigid ways, he also

understood holiness in terms of love (Davies 25). The society members had to display a strong Christian commitment and heart bent to God.

Wesley is broadly known for his use of class meetings, but before the class meetings were created, he used the model of bands to help people covenant together to be honest to God and with each other. Initially Wesley's bands were for people who were consciously going on to perfection. A band was voluntary and small, to help achieve a level of intimacy that is difficult in a large groups (Oden 4:28). Bands were not to consist of fewer than five or more than ten persons.

Wesley's use of bands in England began simultaneously with the Fetter Lane Society. Twice a week the members of the Fetter Lane Society would get together in bands led by a layperson. Their purpose for meeting was to answer prescribed questions to each other dealing with the state of their souls. The other group members were to respond with encouragement, suggestions, or support (Henderson 66). Wesley gave very specific instructions for the Fetter Lane Society on 1 May 1738:

1. That we will meet together once a week to "confess our faults one to another, and pray one for another, that we may be healed."
2. That the persons so meeting be divided into several *bands*, or little companies, none of them consisting of fewer than five, or more than ten persons.
3. That every one in order speak as freely, plainly, and concisely as he can, the real state of his heart, with his several temptations and deliverances, since the last time of meeting.
4. That all the bands have a conference at eight every Wednesday evening, begun and ended with singing and prayer.
5. That any who desire to be admitted into this society be asked, "What are your reasons for desiring this? Will you be entirely open; using no kind of reserve? Have you any objection to any of our orders?" (which may then be read.)
6. That when any new member is proposed, every one present speak clearly and freely whatever objection he has to him.

7. That those against whom no reasonable objection appears, be, in order for their trial, formed into one or more distinct bands, and some person agreed on to assist them.
8. That after two months' trial, if no objection then appears, they may be admitted into the society.
9. That every fourth Saturday be observed as a day of general intercession.
10. That on the Sunday seven-night following be a general love-feast, from seven till ten in the evening.
11. That no particular member be allowed to act in any thing contrary to any order of the society: And that if any persons, after being thrice admonished, do not conform thereto, they be not any longer esteemed as members. (Ward, Heitzenrater 18:236-37)

Many of these rules show up again in December of the same year when he created the Rules for Band Societies. The structure of the groups served as a reminder that the participants were to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow [Jesus] (Matt. 16:24). The small groups provided a setting to keep the group members constantly aware that they should be growing in holiness and not getting comfortable in the world in which they lived (K. Watson 174).

Shortly afterwards John Wesley made his journey to Herrnhut and formed many impressions of Moravian life, most of them favorable. On his return he was more than ever convinced of the value of the bands, and on December 25, 1738 he drew up the Rules of the Band Societies. (Davies 9:9)

The design of our meeting is to obey that command of God, “[c]onfess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.”

To this end, we intend,—

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.

4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.

5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.

6. To desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may be to this effect:—

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?

2. Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?

3. Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God?

4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?

5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?

6. Do you desire to be told of your faults?

7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?

8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?

9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?

10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?

11. Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion offers; the four following at every meeting:—

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?

2. What temptations have you met with?

3. How were you delivered?

4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not? (Davies 9:77-78)

Wesley often changed things or edited writings to fit what he thought was best.

The Moravian bands were no different. The bands had the component he needed to gather people together for mutual accountability: "To meet together in a band was not merely to exercise self-examination, nor yet to engender a mutual growth in spiritual self-awareness; it was to occasion the presence of Christ and thus to provide a sure and efficacious means of grace" (D. Watson *Early Methodist Class Meeting* 78). Wesley



knew that sharing faith in community was a powerful way to encounter God's grace, especially the part of sanctifying grace that calls disciples to deeper holiness and righteousness.

He disagreed with part of the focus of the Moravian bands thinking they were too mystical and did not give enough attention to Scripture (Henderson 62). In Wesley's struggle, the need for balancing the different methods of discipleship is evident. The Moravian bands were doing well in the relational and personal arenas but, according to Wesley, were lacking in academic focus and were not founded on Scripture.

The groups dealt with motives and heartfelt expression of faith rather than with behaviors and ideas. Like the Moravian groups, these were not small Bible studies but groups designed to be personally and communally transformative. Christian fellowship grew quickly within the bands as the members bore one another's burdens and cared for each other. The openness within the bands cultivated a closer sense of community among the members, which helped the members be more open and able to bear one another's burdens and care for each other more fully. These relationships, in turn, cultivated the members' own relationships with Christ as they grew in their faith (D. Watson *Early Methodist Class Meeting* 94). While these groups never experienced the popularity he wished, they really were the foundation of Methodism (Henderson 113).

On 25 December 1744, Wesley rewrote the directions for band members. If members did not follow these directions they were downgraded from band membership to society membership (Davies 9:13). The rewritten directions are as follows:

You are supposed to have the faith that "overcometh the world." To you, therefore, it is not grievous,—

I.

Carefully to abstain from doing evil; in particular,—

1. Neither to buy nor sell anything at all on the Lord's day.
2. To taste no spirituous liquor, no dram of any kind, unless prescribed by a Physician.
3. To be at a word both in buying and selling.
4. To pawn nothing, no, not to save life.
5. Not to mention the fault of any behind his back, and to stop those short that do.
6. To wear no needless ornaments, such as rings, earrings, necklaces, lace, ruffles.
7. To use no needless self-indulgence, such as taking snuff or tobacco, unless prescribed by a Physician.

## II.

Zealously to maintain good works; in particular,—

1. To give alms of such things as you possess, and that to the uttermost of your power.
2. To reprove all that sin in your sight, and that in love and meekness of wisdom.
3. To be patterns of diligence and frugality, of self-denial, and taking up the cross daily.

## III.

Constantly to attend on all the ordinances of God; in particular,—

1. To be at church and at the Lord's table every week, and at every public meeting of the Bands.
2. To attend the ministry of the word every morning, unless distance, business, or sickness prevent.
3. To use private prayer everyday; and family prayer, if you are at the head of a family.
4. To read the Scriptures, and meditate therein, at every vacant; hour. And,
5. To observe, as days of fasting or abstinence, all Fridays in the year. (79)

Wesley ultimately separated from the Moravians because he thought they confused sanctification with justification and because of the stillness controversy. His sermon "On Sin in Believers" came out of the problems he found in the Moravians' belief that believers did not have sin in them. For Wesley, this perspective was true to a degree, but only through the process of sanctification. The Moravians believed that this was all a part of justification. The stillness movement in the Fetter Lane Society led the members to stop going to church, receiving the sacraments, praying, reading Scripture, or doing any good, and led them to be still and wait for God to find them:

After less than two years, the Fetter Lane Society came under the powerful influence of Philip Henry Molther, who taught a particular form of Moravianism according to which the means of grace are unnecessary for those who live under grace, and the essential element in the religion of believers is “stillness.” (Davies 9:7)

Because of the stillness controversy and the issues surrounding justification and sanctification, Wesley led a group of seventy five people from the Fetter Lane Society on 23 July 1740, (Davies 9:10) and started meeting at the Foundry which became the first strictly Methodist Society.

**The class meetings.** On 15 February 1742, Wesley gave instructions for the first class meetings, involving the penny offering to help retire the debt. The class meetings quickly grew to become a vital part of Wesley’s efforts to spread scriptural holiness. The leaders of the classes “were to visit the homes of those absent from the weekly meeting for fellowship, whatever the reason” (Davies 9:12). People did not exist to support the class meeting structure, the class meetings were formed to strengthen people. Class leaders were called to focus on strengthening the people.

As the structure of class meetings grew, the bands seemed to decrease, especially in later years of Wesley’s ministry: “At the end of his life they were retained only in the larger societies. But Wesley himself never ceased to urge their establishment and retention, and they survived into the nineteenth century both in England and in America” (Davies 9:13). Groups such as Wesley’s bands have been hard to maintain throughout the life of the church.

The empowerment of the laity was essential for the Methodist movement. It was growing too fast for Wesley or the other clergy to attend to the spiritual growth of the people under their umbrella. Wesley structured his movement in such a way as to make

the class leaders responsible for pastoral oversight for the people in their classes (Henderson 101). Wesley also discovered that people in “the bands were more likely to state their true feelings when they knew the leaders were peers not superiors” (67). Another aid to helping the bonds of groups develop was that he let the bands be self-selecting (Manskar 91). Most people naturally know with whom they have the potential to connect well, so letting people choose their own groups helped alleviate potential group dynamic problems and sped up the processes of growing into a deeper relationship.

Wesley trained the class leaders in how to run their classes and how to be the pastors for their classes. He prepared them to “expect people to regress in their faith, and helped them know how to bring people back” (Henderson 103). Wesley also strongly emphasized the teaching of holiness that he believed Scripture teaches is possible in this life (Hull 949). “Wesley took great care to see, insofar as possible, that the leader of the small class was prepared to study Scripture and pray with each participant. They had his teaching homilies available to them for guidance” (Oden 4:47). Class and band leaders were instrumental to helping their people grow in faith. The emphasis of the meetings was answering hard questions about their daily life. This emphasis kept the meetings focused on Christian discipleship (D. Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* 49). Wesley’s groups expected people to be very devoted to living out their faith and meeting together.

The lay assistants were utilized by Wesley to help keep the bands and classes accountable to their intended purpose. The lay assistants would “meet the Leaders of the Bands and Classes weekly, and the Stewards, and to overlook their accounts” (Wesley 9:271). Wesley put in place layer upon layer of leadership for his groups to keep them functioning properly.

**Wesleyan bands.** In Wesley's Rules of the Band-Societies, already clearly stated, he quotes James 5:16, as the reason for the weekly bands to meet. Among the rules, each person is to speak "freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting." To facilitate this conversation, each participant was to answer at least four questions. "What known sins have you committed since our last meeting? What temptations have you met with? How were you delivered? What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not" (Davies 9:77-78).

Wesley included in his Rules of the Band-Societies a list of questions that could be asked of people who wanted to join a band. The questions ranged from: "Have you the forgiveness of your sins" and "Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God" to questions like, "Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you? Do you desire to be told of your faults," and "Do you desire that every one of us should tell you from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you" (Davies 9:77-78).

Wesley's bands and class meetings seemed to be trying to reintroduce the church to the relational and personal method of discipleship. The main method of discipleship in the Church of England of Wesley's time appears to be the experiential method, with its only outlet being proper worship and the art and architecture of the day. The Church of England was a living example of Wesley's fear for what Methodism would become: a church with the form of religion but without the power.

Wesley developed a detailed system of bands for people at all different stages in their Christian faith. He had trial bands for people who were interested in learning more

about Jesus (Stafford 42) but who were not sure if they wanted to answer Jesus' call to follow him. He had class meetings that helped people grow in the beginning stages of their Christian life, and band meetings for those who wanted to go on to sanctification (43).

Wesley also created penitent bands for people who had fallen away from the faith or from Christian practices and wanted a way to be restored to the faith. People who have been pulled away through addictions or whose lives have been wrecked because of life experiences often need a more focused intensive group to help restore them to a relationship with Christ and to the body of the Church.

**Not a program.** The industrial mind-set has infiltrated the church and corrupted the Biblical model of making disciples. This mind-set has led the church to treat a Christian's spiritual growth like an assembly-line product. The problem with this approach is that people are different and live in different cultures. Assembly lines work when all of the raw materials are the same. People are not raw materials, ready to be shaped according to a particular mold. "Disciple making is not a program, but a relationship" (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 145). Programs tend to be focused on learning particular information or having a certain experience. The premise is that if a person has knowledge or a particular experience they will be transformed (408). Knowledge and experiences can be transformative, but the Holy Spirit brings the transformation, not the knowledge or experience.

Programs are rarely about people, and Jesus came for people. At its core, being a disciple of Jesus Christ means that followers are in a relationship with Jesus, and Jesus

calls them to live in relationship with their neighbors. Discipleship is more about life together than who came to the weekly meeting (Chan and Beuving 11).

Methodist churches in South Georgia are generally wary of the next program the conference gives them. Programs may create a lot of energy initially but are usually short lived. Discipleship is not a program but a lifestyle, a lifelong journey. Programs can also create a tiered system in churches of people who have been through the program and people who have not, often resulting in the mind-set that those who have been through it are better off than those who have not. Another problem with seeing discipleship as a program is that it can be a category in the church, such as evangelism, missions, worship, and small groups. Discipleship is not another part of the church, discipleship is at the heart of being a Christian (Hull 299).

One of the challenges for churches in creating a culture of making disciples is that it needs to be specific enough for people to understand but broad enough that it does not become a highly organized program. The more specific the model gets, the sooner it will become obsolete (Houston 134). The goal of discipleship groups is not to create another program but to create space for people to find relationships where they can grow in their faith together, being the body of Christ one for another. Tony Dungy knows that relationships lay at the center of training people:

Relationships are ultimately what matter—our relationships with God and with other people. The key to becoming a mentor leader is learning how to put other people first. You see, the question that burns in the heart of the mentor leader is simply this: What can I do to make other people better, to make them all that God created them to be? (Dungy 5)

The focus Dungy has for mentor leaders around relationships with God and others is the same focus both disciplers and disciples are called to have. As soon as disciplers make a

relationship about principles or steps, they have turned the relationship into something that is not an encounter with the other person (Boren 763). Programs have no way of knowing where someone is on his or her journey with Christ, what his or her hangups are, or about what he or she is passionate. A disciples' spiritual growth is significantly impacted when believers join together as they journey with Christ.

The church's bent towards programs is apparent in common approaches to the Bible. Some see it as God's instruction book, or a Christian's manual, or basic instructions before leaving earth. Other times it gets relegated to a history book or a rule book. For Wesley, the Bible was not just a message book but the method book (Henderson 46). The message cannot be separated from the method. The greatest method emphasized over and over in the Bible is people's relationship with God, often lived out through the work of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit cannot be programmed. Instead, disciple makers focus on working to invite people to live out their own relationship with God through the Holy Spirit as they share life together.

Healthy, lasting growth in the church needs to revolve around individual lives being transformed by Jesus Christ, both in salvation moments, and as believers take up their crosses and follow Jesus, continuing to become holy as he is holy, resting in God's sanctifying grace. Individual lives need to be transformed but not in isolation. The church needs to rediscover the heart of discipleship as the community supports one another and as people "work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12), learning the disciplined life, following Jesus (P. Meadows, "Methodist Society" 93).

Discipleship is God's plan for growing the kingdom of heaven. It is, however, not intended to be used as a focus for growing a big church. Discipleship calls Christians to



focus on “the depth of personal character and spiritual passion of each disciple” (Hull 313). The miraculous result of helping each other focus on their communal life as disciples is that the kingdom of heaven grows. Sometimes this work results in one particular church growing; however focusing on discipleship in order to grow a particular church is the wrong motivation. Numbers matter but only because each number represents a person who is being transformed by Jesus Christ.

**Potential problems.** A three-year study in the 1990s showed that one problem with intentional small groups was that they slipped into the “us four and no more” mentality (Carter 281). Because of the quality of relationships people can develop in their groups, individuals have the tendency to pull away from others outside the group. The worst case scenario is the group turning into a cult. People who grow in their faith are going to notice that they are different from other church members. They can start to see others as not as good a Christian. When this distinction happens, radical disciples could potentially separate themselves from the church and form a completely new community (Kraus 11). To prevent this division groups need to place a strong focus on missional discipleship. Disciples are always called to be pursuing the mission God has for the Church to share their faith with those in the world around them. If groups are accountable to a larger body and keep God’s mission in focus, it is easier for them not to turn inward.

Group members need to stay away from the desire to fix each other or force one another to act a certain way or share things about their lives. These behaviors hinder the growth of trust. Groups also should to stay away from having to have the *right* answer, such as the fill-in-the-blank Bible study groups. Right and wrong answers to the meaning of Scripture can lead to a few people dominating the conversation and the outcome of the

group. Groups must create space for people to wrestle with the meaning of the text for their own lives. If conversations about the Bible are limited to right answers, people will be more reluctant to go beyond the surface when sharing about their lives (Boren 1102).

Another potential problem is a leader who does not share, and keeps the relationships one sided. The leader must work toward all group members becoming equals. Mutual relationships help to bring about transformation in people's whole lives (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 110). If leaders are going to help others grow as disciples, they must help them develop in all areas, and this maturity happens best if leaders are willing to humble themselves to be a part of all areas of a disciples life. This type of incarnational leading is best seen through Jesus' own example of leaving heaven to come and live on earth among humanity, teaching as he lived his day-to-day life.

### **Good Discipleship Group Components**

Discipleship small groups need to have several components for them to be effective in making disciples. Wesley knew what many of the key components are:

Which of those true Christians had any such fellowship with these? Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship. . . What Christian connection is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other's souls? What bearing of one another's burdens? What a mere jest is it then, to talk so gravely of destroying what never was! The real truth is just the reverse of this: We introduce Christian fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work. (Wesley, *A Plain Account* 1.11.4)

Christian fellowship is essential for forming disciples. Wesley worked to keep Methodists in fellowship with one another because he knew living in relationship with other believers was essential to spiritual growth and accountability.

**Life in Common**

United Methodism is facing the same challenge Wesley faced. Just as Wesley saw the poor condition of the life of the average member of the Anglican church in his day, the members of the body of Christ need to come together in Christian fellowship, bear one another's burdens, and watch over one another in love in this day and time.

Wesley used his evangelistic preaching to gather people into societies, classes, and bands to help them draw closer to God and one another. Every member of a society had to be a member of a class meeting, usually a group of twelve to twenty people. He worked to have the class members join a variety of bands, groups of five to ten that met for intense accountability. The lay-led class and band meetings were Wesley's tools for creating a support system for the people called Methodists, so they could help each other go on to perfection. Wesley emphasized that this kind of growth was only possible within the framework of the community of believers (Matthaei 28).

The foundation of these groups needs to include components that will empower members to bear one another's burdens and watch over one another in love. Gregory Kaster found that school children responded very well to a system when they were asked what they needed to be better students and test takers. The students were allowed to shape some of the rules and methods and, as a result, were more invested in their education, as well as feeling honored, respected, and heard (70). One way the church does not empower people is by telling them what to do or what they need. Groups members being freed to create and continue to alter their own structure can help the group bond together and each member to gain a sense of responsibility.

One of the barriers to these types of groups can be the North American value of individuality. While this value is a rampant ideology today, Christians throughout history have wrestled with the tension of whether to be engaged with the world or separate from it. Some endeavor to stay away from the world because of the fear that it endangers their purity, but if disciples disengage from society then they deny God a vehicle for delivering the presence of Christ (McGrath 139). Passages such as 1 John 4:19-20 clearly state that love for God is only true if it is lived out towards others. Discipleship should never result in continuous introspection, but cause disciples to share their lives and faith with others (Porter 147).

This tension has been the topic of theological debates throughout history. Soren Kierkegaard believed that living out the Christian faith meant people would be in conflict with the world, while Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood discipleship to mean that people needed to work to be holy while remaining in their community (Law 14). Jesus clearly set the example in Matthew 9:9-13 when he said that well people do not need a doctor but the sick do and that he did not come to call the righteous, but the sinners. Jesus' example illustrates that disciples cannot live out holiness by being separate from the sinners (Hirsch and Hirsch 46). Francis Chan and Mark Beuving reiterate this idea and claim that if Christians are not connecting with other believers, serving together, and helping one another grow, then they are not functioning as the people God intended them to be (35).

Jesus' model of discipleship was not a program through which he tried to put people; he shared his life with them (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 110). Tim Keller points out a list of "one another" passages from the Bible to help bring understanding about how the church today can live in a Holy community:

We are to honor (Rom 12:10), accept (Rom 15:7), bear with (Eph 4:2; Col 3:13), forgive (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), pray for, and confess sins to one another (James 5:16). We are to cheer and challenge (Heb 3:13), admonish and confront (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16; Gal 6:1-6), warn (1 Thess 5:14), and teach one another (Col 3:16). We are to stop gossiping and slandering (Gal 5:15) or being fake (Rom 12:9) with each other. We are to bear burdens (Gal 6:2), share possessions (Acts 4:32), and submit to each other (Eph 5:21). (9128)

The Bible paints a picture of how the church can help each other grow, worship God, and be rejuvenated as they live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world. Bonhoeffer believed this kind of community was essential for Christian discipleship (Grace 153). This kind of support and accountability system helps believers overcome their cultural tendencies towards isolation and individualism (Matthaei 97). If disciples refrain from being authentic with a few other believers, not acknowledging their sin and trials to one another, they greatly hinder the power of the community to help them grow in Christ (Latini 39).

Most people are not as self-reflective as they believe. An authentic small group will help believers learn more effectively than they would by themselves (Horder 76). As people open their lives up to the members of their group, they are able to lay themselves in front of Jesus to let the Potter mold the clay of their hearts. As groups live out this dynamic, members will come to see that they are not only a part of the group for how it supports them but because they have a responsibility to help the other members of the group. When group members realize their importance, they have a greater sense of commitment and responsibility to the group (Leachman and Victor 66).

Participation is essential to any group dynamic. Participation, however, should not be limited to showing up for the 1-1½ hour weekly meeting. Group projects and community-building activities help grow the relational bonds and foster trust within a

group (Leachman and Victor 65). Small groups today could easily incorporate separate times of fun and fellowship as well as take time intentionally to get together for acts of service in their community. Serving others together as a group is a powerful tool in building relationships with other group members. Life in common is an important aspect of small groups that are helping each other grow closer to Christ. With a general focus on academic discipleship the transformational learning when group members can be present, working side by side in all aspects of the group life can be devalued (Csinos 48).

### **Small Group Leadership**

The leader of a group is not always the one who forms it. A controversial but essential component of highly accountable Wesleyan band-style groups is that they are self-selecting. Jesus set the example when he chose his disciples (Coleman, *Master Plan of Evangelism* 36). He preached to the masses and had a large group of disciples, he chose twelve with whom to spend more significant time, and even three from that group, Peter, James, and John, into whom he poured even more of himself. Jesus gave a wonderful example of discipling in his ministry to the crowds, especially realizing that he had more than just twelve disciples. He ministered to larger groups of people, the twelve, and the three.

Ogden proposes a question asking how pastors could begin to model Jesus' ministry in intentionally discipling a few people, rather than focusing on the whole congregation (*Transforming Discipleship* 139). Wesleyan-style discipleship groups are an essential answer for making this idea a reality. It can be better to give a year to a few people, helping them to grow closer to Jesus, than to spend years just keeping the church going (749). Keeping groups small can be a challenge for a leader. The mark of good

leadership seems to be higher attendance, but the church needs to see the mark of good leadership as being people's spiritual growth.

In order to raise up disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians need to become people who disciple others in the ways Jesus did. Some of the core components of Jesus' discipleship are that he "taught the disciples (Mk 4:10–12), corrected them (Mt 16:5–12), admonished them (Mt 17:19–20), supported them (Lk 22:31–34), comforted them (Jn 20:19–22), and restored them (21:15–19)" (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 119). A challenging component here for many Christian leaders can be the idea of correcting, admonishing, supporting, and restoring others as Jesus did. Jesus was not just correcting the disciples' faulty information; he was correcting their behavior. In his correction he was not bringing shame on them. The key component in his correcting and admonishing is that he was always working to restore them as well. To restore people being disciplined means that it has to be okay for them to make mistakes. One of the great tools available for restoring people that Jesus did not have, is the ability to be open about personal mistakes.

The Gospels show how often the disciples missed the mark. Their mistakes do not point to Jesus being a poor teacher but show the ups and downs of true learning (Csinos 57). Learning about the lives of Jesus' disciples and nearly all of the other biblical characters, shows lives of people who continued to sin and fall short of the glory of God, all while they were trying to live for him and walk with him (Nelson 67). The failure of students makes the restorative role of the discipler all the more necessary.

Another challenging component to overcome is the leader's need to accept the position as a role model. Although American culture prizes originality most people are

looking for someone to imitate (Katos 30). Most Christians have other Christians whom they revere and after whom they try to model their faith. They might be larger than life people such as Billy Graham or more ordinary people such as grandmothers or Sunday school teachers. The Apostle Paul knew the value of role models, and in verses such as, 1 Thessalonians 1:5–7, 1 Corinthians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 11:1, Philippians 3:17, and Philippians 4:9 he told people to look at his life and model his ways (Copan 144).

The most essential aspect of disciplers being role models is that they do not call people to be like themselves but call them to follow Jesus as they are following Jesus. Paul calls people “to imitate the virtues of humility and discipline ‘that was also in Christ,’ ‘because of Christ,’ or ‘for the sake of the gospel’” (Copan 151). The discipler is never to take the place of Jesus who is always to be the one for whom disciples are made. The goal of the discipler is always to help others follow Jesus (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 49).

In the beginning stages of discipleship, the discipler is usually more directive, setting the focus and tone of the meetings and keeping the group on task and being intentional in functioning out front as leader (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 835). Part of the needed posture of disciplers is to be open and authentic with their own faith, letting the group members know who they are in Christ, the ways they have grown in their own discipleship, and how they are still continuing to grow (Campbell 87).

As the members grow in their relationship with Christ and each other, they often develop more of a peer-discipling relationship. Edward D. Campolongo did research among youth and discovered that the use of peer mentoring was positive for the students,



helping them to hold each other accountable to standards and goals they set. This peer mentoring model helped the students feel valued and heard (72).

Peer learning in discipleship relationships is often best done by sharing life together. In these moments disciplers have the ability to encourage those being discipled to be involved in ministry in ways they may not normally be. Sometimes this involvement can be as simple as serving communion together or stepping aside and having disciples give devotions in the disciplers' place. Pastors can take church members with them when they make home visits, seeing something that simple as a potential teaching moment (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 928). Training can be much more involved such as having a disciple teach *Lectio divina* to a group of pastors in Uganda. The task of disciplers is to be involved in ministry with those they are training and to keep their eyes and ears open to the Holy Spirit to see how they can involve those they are training in ministry.

The act of disciplers sharing life together with those they disciple means that what they do is going to be evaluated by those they disciple. Some of what they do is going to be adopted or modified by their disciples. Discipling this way is only possible through proximity and intimacy (Wilkins, *Following the Master* 118). It is not enough to teach a way of life in a classroom setting, disciplers must get outside the walls and teach by example and teach by getting the disciples' hands into the world in which they are called to live and share Christ.

The disposition of disciplers needs to be to see their calling as being a fellow pilgrim on a journey following Jesus with their disciples (F. Meadows 1893). Amy F. Davis Abdallah says that women who are leading girls into womanhood are not to see

themselves as women who have completed the journey. They are just farther along and inviting “daughters” to come alongside “older Sisters” as they travel together (10). The relationship that is shared between a discipler and disciple, or teacher and student, can be the most important ingredient in providing motivation for the disciples desire to learn (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 874). The whole process of sharing life in this way creates space for people to talk about the meaning of being followers of Jesus (Abdallah 10).

The relationship between discipler and disciple is what ultimately leads disciples on their journey of being made in the image of Christ. As the discipler follows the Spirit and brings the disciple along for the journey, the disciple learns how to “walk in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21; Foster, *Streams* 3). The discipler lives in a way that they model how to love, learn, and lead together with their disciples. Being able to model faith this way is the essential to becoming spiritual leaders (Sims and Lopes 67). Leaders are trying to help those they disciple live into a whole new way of being and seeing the world. They are not simply trying to convince or inform people of certain truths (Wringe 244). Following Jesus’ example leaders are helping to guide those they disciple into a loving relationship with Jesus and others.

Through the process of discipling others, disciplers must also convey the necessity of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. Part of disciplers’ own discipleship was growing into the role of discipling others. Disciplers also model accountability to a lived-out faith, through study and service, and work to embody and teach habits that lead to an intimate relationship with Jesus and service to the community (Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* 118).

The only thing disciplers can control is their own lives and how they live in relationship with those they disciple. The indicator of a good teacher is not simply what the teacher does but what the student learns (Hunt 10). What students do with what they have learned is not always a good indicator of the quality of the teacher. Space must be allowed for the Judases of the world. Jesus said that some are ever hearing, never perceiving. He spoke in parables because some people will not understand. Disciplers need to discern if those they are discipling are learning and then also ask themselves if they are being faithful to do the things God is calling them to do and to be the people God is calling them to be.

If disciplers want to make disciples in the same way that Jesus did, they must focus on the lives of the people they are discipling, coming alongside them as a fellow traveler, answering the call to follow Jesus. Discipling others is not something that is simply done by attending meetings, teaching fill-in-the-blank lessons or facilitating a prepackaged video lesson. Discipling is sharing life together through the glorious, mundane, and difficult events in life. Being a discipler involves taking time to get to know the people being disciplined, not focusing on changing them but looking for ways to be Jesus in their life, while being willing to leave the outcome to Christ and Christ alone (Parrott 43).

Finally, discipleship leaders must themselves be disciplined. Being disciplined may take on the form of pastors being in a mutual discipleship group with other clergy, or it may be people who have been disciplined in a small group and are working with others to start a group of their own:

We reproduce our own kind, our own nature. Nobody goes to the delivery room of a hospital expecting to bring a dolphin home, because we all

reproduce according to our own nature. When we are commanded to make disciples, it is assumed that we are disciples ourselves. We are, therefore, “begetting” our own kind. (Geiger, Kelly, and Nation 216)

Leaders need to be active disciples of Jesus Christ, and be walking through life with others. As the group grows and matures the initial leader could cease being the leader and become an active participant in the discipleship group.

### **Discipleship Group Essentials**

The goal for the root of motivation for the Christian way of living should be love. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The life of a disciple should be a loving response to God’s amazing love. Discipleship groups must be places in which members experience God’s love and are inspired to live in response to it (Manskar 13). The biblical use of agape love to describe God’s love helps people to grasp hold of the true nature of God’s unconditional love. God loves humanity no matter what and is always working for its redemption and restoration. To be able to see God’s love for people achieve its full purpose, people must open themselves up to accountable relationships.

Discipleship groups need to create space for people to be able to bring to light their doubts, fears, and struggles alongside their great joys and accomplishments. Wesley’s bands existed to help people grow through the struggles of daily life (Manskar 91). Groups can reach a place of trust if members lower their defenses and listen to the Holy Spirit as they share with each other (Muto and van Kaam 66). This space comes about through a growing love for Christ and each other. God is love. Love will never pass away. Jesus says the disciples will be known by their love for one another. The problem all leaders have is that love cannot be taught (Geiger, Kelly, and Nation 208).

Discipleship group leaders need to model Christ's love, especially when no guarantees are made it will be respected or reciprocated. Leaders also need to remember the only one who can grow that love in their members is the Holy Spirit, and so they need to pray continually, asking God to help their members to have the ability to experience and share God's love.

Discipleship groups will be able to experience true community if the members are willing to live in submission to one another. Community is only brought about through the Holy Spirit (Hull 253). The continual work of the Holy Spirit is also necessary to keep the idea of mutual submission in check.

Ogden identifies several ingredients surrounding trust that help group members become transformed: group members encouraging one another, being with each other in tough times, being good listeners that help other members hear God, and confessing their sin to one another so that they might be healed (*Transforming Discipleship* 1605). The last of these ingredients comes straight from James 5:16, which is also the same verse Wesley used as the basis for his bands.

These ingredients to building trust work to help each member grow in faith and holiness in their walk with God. As group members pay attention to these areas, they are really practicing the meaning of caring for the body of Christ. To do any of these things well, members must also be working on their own relationships with Christ. The reciprocity of people's discipleship relationships helps them clean up their own lives, as well as work with their fellow brothers or sisters to become more Holy. This process helps people to live out 2 Corinthians 3:18:

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

The process of being transformed from one degree of glory to another is where the life of the disciple exists, a life between where Christians are and the goal of Christlike holiness for which they strive (Nelson 80). Believers cannot work for this kind of life if they are focused on obeying rules. The only way to grow into a life of holiness is to surrender and come and follow Jesus. Discipleship is not something to be understood and believed; it is to be heard and obeyed. Bonhoeffer says that Christ does not want his disciples to talk about faith in Jesus as an ideal, but that his followers just need to get on with it (196). Discipleship groups will miss the mark if they spend more time talking about the meaning of being a disciple than they do talking about their own discipleship.

The conversation surrounding discipleship is continuing to evolve. The church is growing through the necessary part of the conversation about people's own morality, Christian values, and character. The conversation is now beginning to talk about all Christians as missionaries. Alan and Debra Hirsch are bold enough to say, "No mission, no discipleship" (29). Equating mission and discipleship is true in the sense that disciples must be grown to the point that they are willing to go out. This same line of thinking has come through Boren and Alan Roxburgh.

Roxburgh says the Christians need to stop trying to figure out how to be disciples within the walls of the church and instead get out into their neighborhoods and communities, sit and eat with their neighbors, and listen to what God is doing (134). Boren talks through the growth pattern of small groups for the last twenty-five years and now believes that small groups are growing to the point that the one hour a week meeting

time is not the most important part of the group's life. The most important part of the group's relationship is how they are sharing life together outside their group time.

Families should know each other, groups should serve together in their neighborhoods, and reach out to others. Life in common, not a deep one-hour meeting, is the goal of discipleship group's life together.

Groups going out and doing acts of service is not enough. Disciples are also called to make more disciples. Discipleship groups must keep growing members to the point of maturity until they are willing to go out themselves and make more disciples, just as they are being transformed into the image of Christ. One of the great ways to think about this approach is for disciple makers to work towards replacing themselves (Dungy 10). They are working to train disciples to do what they do, make disciples. The call to make disciples is a call for all people. Making disciples is the most essential element in the ministry of the laity. In Wesley's perspective, the "care of souls" is the responsibility of the whole body of Christ (Oden 3:536). Care of souls is not relegated to tending to the widows and orphans but growing in relationships with one another, so disciples can talk with each other about the state of their own souls.

### **Weekly Meeting Nuts and Bolts**

Disciplers are making disciples of Jesus Christ. The foundation of the group is Jesus himself, most consistently accomplished by using the Bible as the foundation for the group. Willard explains the foundational nature of Jesus and scripture in terms of memorizing some of the prominent Bible passages such as the Sermon on the Mount, 1 Corinthians 12, and John 14-17 (*Great Omission* 1945). The process of memorizing passages of Scripture theoretically leads to a greater understanding.

All followers of Jesus Christ need a steady diet of Scripture in their lives.

Scripture can be received through preaching, meditation, and experiencing it in the sacraments (Chilcote 80). Christians would be well suited to include Bible study groups, especially those who strongly encourage all believers to participate. In the Reformation, the Anabaptist's believed that as believers came together, the Holy Spirit could use anyone to help them gain an understanding of the Word, not just the experts.

Deemphasizing teaching from an expert helped to emphasize the idea that the Bible was to be obeyed not simply understood. The goal was to help the participants become passionate about Jesus, going to to spread the good news and live according to the Bible (Grass 67).

The Reformation opened the door for these types of groups to be centered around the Bible. Without the necessity of a Bible scholar, groups can incorporate Scripture reading along with prayer and learning how to witness to be tools for the Holy Spirit to bring about transformation in the life of the group members. The early stages of group dynamics can be focused on familiarity with these things helping to ground the group members in the faith. As the group grows, emphasis needs to begin to be placed on applying Scripture by going out and ministering (McCallum 567).

Mark A. Maddix and Richard P. Thompson identify three main methods by which Scripture enables transformation: "*lectio divina*, inductive Bible Study, and worship" (84). *Lectio divina* is a practice of holy reading that involves slow, prayerful meditation while reading the Bible. The power of Scripture comes from the Holy Spirit opening the readers mind to hear the living Word. Wesley believed that the Holy Spirit both inspired the Bible to be written and that the Spirit continues to inspire the reader to bring forth



meaning for his or her life, and to be the very voice of God speaking to the reader (Chilcote 38). Strengthened by the understanding that the Holy Spirit speaks through the Bible, and that Jesus is the Shepherd, the teacher, and the main discipler, people are well served by encouraging one another to immerse themselves in the Bible, particularly the Gospels, so they can learn and apply them to their daily lives (Foster, *Streams* 130).

An immersion in the Scriptures is more than the typical life application that asks people to apply biblical principles to their lives. This type of immersion calls for people to have their beings saturated by the Holy Spirit through the Word so that the Holy Spirit can bring forth transformation in their souls (Boren 881). A great catalyst for this type of encounter with the Spirit comes as people center themselves in the presence of the Holy Spirit and seek God's direction. Individuals can try and picture themselves in the story and think about its meaning for their own lives (Chilcote 84), or they can meditate on the passage, praying to the Holy Spirit for guidance on how to make it a part of their own beings.

Scripture may be the foundational element in a discipleship group, but its use will undoubtedly look different from the standard Bible study seen in most United Methodist churches. Most of the current focus on how churches disciple people comes through lecture-based teaching and small group studies. Discipleship groups help to expand the learning possibilities to include a much-needed open-ended informal style learning (Wringe 243). Study of Scripture is the central tool for discipleship groups, but the focus is not simply learning the Bible. The focus of the group is to pursue the presence of God in every area of life (Muto and van Kaam 109).

Wesley knew how essential the class and band meetings were to people's spiritual growth. Ogden also believes that the main way people can "grow into self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ is by being involved in highly accountable, relational, multiplying discipleship units of three or four" (*Transforming Discipleship* 533). The component of accountability is also essential to the dynamics of discipleship groups. Accountability is essential because it strengthens the bonds between head knowledge and faith in practice (K. Watson 178).

The longer groups are together, the greater chance relationships among group members will strengthen. The practice of reading Scripture and holding each other accountable to the ways they live out faith is essential. As noted previously, Wesley focused on accountability in his band meetings, but many of the questions people were to answer involved reporting where they had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Confessing sins to one another is essential for healing, but accountability needs to be more than being held accountable for mistakes. In D. Watson's model of small groups, people are encouraged to share with the group how they have been faithful disciples during their week (*Covenant Discipleship* 43).

The shift in a psychology of reporting failure to reporting obedience can be a very healthy practice. People can be challenged in a positive way to think about how they are joining Jesus in his work in their world, instead of thinking about how they can stay out of trouble. When discipleship groups help people focus on a relationship with Jesus, the result is that they also strengthen relationships with other members. When people strengthen their relationship with Jesus, they have more to share with others (Parrott 21). The love of Christ must be within Jesus' disciples in order for them to give it away.

A disciple's relationship with Jesus is fostered within the context of community, but it starts in a quiet place, spending time alone with God: "It begins with a hunger and thirst after right living. It begins with a deep desperation in your soul that says, 'Give me Jesus or I die!' It begins with a relationship between the Lord and you" (Parrott 21). Too often Christians put their focus either on working to have a good quiet time alone with God or seeking a group of believers to be Jesus to them. Both the personal relationship and the communal relationship are necessary for people to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

The relational function of discipleship groups does not need to be limited to accountability of faith practices. Theresa F. Latini talks about a men's group in which members would regularly call each other in times of crisis, as well as pray for one another and encourage each other. The group also emphasized honoring their marriages and taking seriously their family relationships as part of their own Christian discipleship (36). Often as participants grow closer together they are free to share all manner of struggles and joys with brothers or sisters who are willing to journey with them. Text and e-mail have expanded the possibilities to help group members stay connected (Torma 275). One group with which I am familiar is unable to meet regularly because the members do not live near each other. Their relationship, however, is able to thrive in the in-between times because of mobile technology.

The more tools a group can use to help members grow closer to Christ and closer to each other, the more help a group has to foster a sense of trust and a place of safety that they need as they grow in their faith. A safe group is not just one where what is said in the meeting remains confidential. A safe group is about becoming safe people for one another (Boren 1127). This sense of safety is essential in light of people's propensity

occasionally to miss the mark of following Jesus. Just like the disciples and most biblical characters, people are going to make mistakes and need a safe place to find healing and restoration. People also need a safe place where they can grow at their own pace.

Everyone will not progress at the same speed (Csinos 57). In fact, people are going to progress differently because the details and path for each person's life is going to look and be lived out a little differently. Groups need to be safe enough that everyone is not expected to do the same exact thing.

### **Connecting to the Project**

According to the Bible being a disciple is the same thing as being a Christian. The marks of a disciple are to abide in the Word, love one another, and bear fruit. Disciples are also empowered and sent out to do the work of the church in a variety of fashions. These ideas build toward the mandate from Jesus to make disciples. "Jesus told us explicitly what to do. We have a manual, just like the car owner. He told us, as disciples, to make disciples not converts to Christianity, nor to some particular 'faith and practice'" (Willard, *Great Omission* 143). The mission of the United Methodist Church as stated in the *Book of Discipline* is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the World" (91). Generally the United Methodist Church does not have a good idea how to do fulfill this mission and has very little practical structure in place for making disciples. In conversation with a United Methodist pastor and former district superintendent about his new focus on making disciples, he said he was trained in a culture to make church members, not disciples. My perception of the United Methodist Church is that they have focused on making converts rather than disciples. They have not challenged people to count the cost of following Jesus, but have only tried to get them to accept the reward of

eternal life. Invariably people ask if being a disciple is necessary to get into heaven.

Willard comments on this train of thought:

But, someone will say, can I not be “saved”—that is, get into heaven when I die—without any of this? Perhaps you can. God’s goodness is so great, I am sure that He will let you in if He can find any basis at all to do so. But you might wish to think about what your life amounts to before you die, about what kind of person you are becoming, and about whether you really would be comfortable for eternity in the presence of One whose company you have not found especially desirable for the few hours and days of your earthly existence. And He is, after all, One who says to you now, “Follow me!” (*Great Omission* 408)

Following Jesus is much more than assenting to belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Discipleship is an invitation for believers to enter into God’s presence as children of the King of kings, entering into a whole new life (Bock 138), as they are born again by water and the Spirit.

Often people are not interested in giving their all but are wanting to know what the minimum requirements are. One of the key words in the Great Commission is *all*. “All authority, all sacrifice, all-out effort, all the time, for all people” (Hull 204). If the church fails in its calling to be disciples and make disciples, the church has failed in its primary mission (Hirsch and Hirsch 24).

Another underlying problem with the minimum requirements mode is that people have lost sight of who is calling them into this new life. The Lord of lords is worthy of more than church attendance or fandom. Jesus is worthy of complete adoration and full dedication (Platt 38). In order to help people take their faith seriously, they need to grasp hold of the things only Jesus can provide for them: salvation, transformation, and a healing of their souls (Vickers 1765). Jesus can work outside the bounds of the body of believers, but he has placed the church in position to be the primary tool for doing this

work. It is not simply the work of the pastor or a few key leaders but the work of the body as a whole.

In the Great Commission, Jesus also called the disciples to baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said that he was baptizing with water, but that one would come after him who would baptize with Spirit and with fire (Matt. 3:11-12). The Greek word for *baptize* can mean to immerse. To baptize in the name of the triune God does not mean to immerse people in water and say it is done in Jesus' name but that people are immersed in the trinitarian God and into the living body of Christ, the Church. This perception of baptism helps to support the need for the relational method of discipleship. Baptism is a calling to immerse people into community, the body of Christ. As a part of the Church they will be taught to obey the living God (Willard, *Great Omission* 731).

The Church must continue living out the calling to fulfill the Great Commission, making disciples of Jesus Christ, immersing them into the life of the triune God, both in Spirit and in the physical body of Christ, the Church, and teaching them to obey Jesus. Making disciples is the mission of the Church. Making disciples is the mission of the United Methodist Church.

### **Potential Benefits**

People who are a part of small groups often have better worship attendance, give more time and money, and feel a stronger connection to their churches (Walton 100).

Roger Walton shares statistics on the results group members though they received:

When asked to identify in what ways the group had helped them; 77 percent thought the group had made them more confident in their faith; 76 percent said that belonging to a group has made them more able to connect their faith and everyday life; 72 percent said it had made them more

accepting and forgiving of others; 79 percent said it had strengthened their prayer life; and 68 percent said it had given them more confidence in speaking about their faith to others. The strongest response was that the group had brought them closer to God. 87 percent of participants believed this. (109)

People who are growing in their faith will naturally put Jesus as a greater priority or even make God *the priority* in their lives. When people make God their priority, they find the strength from God to endure all manner of trials and persecutions (Grace 140). People will have a support system from fellow believers for the difficulties of life and will have a stronger relationship with God that will ultimately help them weather the challenges of life.

The positive personal spiritual growth and sense of connection to a church body are some of the most exciting benefits of these types of groups. As individuals change the culture of the church will change. As many small changes are made in people's lives as they more faithfully follow Jesus, more major change will be seen in the church over time (Johnson-Miller 42). Discipleship groups need to stay small, and know growing slow is not bad. Slow growth in churches can lead to a more enduring and effective change than the typical work for the newest program.

### **Research Design**

The intervention was designed as an exploratory qualitative study. In qualitative research, the goal of the questions is to learn from participants (Creswell 1254). The goal of the research was to see the effects of the training on the participants in two areas: their growth as disciples and their willingness to lead discipleship small groups.

Data was collected using two qualitative research methods. Data was collected "to learn from the participants in the study" (Creswell 1260). The prestudy questionnaire

helped me understand where the participants began in relation to their understanding of discipleship and their perceived skill level for leading discipleship small groups.

Gathering data through the weekly journals, I was able to adapt the journal questions as I learned how they were responding to the training sessions. The weekly journals were a narrative not of what happened during the training session but of the participants' perspectives the sessions in terms of "meaning, relevance and importance" (Sensing 163).

Finally, through leading the training sessions, collecting data, and adapting questions, I understand that I am being reflexive, bringing my "own biases, values, and assumptions" (Creswell 1294) as I conduct and analyze my research. Being reflexive in training is a needed skill for any discipler to be able to disciple others.

### **Summary**

Throughout the history of God working with people, the powerful ways in which people have grown in their relationship with their Creator is evident. Sometimes transformation comes through burning bush or blinding light experiences, but more often, it comes through family or a mentor in the faith, teaching and training up individuals or groups of people.

A wonderful analogy to consider when thinking about discipleship and the life of the church is found in the relationships people have with a coach verse a teammate, or with a trainer verse a workout partner. Coaches and trainers help others to see how do exercise or make plays, but partners and teammates are the people who are actually doing all the work alongside each other. People greatly benefit from the strength of others to reach their goals.



Discipleship groups can be a great tool to provide the church with a way to reincorporate the most neglected method—relational discipleship. The pastor cannot be everyone's partner or teammate but can work to train up disciples in the church who can then go and make disciples, who will also then be able to go and make disciples.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Problem and Purpose

The Christian community is waking up to the understanding that they have not been making disciples. In *The Great Omission*, Willard says the church has focused on making converts instead of disciples (141). The church does well working to get people to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior but too often fall short in helping people to live in a community where they can discover the meaning of Jesus as Lord. Learning to make Jesus Lord every day is at the heart of being a disciple.

This project is interested in equipping the laity to help people have relationships with others that help them walk with Jesus every day. Churches today often lack the kind of close community where people share their real struggles in life together. These types of close, accountable groups exist in many other parts of American culture but are not prevalent in most churches.

The goal of this project is to equip members of Wrens United Methodist Church to facilitate small discipleship groups that will help the participants grow closer to Jesus Christ and each other as they read Scripture, practice spiritual disciplines, and serve their community together. The purpose of the study was to train selected small group leaders at WUMC to use a discipleship model that incorporates Scripture reading, fellowship activities, missional projects, and personal reflection to help the participants grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and closer to each other in Christian community.

### **Guiding Research Questions**

The study addressed three main questions. The intent of these questions was to discover the participants' understanding of how to be and make disciples. These research questions will point to practices that helped or did not help people grow to a point that they are willing to share their faith with others.

#### **Research Question #1**

How did the participants understand their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to Christian community, and what were their perceptions about their ability to lead small groups before the study?

A short questionnaire at the beginning of the ten-lesson training gathered information about the skills the disciplers believed were important for leading a small group. The questionnaire also discovered the participants' perceived comfort level in leading a small discipleship group, their perception of their relationship to Christ, and their level of commitment to the Christian community.

#### **Research Question #2**

How did the participants understand their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to Christian community, and what were their perceptions about their ability to lead small groups after the study?

A questionnaire at the end of the ten-lesson training gathered information about the skills the disciplers thought were important for leading a small group. The questionnaire also discovered the participants' perceived comfort level in leading a small discipleship group, their view of their relationship with Christ, and their level of commitment to the Christian community at the end of the study.

**Research Question #3**

What components of the ten-lesson study were most helpful?

The journals provided the space for the participants to reflect on what practices or learning had been most meaningful to them each week. The journals also allowed them to share how their understanding of small group life was changing during the course of the study. Discovering the participants' thoughts on these two ideas helped shed light on what they received personally from the study and what in the study makes them more likely to lead discipleship small groups.

**Population and Participants**

All active participants of WUMC were considered for participation in the study. I prayerfully selected twelve disciplers. Church participation, perceived spiritual maturity, and a desire for community were factors in making the selections. Through the prayerful selection process, inviting a cross section of the church was also a consideration. The cross section considered different ages, worship services, and people who participate in different ministries of the church. This balance was sought for several reasons. First, I wanted the study to have the potential to impact the church as a whole. Second, I wanted to keep the project away from the perception that it was only for one group of people. Finally, people from different services and groups in the church could build relationships with people they did not know, helping to strengthen the community. The study included members and active nonmembers at WUMC.

**Design of the Study**

The study consisted of ten training lessons for the twelve discipleship group facilitators. Each week the participants focused on different components of the

discipleship groups and practical tips for leading effective discipleship groups. The lessons were designed to help the participants understand why these groups can be helpful, how the small groups are structured, and what they can do to be effective facilitators. The study was designed to begin with introducing new concepts of discipleship and move people to being able to lead small groups. The ten lessons included the following topics (see Appendix D):

Lesson 1—A Framework for Making Disciples

Lesson 2—Modes of Discipleship and Our Wesleyan Heritage

Lesson 3—Beginning Stages

Lesson 4—Format and Scripture Reading

Lesson 5—Prayer

Lesson 6—Spiritual Disciplines

Lesson 7—Service

Lesson 8—Life in Common

Lesson 9—Fellowship

Lesson 10—Group Dynamics and Prayerfully Building Groups.

Central to the design of the research was the prayerful invitation for the participants to join the study and a call for their faithfulness to participate in it. The prayerful invitation and challenge for faithful participation had its foundation in Jesus' approach to calling his disciples. The initial group of twelve also had its foundation in Jesus' model of discipleship.

Research was qualitative in nature because the personalities and spiritual lives of each of the participants were different. The research design includes short-answer

questions for the pre- and postintervention questionnaires that the participants took before and after the ten-week study. The design also includes a qualitative weekly journal focusing on transformational learning from the ten sessions.

### **Instrumentation**

Three instruments were used to measure the effectiveness of this discipleship training model. The first assessment conducted at the beginning and end of the ten training sessions for disciplers was the preintervention questionnaire. The first questionnaire asked demographic information about the participants, including age, race, gender, and their perceived level of involvement at WUMC. The second instrument was the questionnaire at the conclusion of the study, which was identical to the first questionnaire but without the demographic information. The third instrument was a weekly journal in the form of an e-mail or written response to a specific question sent to the disciplers from me to measure their weekly progress.

### **Variables**

Two different types of variables were present in the study, including dependent variables and intervening variables. The dependent variable was the effect the model had on the Disciplers. Three intervening variables were present: differences in Disciplers, the interpersonal dynamics of the group, and the openness of any particular group participant.

### **Data Collection**

The intervention consisted of a ten-lesson study and allowed participants one week after the study to turn in their final journal. Ten minutes were given during the first and last sessions for the participants to complete the questionnaires, ensuring 100 percent return rate. The participants were asked to turn in their journal responses within two days

of each of the ten sessions. An e-mail, text message, or phone call reminder was given the day after the deadline and every two days afterwards until the journals were submitted.

The method of communicating with the individual participants was part of the questionnaire during the first class. The participants indicated if they preferred e-mail, text, or phone reminders for the weekly journals.

All sessions were held in the WUMC fellowship hall. No outside expenses for the weekly sessions were involved, and the church absorbed the cost of printing the materials. The twelve participants sat around four round tables with three people per table. This set-up facilitated times of table discussion during the weekly sessions.

The ten-lesson intervention began the week of 13 September and concluded the week of 15 November. The dates were selected to fit between Labor Day weekend and Thanksgiving week, aiming for optimal participation. The first six sessions focused on teaching the model for small group discipleship. The next three sessions focused on equipping the disciplers with practical tools for leading a discipleship small group. The last session was geared towards wrapping up the training session and helping the disciplers prayerfully consider whom to invite to be a part of a discipleship small group they would lead at the conclusion of the study.

Each weekly session was scheduled as follows:

7:00-7:10 Sharing and prayer

7:10-7:50 Teaching section

7:50-8:00 Prayer

8:00-8:30 *Lectio divina*.

### **Data Analysis**

The data gathered from the weekly journals and the short-answer questionnaires was qualitative in nature. The journals identified parts of the training that were impactful for the participants' spiritual growth and for their growth as potential discipleship group leaders.

The short-answer questionnaires and weekly journals showed the participants' understanding of being in a discipleship group. These instruments also highlighted the components to the training and discipleship model that were helpful or impactful and those that were not as they grew in their understanding of how to be in and lead a discipleship small group.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The data collected from the questionnaires and journals was seen only by me. Openness was encouraged as a part of the group training, so none of the instruments was anonymous. The participants signed a consent form (see Appendix A) for me to use their comments without their names in Chapter 4 and 5 of the study. After both of the questionnaires, I digitized their written responses and shredded the paper copies. During the process all data was kept on my password-protected laptop. After completion of the dissertation the gathered data was deleted from my computer.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

Wrens United Methodist Church has a few Sunday school classes, which are attended by less than half of the active participants of the congregation, and offers regular Bible studies, which are attended by one-tenth of the active participants of the congregation. These are the only adult small groups offered at WUMC, and while they are wonderful groups, they are not geared towards accountability and discipleship. None of the members at WUMC are involved in a discipleship program or small group to nurture their faith and help them become and make disciples in the community.

The goal of this project was to use a ten-lesson training program to equip members of WUMC to facilitate small discipleship groups. The discipleship groups are focused on helping the participants grow closer to Jesus Christ and each other as they read Scripture, practice spiritual disciplines, and serve their community together. The purpose of the study was to train twelve potential small group leaders at WUMC to use a discipleship model that incorporates Scripture reading, fellowship activities, missional projects, and personal reflection to help the participants grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and closer to each other in the Christian community.

The training sessions began 17 September 2015 and met for nine consecutive weeks on Thursdays, ending on 12 November 2015. An additional session was held on Saturday 7 November 2015 at the home of two of the group's participants. After the second session, many people shared they would not be able to attend every meeting, so

an identical session was offered each week. The participants could either meet Thursdays from 12:00-1:30 p.m. or from 7:00-8:30 p.m.

The study used a qualitative methodology consisting of pre- and postintervention questionnaires and weekly journals. The pre- and postintervention questionnaires were researcher designed (see Appendix B). The weekly journals gave the participants the option to answer one or more of three different questions. The same three questions were asked every week (see Appendix C). The participants were given the option to answer the journals through e-mail, typed or written text in a sealed envelope, or text message. All participants chose to answer the journals through e-mail.

### **Participants**

I prayerfully chose twelve people to participate in the discipleship group training sessions. The group consisted of six females (50 percent) and six males (50 percent). The participants ages ranged from the 20s to the 60s. The age ranges were broken down into four groups: 20s (n=2, 17 percent), 40s (n=2, 17 percent), 50s (n=4, 33 percent), and 60s (n=4, 33 percent). Each of the four categories were 50 percent male and 50 percent female. Ten of the participants were married (83 percent), one was single (8 percent), and one was divorced (8 percent). The entire group had obtained a high school or college education. Two participants had high school degrees (17 percent), and ten participants had completed bachelor's degrees (83 percent).

The participants had been Christians from fifteen to sixty or more years. The ranges were broken down into five groups: fifteen to twenty years (n=1, 8 percent), twenty to thirty years (n=2, 17 percent), thirty to forty (n=4, 33 percent), forty to fifty years (n=1, 8 percent), fifty to sixty years (n=3, 25 percent), more than sixty (n=1, 8

percent). Eleven of the participants became believers as a child or teenager (92 percent), and one person became a believer as an adult (8 percent).

### **Research Question #1**

Research question one asked, “How did the participants understand their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to Christian community, and what were their perceptions about their ability to lead small groups before the study?” The first part of this question ascertains how they understood their relationship with Jesus. The second part of the question shows how they describe their commitment to Christian community. The last part discovers the participants’ perceptions about their ability to lead small groups.

One person (8 percent) described his relationship with Jesus as “lacking.” Ten people (83 percent) said they talked with Jesus every day or believed they were best friends and expressed that the relationship was ongoing. One person said she loved God but knew God loved her more and thought she did not spend enough time with God. Four people (33 percent) commented on the idea that their relationship with God was always growing deeper or to perfection.

The participants’ involvement at WUMC spanned from attending worship services to Sunday school, Bible study and a wide variety of committees, including several people who were committee chairs. Ten of the participants attended the contemporary service (83 percent), and two people attended the traditional service (17 percent). Six people were actively involved in small groups (50 percent). Four people had served in leadership positions in the church within the last year (33 percent), and two

people actively serve on ministry staff (17 percent). Two people said they only come to Sunday morning worship services (17 percent).

The participants also commented on their involvement as Christians outside of church activities. One person talked about his responsibility as a disciple in terms of “learning and growing in faith and knowledge of the word and my Lord.” One person said she wanted to learn “from Jesus and become more like Him.” Another person said her job as a disciple was to be a follower and believer in Jesus. Nine people (75 percent) expressed the idea that they were to share God’s light, word, love, or message in the world around them. One of those nine said as a disciple she was responsible for “loving, serving, following Jesus and leading others to love, serve and follow Jesus who in turn will lead others to follow Jesus.” Eleven people (92 percent) said helping others grow closer to Jesus was very important for them.

The preintervention questionnaire showed that three people (25 percent) did not believe they had the skills and knowledge to lead a small group. Four people (33 percent) were unsure or hoped that they did, and five people (42 percent) were confident that they had the skills and knowledge necessary. The preintervention questionnaire also asked the participants how effective they thought they would be leading discipleship small groups. Their responses showed that two people (17 percent) did not think they would be effective at small groups. Six people (50 percent) said they were not sure, and four people (25 percent) said they believed they would be effective leading small groups. In the preintervention questionnaire four people (33 percent) claimed they did not have enough knowledge to be small group leaders. Many of the participants elaborated on this

statement in conversation to say they did not think they knew enough about the Bible to lead small groups.

### **Research Question #2**

The second research question asked, “How did the participants understand their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to Christian community, and what were their perceptions about their ability to lead small groups after the study?” This question was interested in the perceived effects of going through the ten training sessions. The participants were all more communicative in their responses to the three questions pertaining to this research question in their postintervention questionnaires. Their responses in the preintervention questionnaire went from 425 words to 773 words in the postintervention questionnaire.

The intent of the first part of the question was to discover if people grew in their relationship with Jesus because of the study. The person who described his relationship with Jesus as “lacking,” changed to “rocky, slippery, I just need to step up my part.” Reflecting on taking part in the group *lectio divina*, this person said, “The past two classes have been more fulfilling spiritually, bringing back lost connection with Christ reminding me that it is me turning a blind eye to what his will for me is.” The next week this individual said, “This week was another growing experience delving into God’s Word.” Some of the people’s additional comments were:

- “I have come closer to the Lord the last few months, I think due to our time of Revival and through getting together and talking about groups.”

- “My relationship [with God] has grown deeper during the last ten lessons. I have enjoyed the scripture reading and allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to me through the scriptures.”

- “I am closer to Jesus than ever.”

These comments highlight that study was effective in helping some of the participants grow closer in their relationship with Jesus.

Eleven people (92 percent) said they believed part of being a disciple meant sharing their faith with others. The other person described being a disciple as “being a faithful follower of Jesus.” When asked about the importance of helping others grow closer to Christ, one person said, “It is becoming very clear to me that helping bring others to Christ is priority #1.” Another person said, “Outside of our own relationship to Jesus, it is our next biggest responsibility.” A third person said, “Life Purpose/Goal—Love and worship God. Life Purpose/Goal 2—Love others and lead them to love and worship God. It’s #2 on the list!” A fourth person said, “I feel that I have to grow closer before I can effectively help others. Maybe it would be something that we would do together.” The responses indicated the participants believed being in community would enhance their spiritual growth.

The postintervention questionnaires indicated that only one person (8 percent) did not think he or she had the skills or knowledge needed. This difference represents a shift of two people (17 percent) moving from “not feeling like they had the skills and knowledge” to “not being sure.” The person who did believe he had the skills and knowledge at the end of the training session indicated the same response in the preintervention questionnaire.

The postintervention questionnaire also showed that four people (33 percent) had either the skills or the knowledge, but not both. The percentage was the same as the preintervention questionnaire, but it represents two people moving up from not being equipped and two people moving from not being sure to being equipped. Seven people (58 percent) thought they had the skills and knowledge to lead a discipleship group after the training session. Five of the seven claimed they were ready but knew they needed to rely on God. Their responses included the phrases such as:

- “with Christ’s help.”
- “with God’s guidance and wisdom.”
- “if I allow the Holy Spirit to lead.”
- “I’m planning on praying and doing. God will take care of the rest.”
- “He will give me what I need.”

The participants expressed the belief that God was the one who would empower them to be able to lead discipleship small groups.

The postintervention questionnaire results were similar to the results for the question on skills and knowledge. One person (8 percent) did not think that he would be effective leading a small group. This individual is the same person who did not believe that he had the skills or knowledge he needed to lead a small group. The two people (17 percent) who did not think they would be effective in the preintervention questionnaire moved up to thinking they might be effective. Five people (42 percent) said they might be effective leading small groups, representing a decrease of one person (8 percent). One person (8 percent) moved down to not thinking she would be effective, and two people (17 percent) moved up to believing they would be effective leading small groups.

The weekly journals shed light on what helped the participants believe they had more knowledge or skills, leading to their potential effectiveness. One person who moved from thinking she might be effective leading small groups to feeling comfortable leading noted in the journal for week seven that she was comfortable with the idea “mainly because I really believe in it!” One person thought she would be effective from the beginning to the end of the study. She noted that the Holy Spirit living within her empowered her to be a small group leader. This idea was in her first and last journal. Only one person (8 percent) eluded to the idea that he or she could lead because of strength from God in the preintervention questionnaires, but six people (50 percent) referenced God empowering them in the postintervention questionnaire.

One person in her first journal entry displayed hope that she could lead these small groups. She claimed, “Even ordinary people like me can do extraordinary things with the help of the Holy Spirit.” In the journal entry for week four she stated, “I am not sure leading this type of small group is my calling.” In her week seven journal entry she said she thought she could lead a small group, “mainly because I really believe it.” One person who said they believed he or she would be effective at leading small groups in the preintervention questionnaire said in her journal entry for week one, “I learned that I am not as well prepared to be a group leader as I thought.” In her week six journal she said, “I feel less qualified to be a small group leader.” In her postintervention questionnaire she claimed to have the skills and knowledge needed and could be effective. These two individuals were the only people who shared this idea of getting less comfortable in the beginning and growing to be more comfortable by the end. Through undocumented conversations, this process was a common sentiment with other people in the study.



In the postintervention questionnaire, one person (8 percent) still believed his knowledge was lacking but claimed he had good skills. One person stated, “After this training course, yes, I do think I have the knowledge.” Through the journals the things that helped people feel competent were coming to an understanding of the weekly format, realizing that the groups could happen in a relaxed setting, and knowing that the focus of the groups were “sharing life with others and helping to bear one another’s burdens.” One person summed up the idea of leading small groups by saying, “I’m not freaking out about starting a small group because I get the concept: Go have Godly friendships—encourage one another and be encouraged in the Lord ... in groups of 3-5.” The participants gained an increased level of comfort and competence with leading discipleship small groups when they saw how natural the structure of the groups were.

The weekly journals revealed the skills and knowledge the participants initially thought were important as well as those they discovered really were. The predominant perceived skill necessary was biblical knowledge. Being a good listener and communicator was also listed as initially perceived skills. The skills the participants discovered were beneficial to being small group leaders included building relationships, focusing on prayer, listening for the Holy Spirit, being willing to share their lives and faith, cultivating an atmosphere of openness, being able to devote time to relationships outside of group time, including others in conversation, and minimizing people from monopolizing the conversation. All of these skills were taught during the third through tenth weekly lessons (see Appendix D).

## **Biblical Knowledge**

Biblical knowledge was a constant theme throughout the journals. Every week the idea that discipleship and the discipleship small groups are not a program was emphasized. A sampling of the journals shows that different people reflected on this idea throughout the ten-lesson study. One individual said she would feel more comfortable with a preplanned study course outline rather than only reading the Bible. Another person said in week three, “Small group life is not the same as small group Bible studies.” In the first journal entry, one person noted, “I thought a small group merely involved discussion of ‘religious’ stuff.” The same person reflected in week six, “It is much more than leading a committee.” One person reflected on the discipleship groups in his last journal entry, “Once people see it’s not so structurally rigid and demanding like a business meeting, that mindset should change.” Another person wrote after the fourth lesson that they understood the groups were not to be a Bible study.

One individual said in her week four journal entry, “The purpose of reading scripture in the small group setting is to hear the Holy Spirit and apply it ... not so much to ‘study’ it & argue its meaning.” This response came after the lesson on *lectio divina* where the participants learned about and practiced *lectio divina* for the first time. Before that lesson none of the participants had any prior experience with *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* is latin for reading the Divine, or holy reading (see Appendix D, week four).

## **Building Relationships**

Building relationships was a prevalent skill described in the weekly journals. This skill became more prevalent after *lectio divina* was introduced, and people became less focused on biblical knowledge. Nine people (75 percent) talked about the importance of

building relationships and their role as leaders in helping that part of the small groups develop. Two people (17 percent) said that part of the groups' success would depend on their willingness to open up and share with others. Facilitators need "to provide an atmosphere conducive to openness, giving room for God's guidance." Three other people shared the understanding that the groups "should be a safe place for each member to feel comfortable and confident in speaking/sharing." The participants believed that openness and confidentiality were essential to the group dynamics.

The journals reflected the realization that the discipleship small groups are "basically just Jesus-based friendship(s) —iron sharpening iron." These small groups "should be like friends hanging out, with a focus on spiritual growth through Bible study, prayer, and just talking or counseling each other through life situations." Eight of the nine people who talked about the importance of building relationships realized that they needed to focus on being more intentional in their relationships. One person expounded on this thought by saying people in groups should be "talking regularly about what God is doing in our lives; and check on group members regularly about life and the situations they are praying together about." One person commented, "I love to pray for others, which is important in building relationships within my small group." Phrases such as, "learning more about each other, sharing in one another's lives, and bearing burdens with one another," were prevalent in eight of the participants' journals.

### **Prayer**

Prayer was the most mentioned skill in the participants' journals. Eleven of the twelve (92 percent) participants mentioned prayer in a variety of aspects. The skill was not any particular form of prayer but the role of pray in becoming a group leader, asking

people to join the group, and during the whole life of the group. The participants' journals showed that the necessity of prayer for the life of small groups began with discerning whether or not to become a group leader. In the postintervention questionnaires, six people (50 percent) said they were going to be in prayer about becoming group leaders. Four of the six felt ready to become leaders but knew they needed to pray for guidance through the process. Two of the six were unsure if they were ready to be small group leaders but were going to pray, knowing God could empower them to lead small groups.

Two people (17 percent) journaled about the necessity to pray about the people to invite to become members of the discipleship group. Prayer for and with the members of the group was also stated as a crucial component of building relationships with the members of the group by three people (25 percent). Focused time of prayer during the small group meeting was also seen as very important by eight of the participants (66 percent). Some of the participants commented on prayer before and during Scripture reading. Three people (25 percent) commented on the reality that prayer involved a lot more listening than they usually practiced. Three people also commented on rediscovering the need and desire to time set aside time to pray especially for others in their group.

### **Research Question #3**

The third research question was devised to discover what components of the ten-lesson study were most helpful. The study focused on Scripture reading, prayer, service, fellowship, life in common and the spiritual disciplines outlined by Foster in *The*

*Celebration of Discipline*. The most transformative practice was *lectio divina* (see Appendix D).

### ***Lectio Divina***

Group *lectio divina* was taught during week four in response to questions about the use of Scripture in the discipleship small groups. One person commented after the initial session, “*Lectio Divina* was a bit intense for me.” Eleven people (92 percent) wrote in their journals about how powerful the practice was.

The comments people had concerning the group *lectio divina* ranged from extremely personal to more eye opening. One person found it to be spiritually fulfilling, drawing him back to God. Another person wrote about the whole *lectio divina* process, describing how the process helps to make Scripture come to life.

Some of the responses involved realizations on how much the Holy Spirit speaks through the Bible. One person said he liked the process because he was learning another approach to reading the Bible by “allowing the Holy Spirit to lead me to a word or a phrase to focus on. This allows me to meditate or reflect as to how this word or phrase can draw me closer to Christ.” Three participants talked about the breadth of understanding as people shared different thoughts that came out of reading the Scripture. For two people, those ideas included hearing the different thoughts others in the group had and how much God spoke to them as they read the text three times. Finally, one person summed up the *lectio divina* process in the simplest way, which was a common comment from the eleven individuals who loved the process: “This week’s small group experience was awesome.” *Lectio divina* was the most impactful practice for spiritual growth reported in the journals.

**Spiritual Disciplines**

Six people (50 percent) said in their journals that the study on the spiritual disciplines was especially meaningful. One person loved all of the “good concrete information to consider and incorporate into my daily life.” Two people commented on the realization that incorporating more than just one or two of the disciplines into their daily lives would help them grow closer to Christ. One person saw the variety of disciplines as a way to help create balance in their life. Solitude was specifically talked about by two people in their journals. Two people described wanting to incorporate meditation into their spiritual lives. One of those was thankful for the explanation on the difference in Eastern meditation and Christian meditation: “Eastern attempts to empty the mind whereas Christian meditation should seek to fill the mind with God and His word.”

**Service**

Five people (42 percent) wrote about the joy of serving together as a group. The person who headed up the service project was a staff member, and she journaled about the blessing of having people serve with different skills and talents. She commented that it was great to have people not only willing to serve but who were serving enthusiastically. She noted that it was encouraging as a leader when people were serving with their whole hearts.

The person who spearheaded the actions of the lesson on service reflected on two aspects of service that had not before occurred to them. This individual often serves many people alone and has not always focused on enlisting others to help. Their two thoughts revolved on the service provided in allowing themselves to be served and the opportunity that can be provided by allowing others the opportunity to serve. This person said, “I

need to change my thoughts and consider that I am giving someone the opportunity to be blessed by serving others when I ask them to join me in doing something.” The person who led the service lesson learned that many people like to serve, but they need to be asked and empowered.

Others in the group loved the togetherness the whole group had as they planned, met, and carried out the time of service. One person commented on how well serving brought the group together in a unique way, that it made for more bonding and trusting. Another comment about the service lesson was the reminder not to let “service be ‘self righteous’ service.” Finally, one person understood that service is another way to worship God.

### **Concepts of Discipleship**

The first two lessons explained the depth and breadth of discipleship. Five people (43 percent) commented on the transformative nature of seeing discipleship differently. Two people (17 percent) talked about the realization that discipleship was more than witnessing to others; it was a lifelong process of helping others continue to grow in their relationship with Christ. Two people found the four modes of discipleship especially helpful in thinking about how they grow in their faith and how they help others grow. In thinking about these modes, one person commented, “Relationship, relationship, relationship—not a program.” The other person thought she, and others, only used one or two modes, and that most of her friends only experience God in worship services. She said, “There is little relationship with other Christians outside the church building. We tend to keep our social life separate from our church life.” This quote reiterates the reality I discovered when participants of the study who were longtime members of the church

and attended the same service, introduced themselves to each other on the first night of the study.

Three other people highlighted the relational nature of discipleship by sharing about the opportunity small groups gave them “to form new friendships through fellowship and [focus] more on God’s word and to pray, pray, pray.” Two of those three were particularly thankful for the ability to begin relationships with others who could help disciple them and that they could help disciple.

### **Fellowship**

The fellowship lesson was the ninth one, held on a Saturday. Only three people commented on fellowship in their journals due, in part, to people forgetting to turn in journal entries and then doubling up with the final lesson. One of the participants said she had not thought about including the participants’ family members in the fellowship time but realized doing so helped the group get to know each other better.

The small group training sessions yielded a few other comments in the journals that were worth noting. One person in week six, after the third experience in group *lectio divina*, discovered “that it is okay to disagree.” This realization ties in with another member who wrote that small group “members were not to judge, but listen.” Both of these comments were in context of personal growth and realizations of how they can participate in group life. Another person wrote it was helpful to realize that if groups are intergenerational, broader ideas, perspectives, and life experiences can be shared. Finally one person wrote about the blessing that relationships in small groups can be.



### Summary of Major Findings

The journals and open-ended questions in the questionnaires allowed the participants to share their thoughts and feelings as they reflected on their faith and the weekly sessions. These two tools allowed the participants to express connections between particular practices and the relationships they were developing through them, both with God and with others. The tools also provided an avenue for the participants to dialogue about their feelings of preparedness for leading discipleship small groups in the future.

The major findings of this study include the following:

1. Learning the practice of *lectio divina* opened the participants' eyes to hearing the Spirit speak through the Bible.
2. Reading devotionally in groups can be transformational for people's relationship with Jesus and each other.
3. People were able to begin thinking about discipleship in terms of their relationships with others instead of thinking about it as their own conversion and church involvement.
4. People expanded their thinking and practice of prayer to include listening to God, praying for group members, and praying for all aspects of their group life.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

The United Methodist Church in the South Georgia Annual Conference has been rediscovering how to help its churches focus on making disciples instead of making converts or church members. The church too often does not do well being a Christian community where people share life and faith and help one another on the path of discipleship. Being a disciple and making disciples should be a natural part of every Christian's life in faith.

This project is interested in equipping the laity to lead discipleship small groups. These small groups can be an essential component of church life, helping believers to be and make disciples. Discipleship small groups help create a close community where people share their real struggles in life together. These types of close, accountable groups exist in many other parts of American culture but are not prevalent in most churches.

The goal of this project was to equip members of Wrens United Methodist Church to facilitate small discipleship groups that will help the participants grow closer to Jesus Christ and each other as they read Scripture, practice spiritual disciplines, and serve their community together. The purpose of the study was to train selected small group leaders at WUMC to use a discipleship model that incorporates Scripture reading, fellowship activities, missional projects, and personal reflection to help the participants grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and closer to each other in Christian community.

### **Major Findings**

Small groups at WUMC consist of three adult Sunday school classes and short-term Bible studies that I offer. No regular small groups exist that focus on accountable discipleship. A little more than one-third of the worshipping congregation take part in small groups offered. The purpose of this study was to train discipleship small group leaders who could lead groups of three to five people. The study had three goals. The first goal was to get the participants to buy into the idea of discipleship small groups by helping them to understand what they are and how important they can be for a person's spiritual life. The second goal was to equip them to be able to lead these small groups. The third, long-range goal was for these groups to begin to transform the lives of the members of their church and our community.

The study yielded some expected and unexpected results. I expected to find that people were not comfortable leading small groups. Many people did not think they had enough biblical knowledge or were uncomfortable putting themselves in a place of spiritual leadership over others. The difficulty people have building relationships was another expected problem that was uncovered. I was also aware that the kind of small groups I was promoting had not been a part of their Christian life. I anticipated that the participants' understanding of discipleship would largely consist of their personal walk with Jesus being worked out in private, with the outward expression being church attendance and involvement.

### **The Practice of *Lectio Divina***

I was surprised how fast the participants fell in love with the practice of group *lectio divina* and how well and fast the groups started growing closer together. Maddix

and Thompson said it was often hard to get people to begin reading devotionally instead of searching the Bible for applicable truths to apply to their lives (84). This need to reorient people's reading of the Bible took me by surprise. After the first two weeks of *lectio divina*, almost the entire group had fallen in love with this type of reading.

The first two lessons were focused on the historical background and the need for discipleship small groups in the life of the church. The next eight lessons were designed to focus on training and explaining the different components of the small groups as well as skills needed to be able to facilitate these groups. In week three I outlined the suggested structure for group time and briefly discussed the use of Scripture. I referenced the concept of *lectio divina* to help the participants understand these groups were not intended to be a Bible study but a place where people could share what the Holy Spirit was saying to them through the Scriptures. The original plan was not to spend a lot of time explaining this type of Bible reading to the group. It was not initially a focus of any of the ten lessons. At the end of the lesson for week three, the group asked if I could spend time elaborating on the use of Scripture in the small groups. I then restructured the remaining lessons so I could focus one lesson on the use of Scripture.

The first half of the lesson the next week focused in detail on the difference between an academic and a devotional reading of Scripture. I was careful to note that both were necessary in a person's spiritual life. My experience with an academic study in groups is that one or two people become the expert, and others listen. The tendency for people to argue over what the text means, creating winners and losers, those who are right and those who are wrong is present in an academic approach. If groups read devotionally, everyone can be on equal ground, sharing what they believe the Holy Spirit

is saying to them. I also taught in detail about the process of group *lectio divina*. During the second half of the lesson we separated into small groups and practiced *lectio divina* together. After the lesson it was obvious that this practice was going to be the catalyst for people wanting to be a part of discipleship small groups. The most important thing I needed to do to get people to want to lead small groups was to help them find discover a desire to be in small group with others. The participants needed to believe that being a part of discipleship small groups was important for them.

I worked through the rest of my material and restructured all but two of the remaining six lessons to consist of an hour of training and thirty minutes for group *lectio divina*. The only perceptible negative to this restructuring was that at the end of the training session several of the people loved the relationships they had created and wanted to continue in small groups with people with whom they had been sharing during the study instead of going out and creating new groups.

Group *lectio divina* was used to help the participants begin to read the Bible differently than they might have in the past. The participants were taught that the Bible is the Word of God, not simply because God wrote the Bible or inspired its writing but because the Holy Spirit speaks through it. The Bible is the living Word. I did not want the groups to treat the Bible like a dead book to be dissected and disputed. People in the groups needed to be able to read the Bible and hear the Holy Spirit speaking to them through it.

The nature of this type of group shifts the authority from being top down, from the pastor to the people, and places the authority in God through the Holy Spirit to be the teacher, so the group can hear and discern together. The idea of the Holy Spirit as teacher

was evident in the *lectio divina* time during the sixth lesson. I shared with the groups the passage from Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” After the second reading of the text I believed I heard the Holy Spirit sharing with me a few ideas about the text. Before I spoke, the person sitting across from me shared the first half of what I believed I heard the Spirit say, then the person to my right said the second half! This encounter highlighted the ideas that the Holy Spirit is present in community, and the Holy Spirit is the teacher.

I believe seeing God as teacher is part of a shift going on in the Church. The church experienced a great shift during the Reformation as people began to have copies of the Bible and question the authority of the Catholic Church. The Reformation was fueled in part due to the invention of the printing press in Germany in 1450. The reformers were able to share their ideas more widely, and Bibles were being printed, enabling more than just the priests and monks to have Bibles for themselves. The church is being forced to deal with how inventions like the Television and the Internet are changing how people communicate and relate. Suddenly people find themselves in a flat world. The way Wikipedia works is a great example of where American culture might be headed. Anyone can add to or correct articles on Wikipedia. People no longer need a certain level of education to have their voice heard. People no longer need a publisher to agree to share their ideas or a record label to back them to have their music heard. The world is moving into a time when all voices can come to the table and be heard. With the rise of e-mail, cell phones and social media, the culture is finding less need for *official* people, enabling grassroots movements to spring up and take off.

The church has the opportunity to respond to the changing world and return to the source of life and to envision how it is going to evolve. The first step for the church is to rediscover the person and Lordship of Jesus (Hirsch 100). In discovering Jesus again, we need to know him as a personal teacher; not *a* teacher, but *the* teacher. If Jesus is not the teacher, then people cannot be his disciples. People will be a disciple of whoever their teacher is. In one perspective, the church has lost the meaning of being a disciple of Jesus Christ because it has lost the practice of having Jesus as the teacher (Willard, *Great Omission* 2520).

This approach to rediscovering the lordship of Jesus and encountering the Bible as a living book is best done within a larger community. Private reading of the Bible and personal times of communing with the Holy Spirit are essential, but disciples do not need to keep their relationship with Christ cloistered away. Christians are called to be a part of the body of Christ, which necessitates living in community. It is not enough for people to attend church. They must get connected to other disciples so they can be discipled and disciple others. For too long I have heard the mantra that people do not talk about religion or money with others. Discipleship by nature is sharing relationships: sharing the relationship a disciple has with Jesus with others. Relationships are flexible and always evolving, and discipleship is no different.

Shifting the lessons also modeled for the participants another aspect of leading small groups—being able to adapt to the needs of the small group as they arise. Scripture reveals many times when Jesus knew that it was time to move on and he left needs unmet because he knew what was most important, but other times he seemingly changed his plans to meet the needs of those around him, using those opportunities as teaching

moments for his disciples. Jesus' actions in Matthew 14 are a prime example. After hearing that John the Baptist had been beheaded, Jesus immediately left, crossing over to a secluded place on the other side of the sea, but the crowds followed him. Instead of telling the crowds he wanted to be alone, he spent the rest of the day healing the sick. When evening comes, instead of sending the people away to find food, he performed one of the most famous miracles—feeding the five thousand. Finally, Jesus sent the disciples out in the boat, sent the crowd away, and then went up on the mountain to find his place of solitude. One of the many things I see Jesus doing is adjusting his plan to meet the needs of the people and using the circumstances as a teaching moment for his disciples.

I wanted the groups to follow the model I created but expressed over and over that the model was not a program. Discipleship small groups are a way of creating relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ who can walk the faith together. As leaders, they should know the model but also know they are free to follow the Holy Spirit to tailor the model to meet the group's needs.

### **Transforming Relationships with Jesus and Others**

One of the church's biggest challenges is equipping the laity for ministry. I have found many layers to this widespread problem. In South Georgia Methodism, like other places, clergy and laity have created a culture where the ministry staff is providing goods or services for the congregation to consume. Churches rarely see themselves as the body of Christ in a particular community with the understanding that the whole body of Christ is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with those inside and outside the church. United Methodist churches in the South Georgia Annual Conference are predominantly attractional and not missional in nature. A major problem my parishioners have is a lack



of skills or desire to build relationships with new people either in the community or within the church. During the first group meeting for the study, I had participants introducing themselves to each other. These were all people who have been going to WUMC for several years, most attending the same service, which usually averages seventy to eighty people, and I discovered that some people did not even know each other's names.

The most common reservation people expressed to me through conversations about starting discipleship small groups was the awkwardness in approaching other people to see if they would like to be in a small group with them. As their pastor I am hopeful that I can help guide them through the process because the people that participated in the study know how wonderful the relationships in the groups can be once they are formed. Overcoming the obstacle of that first awkward step of talking to people they do not know well, or people they do know well, but with whom they want to move into a deeper relationship, is a challenge for many people.

One of the benefits of discipleship small groups is that people's relationships with the group members and many other people they know will be transformed. I did not research ways to help people overcome their initial fears about starting these groups. After completing the study, I discovered the arena of relationship building is a place that needs an investment of time and energy. I have a strong suspicion that what I saw in micro form with the participants' insecurities starting new groups is a major reason the church at large is not actively involved in the Great Commission, except by giving money to a select few who have been trained to be missionaries or evangelists.

The hurdle that was easier to overcome in the study was the idea that they did not need to be specialists to lead a discipleship small group. They did not need to be Bible scholars or have any exceptional skills. They only needed to be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to use them and step out of their comfort zone and guide people in forming a group. They learned skills through the study, but most were things they already knew. They simply needed to be empowered to lead with what they knew.

Finally, for some, the time commitment was still a hurdle. An additional weekly meeting can be challenging to add to a person's schedule, depending on work and family constraints. The idea that more is involved than showing up at a weekly meeting, that discipleship involves sharing life together, can be daunting. I had conversations with a few of the participants about getting to the heart of these small groups, mining what was essential and then forming groups or relationships that would accomplish the goal even though they might look different. The end goal is to have relationships with others where mutual discipling is occurring, thus also creating a new culture in the church.

Ultimately to help people overcome their fears about starting new groups, more training is needed. I was on the right track as we practiced everything in community. If more training sessions were added, we would be able to spend more time in corporate prayer about specific people to invite to become members of individual small groups. The whole group would be able to help each other recruit members for their small groups. As the leader I would stay in regular contact with the new group leaders to see how they were progressing. One consideration might even be training people to go out in pairs and find two to three other people to form a small group. This last approach would more closely model Jesus' method of never sending the disciples out alone to do the work of

the church. Even when Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs, he still took time to debrief with them when they came back. It is important for the people beginning the discipleship small groups to know that they are not walking this journey alone, that they have support from the leader and from others who are trying to start small groups as well.

### **New Concepts of Discipleship**

Through my research I was able to see how the broader church's conversation around being a disciple and a life of discipleship has been developing. Willard and Boren were particularly influential for me in this regard. The South Georgia Annual Conference has been talking about discipleship for the past few years, and I have heard many conversations with colleagues about discipling people while really only meaning conversion. Another tendency is to view discipleship as the new program that simply sees discipleship as the newest church-growth method and a way for people to feel as if they are moving forward (Hull 2009). The conversation on discipleship has matured into a discussion that includes but is not limited to the Wesleyan idea of sanctification. Christians would be well served to look back and reclaim the practices of Jesus and the Wesleyan roots as people rediscover the meaning of being disciples of Jesus Christ.

A few of the participants had been sharing their faith with others on some level. A retired teacher talked about the opportunities she had to share the love of Christ with her students. Most of the participants did not have the kind of lived-out faith that expressed the importance of sharing their faith with others around them. Their discipleship was focused on their own private walk with the Lord and things such as church attendance and the committees on which they served. By the end of the study, their concept of discipleship had shifted towards sharing their lives and faith with others. As their pastor I

was able to observe how the relationships of the group members with each other had grown and were continuing to grow after the study was complete. I have also been able to witness how some of the group members are more expressive with their faith and are volunteering for more ministry-based ways to serve in WUMC. It is also a great blessing to see or hear the steps the participants are taking to live out their discipleship with their spouses, children and grandchildren, differently than they were before the study. I have been most thankful that the participants understand that discipleship small groups are helpful tools in their own discipleship and not the goal of their discipleship. They understand discipleship is life with God and others and not a weekly meeting.

Discipleship small groups give people accountable, Christ-centered relationships to encourage them as they live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The groups are not the primary way the participants live out their discipleship, but they are the central hub for helping people process how to be disciples everywhere they go, as well as providing support and accountability as they follow Jesus. Discipleship small groups help their participants understand how different parts of their walk with God make up their life of discipleship. These groups also help disciples discern areas of their relationship with Jesus that need to be strengthened.

The study supported the literature in that most people were not focusing on their own discipleship and especially not on the aspect of their discipleship that was calling them to make disciples. People's involvement in church leadership or activities did not have a direct connection to living as disciples. The participants' relationships with each other changed as the study progressed as they were focusing more on their call to make disciples. Through conversations with the participants, growth happened in their

relationships with people outside the group, too. Some people focused on being disciples with their friends, with their children, or in ministry areas within the church. Participants were living with a renewed sense of purpose in how they lived out their Christian faith.

### **Expanded Practice of Prayer**

One of the surprises of the study was the growth the participants had in the area of prayer. I found people repeating back my statement in an early week regarding group formation: “Pray, pray, pray.” They learned to pray about the people they asked to be a part of the group. They learned to pray for the group members, and not just those who were sick. They learned to pray before reading Scripture, asking the Spirit to speak. They learned to pray for discernment during the reading process. They learned to pray at the end of the session, thanking God for the conversation and for any areas of need that had arisen through conversation. They learned to be praying for their group members throughout the week, not necessarily of a specific need but just because all people can benefit from others praying for them. The biggest shift for many people was learning to listen to God instead of always speaking to God.

The focus on prayer, especially learning to listen, is essential for these groups to operate well. If the groups are going to rely on the Holy Spirit as teacher as they read and share, they must start by listening to the Spirit. The idea of listening to the Spirit was emphasized with a new understanding for the group of Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” The participants learned from conversation during *lectio divina* how much the Holy Spirit was present guiding their conversation. Learning to listen in prayer during group time helped the people in the study learn to listen more to God when praying outside of the group as well. They

understood that if they are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, they are called to be fully devoted followers of Jesus, and that if they are to follow, they have to be able to hear Jesus speaking. They grew in understanding of hearing God speak through the Bible, in their prayer life, through others, and through the world around them.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The training sessions have proved to be an excellent foundation for future work and training with other churches and individuals who want to incorporate discipleship small groups into their lives or the life of their churches. Currently I have plans to lead a retreat for another church that already has small groups going and the pastor wants help breathe new life and support into them.

The South Georgia Annual Conference leads a one-day conference called Pathways to Healthy Congregations. I am submitting information to teach three seventy five-minute classes focusing on methodist history of bands and class meetings, models for discipleship small groups, and how to train discipleship small group facilitators. I am hopeful that these classes will become a vehicle to communicate what I have learned with others in the South Georgia Annual Conference.

Training sessions for discipleship small groups will become a norm for my own pastoral ministry at least once a year. Creating and nurturing these small groups is one of the things about which I am most passionate as I follow Jesus Christ. Working through all of the research and conducting the training sessions has been very empowering for me as I begin to make discipleship small groups a major part of my own ministry.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study had some limitations. One limitation was the small group size of twelve people who were all Caucasian, with the majority being between 40 to 60 years old. In addition I selected all of the participants. Another limitation was that the study was conducted in a rural town in Georgia. The limitation of time was also a problem. The study had to fit into a small window between Labor Day and Thanksgiving and had only ten weeks to take place.

I had been pastoring WUMC for a little over a year when the study began. My ministry style is geared towards relational discipleship, and I have been modeling different dynamics of these small groups in varying levels in many areas of the church. A majority of the participants in the study had already bought in to my ministry style, so the step to form discipleship small groups might have been easier because of my approach to ministry. Pastors or churches that are not already geared this way may have a more challenging time getting started.

Another limitation is the years of research and thinking I have invested in the idea of discipleship, which helped me be able to respond to questions and dynamics as they arose in the group sessions. The practice of *lectio divina* was an insignificant part of my research but proved to be one of the best tools to get people on board with the idea of discipleship small groups. Every church, and every grouping within a church, and sometimes even between individuals in a group, will require the facilitator to be focused on listening to the Holy Spirit to know how to tailor the material to their particular group to meet its needs.

At the end of the study, one participant wanted to have a preplanned lesson guide to follow instead of only using the Bible. As she and I talked about it, I told her that as her pastor I would be more than willing to help her find a resource that could be good to use. I would encourage her as the group grew to consider transitioning to using only the Bible. We talked about the essential focus of the group: creating a relationship with others focusing on God so the group members could develop solid godly relationships where they could share life and faith together.

The essential thing for a person trying to develop these small groups in a local church is to realize that each step is a part of people's faith journey. Becoming a part of the *perfect* discipleship small group is not the end of the journey; but it is just part of it. Discipleship small groups are not the destination. At best they become a group of other trained traveling companions that can help you navigate the trail ahead.

### **Unexpected Observations**

I wrote about the surprises that I discovered as they appeared in the major findings. I was not anticipating people to be so unfamiliar with the concept of reading the Bible devotionally or listening to the Holy Spirit. The lack of the practice of prayer was not shocking, but the realization that they should be listening as much, if not more than they were talking, was surprising. I would probably have not been as surprised if that was the general congregation's response, but these were people I believe to be more spiritually mature than most. I knew one of the problems was going to be people's relational fears starting new small groups, but I was surprised to realize the depths of those fears.



### **Recommendations**

The most important area of study going forward would be to focus on the fears people have in creating new friendships or in moving from being acquaintances to close friends. Currently my only solution to this problem is to teach as Jesus taught simply by involving others in ministering together until they are comfortable to go out and minister with others.

Expanding the study to fourteen or fifteen lessons would also be beneficial to help focus on bridging the gap between the training sessions and the participants actually starting their own discipleship small groups. In theory future participants could be encouraged to be starting their small groups around lesson thirteen or fourteen. The last two to three lessons could meet every other week, giving opportunity for the participants to start their small groups. The last few training sessions would then fall after the participants had already created their small groups and would be a time for troubleshooting, answering questions, and peer learning. They would be able to learn from each other's successes or troubles.

### **Postscript**

In many ways Christians live with the idea that they exist to support the church. Theologically this is true in the sense that the *church* consists of individual people, but practically, Church gets translated into describing my church, the buildings, the programs, and the budget. Disciples need to regain the understanding that the church exists to fulfill the unchanging promise God gave Abraham:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2-3)

The Great Commission was a reiteration of God's original mission for his people.

Jesus puts flesh to Abraham's promise and call through the model he lived out with his disciples. Jesus took three years pouring life and faith into the twelve disciples and some others who then become the catalyst for sharing faith with the world around them. I believe the best way to bless the nations is by being intentional in relationships with a few people who will, in turn, do likewise.

Discipleship small groups are an excellent tool to help the body of Christ live into the calling God has for all his children to bless the nations. These groups can provide support and structure helping God's children to fulfill the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Discipleship small groups, and training the laity to lead them can be an effective tool in helping the church to fulfill the mission God has given his people.

**APPENDIX A**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

August 26, 2015

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am a Doctor of Ministry participant at Asbury Theological Seminary and I am conducting research on the topic training discipleship group leaders. I would like to train 12 people from Wrens UMC and you have been selected as one invited to assist in the study.

Since the learning process can be involve your personal spiritual growth I want to assure you that your responses to the questionnaires and journals will be kept confidential. I do not want to jeopardize your relationships in your church, so I will keep your name confidential on any or the material you submit to me.

I believe discipleship small groups can be a central element of any church and I believe the findings from this survey will allow me to assist congregations as they design their own discipleship plans. My hope is that our church and others will be helped because you and others like you have taken the time to participate.

Once the research is completed in approximately one week, I will destroy the individual surveys and keep the all data electronically on my personal password protected laptop for no more than 2 months after graduation.

Please know that you can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions on the questionnaire's or journals. I realize that your participation is entirely voluntary and I appreciate your willingness to consider being part of the study. Feel free to call or write me at any time if you need any more information. My number is 706-244-8488 and my e-mail is thadgharvey@gmail.com.

If you are willing to assist me in this study, please sign and date this letter below to indicate your voluntary participation. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,  
Thad Harvey

I volunteer to participate in the study described above and so indicate by my signature below:

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please print your name: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX B**

### **QUESTIONNAIRES**

#### **Preintervention Questionnaire**

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age range, race and gender  
20s    30s    40s    50s    60s    70s  
  
Male    Female  
  
White    Other
3. How long have you been a Christian?
4. What is your educational/professional background?
5. What is your involvement at Wrens UMC?
6. How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?
7. What does being a Disciple mean to you?
8. How important is it for you to help others grow closer to Jesus?
9. Do you think you have the skills and knowledge necessary to lead a small group?
10. How effective do you think you would be as a small group leader?

**Postintervention Questionnaire**

1. How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What does being a disciple mean to you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How important is it for you to help others grow closer to Jesus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Do you think you have the skills and knowledge necessary to lead a small group?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How effective do you think you would be as a small group leader?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **WEEKLY JOURNAL**

\*Please write a journal response to one or more of the following questions.  
E-mail your responses to [thadgharvey@gmail.com](mailto:thadgharvey@gmail.com) or reply to this e-mail.

What was the most meaningful thing you learned this week?

What helped you feel empowered to be a small group leader?

What has changed in your understanding of small group life?

## APPENDIX D

### LESSON PLANS

#### Lesson 1: A Framework for Making Disciples

Prayer

##### HouseKeeping

- \* Session Outline
- \* Pre- & Post- Questionnaire
- \* Weekly Journals
- \* Makeup Sessions
- \* Questions or Comments

##### What is Discipleship?

- \* Matthew 4:18-22 - Who?
- \* Luke 14:25-33, Matthew 19:16-25 - The Cost
- \* Mark 3:13-15 - Disciples vs Apostles
- \* Luke 9:1-2, Luke 10:1-11 - Doing the Work
- \* Hebrews 12:1-2 - The Lifelong Process
- \* Questions or Comments

##### Convert or Disciple?

- \* Luke 15:11-32 - Prodigal Son.
- \* Information does not always lead to transformation
- \* 1 Thessalonians 2:8 - Life, purpose and way of being.
- \* Conversion = Justification
- \* Discipleship = Prevenient, Justifying and Sanctifying Grace
- \* Discipleship = life long journey of answering the call to, "Come, follow me."
- \* Questions or Comments

##### Imitating Christ - "Just As"

- \* John 6:57
- \* John 10:14-15
- \* John 15:9-10
- \* John 17:21

##### Paul, Barnabbas & Timothy

- \* Someone who disciples you
- \* Someone you do mutual discipleship with
- \* Someone you disciple
- \* Warning: break-ups might happen

Prayer

## **Lesson 2: Modes of Discipleship & our Wesleyan Heritage**

James 5:16 “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

Galatians 6:2 says, ‘Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.’ Discipleship groups were Wesley’s tool for helping people to go on to perfection.

“Disciple making is not a program, but a relationship” (Ogden *Transforming Discipleship* 145)

### **4 Modes of Discipleship:**

Experiential

Relational

Academic

Personal

### **Wesley’s Reason for Bands**

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no *regular societies*, no discipline, no order or connection. And the consequence is that nine in ten of the once awakened are now faster asleep than ever. (Ward, Heitzenrater 21:424)

“The Holy Club meetings included prayer, Bible reading, sharing the experiences of the day, and encouraging one another. Their activities focused on three areas: the imitation of Christ, evangelism, and doing good to those in need, especially those in prison” (Hull 955). It was the methodical nature of the Holy Club that drew the nickname Methodists from outsiders.

Philip Spener, known as the “Father of Pietism,” heavily influenced Count Von Zinzendorf and the Moravians. Spener encouraged people to read and discuss the Bible in the *collegia pietatis* or small groups. He also encouraged members to read the Scripture



privately, and to read books of the Bible from start to finish so they could be understood the way they were written. He wanted small groups to run according to 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” Spener’s small groups also focused on helping the group members to live out a life of faith and holiness and to stay committed to God (Hull 917).

In May of 1738 Wesley formed a new Religious Society that eventually became the Fetter Lane Society. They met weekly for preaching, either from Wesley or a Moravian leader, Peter Bohler. The goal of the Society was described simply. Such a Society is no other than a company of men “‘having the form, and seeking the power of godliness’, 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” (Davies 9:69).

The Fetter Lane Society was distinct from the rest of Wesley’s attempts at classes or bands in that participants did not have to be members of the Anglican Church to be a part of it. The only requirement was that the participants wanted to grow in love, holiness and purity of intention. Although he insisted on members striving for holiness in some rigid ways, he also understood holiness in terms of love (Davies 9:25). The society members had to display a strong Christian commitment and heart bent to God.

### **Going Forward with Bands**

- A few people that really know us, and that we can really know
- Accountability
- Support
- Encouragement
- 3-5 - any fewer and there is no group, any more and someone is going to get left out

### **Questions for Bands**

The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.”

To this end, we intend, —

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.

**6.** To desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may he to this effect: —

- 1.** Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
- 2.** Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?
- 3.** Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God?
- 4.** Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
- 5.** Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
- 6.** Do you desire to be told of your faults?
- 7.** Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?
- 8.** Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
- 9.** Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?
- 10.** Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
- 11.** Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion others; the four following at every meeting: —

- 1.** What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
  - 2.** What temptations have you met with?
  - 3.** How were you delivered?
  - 4.** What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
- (Wesley Vol 9: 77-78)

### Lesson 3: Beginning Stages

Prayer

HouseKeeping

- \* Weekly Journals
- \* Makeup Sessions & Noon/Night Options
- \* Questions or Comments

Forming Groups

- \* Prayer. Prayer. Prayer
- \* All Men or all Women
- \* Positives of Intergenerational Groups
- \* Don't choose people you want to "fix"
- \* Stay away from forming Common Interest Groups
- \* How would you sell this?

Beginning Relationship Building

- \* Prayer Requests
- \* Emphasizing the groups is a safe place
- \* Creating space for everyone to speak
- \* How do you help group members get to know one another?
- \* Incarnational leading, as Jesus leads

Creating Specific Goals

- \* Specific enough to understand, but broad enough to create space
- \* Meeting Time, Place, Length
- \* How do you keep in touch
- \* Scripture Reading—*Lectio Devina*
- \* Fellowship
- \* Spiritual Disciplines
- \* Service

The Groups are Accountable to Leadership

- \* Wesley visited His bands
- \* Initially it'll be the Pastor, every two months

Prayer

## **Lesson 4: Format and Scripture Reading**

Prayer

### HouseKeeping

- \* Weekly Journals
- \* Makeup Sessions & Noon/Night Option
- \* Questions or Comments

### Suggested Weekly Format

- \* Catching Up 5-10 Minutes
- \* Prayer Requests 5-10 Minutes
- \* Prayer (Initially Facilitator till others are comfortable)
- \* Sharing Meaningful Encounters with God through the Scripture Reading
- \* Prayer (especially for any needs that arise out of sharing) 5-10 Minutes
- \* Other options:
  - \* Closest to God & Farthest from God
  - \* Time you followed & Time you denied
  - \* ???

### Scripture Reading

- \* Central focus is on God Speaking
- \* Encourage journaling or writing in your Bible
- \* It is not a Bible Study
- \* More than only reading during meeting
- \* Less than Reading through the Bible in a year
- \* 2-3 Chapters a week?
- \* Possible places to start: the Gospels, 1 John, James, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Acts
- \* Pray. Pray. Pray, about where to start

Lectio Devina

- \* The Goal: To pursue the presence of God in every area of life
- \* Does not seek information but communion with God
- \* Treats the Bible not as a text to be studied, but as the “Living Word”
- \* Prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to read with you
  - \* Centering Prayer
- \* Read a passage several times
  - \* listen for the still small voice
  - \* the Word for you today
- \* Meditate
  - \* focus on a phrase or phrases, a word, a thought
- \* Pray
  - \* why is this speaking to you?
- \* Contemplate
  - \* How is this calling you to be? What is it calling you to do?

Lectio Devina in Groups

- \* Group leader reads the text three times, each time followed by silence and an opportunity to share
- \* 1st Reading is to hear a word or passage that speaks to you
- \* 2nd Reading is to hear where that word or phrase touches your heart and life
- \* 3rd Reading is to be called forth into doing or being

Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew 5:13-16

## Lesson 5: Prayer

Prayer

HouseKeeping

- \* Weekly Journals
- \* Questions or Comments

Prayer

- \* Beginning: Prayer for the group, requests and “How can we pray for you?”
- \* Centering Prayer before reading
- \* Ending: Pray for things that have been brought up, and strength in going/growing

Prayer—Richard Foster

- \* “Ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father.”
- \* “Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us”
- \* “We are to change the world by prayer.”
- \* “One of the most critical aspects in learning to pray for others is to get in contact with God so that his life and power can flow through us into others.”
- \* “Listening to the Lord is the first thing, the second thing, and the third thing necessary for successful intercession.”
  - \* “If it be thy will”
  - \* Prayer of Guidance
  - \* Prayer of Relinquishment

Prayer Requests and Prayer

Lectio Devina

Matthew 6:5-15

- \* Group leader reads the text three times, each time followed by silence and an opportunity to share
- \* 1st Reading is to hear a word or passage that speaks to you
- \* 2nd Reading is to hear where that word or phrase touches your heart and life
- \* 3rd Reading is to be called forth into doing or being

Prayer

## **Lesson 6: Spiritual Disciplines**

### **Richard Foster**

Prayer

HouseKeeping

- \* Weekly Journals
- \* Plans for Service and Fellowship

The disciplines are not the answer but they are the means to the answer

### Inward Disciplines

- \* Meditation
  - \* “The ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word.”
  - \* Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to fill the mind.”
- \* Prayer
  - \* Changing our world and ourselves through prayer
- \* Fasting
  - \* “When you fast” —Jesus
  - \* Train our bodies to rely on God
- \* Study
  - \* “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” John 8:32
  - \* Both Scripture and the work of God in our world

### Outward Disciplines

- \* Simplicity
  - \* Inward - the divine center / Outward - God’s business, not our busyness
- \* Solitude
  - \* “More a state of mind and heart than it is a place.”
  - \* Finding a quiet place. Little solitudes that fill our day.
- \* Submission
  - \* To value others and not have to “win”
- \* Service
  - \* “Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing transforms the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness.”

### Corporate Disciplines

#### \* Confession

- \* “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” - John 20:23
- \* “The discipline of confession brings and end to pretense.”

#### \* Worship

- \* “Singing, praying, praising all may lead to worship, but worship is more than any of them.”
- \* “Just as worship begins in holy expectancy, it ends in holy obedience. If worship does not propel us into greater obedience, it has not been worship.”

#### \* Guidance

- \* “Where 2 or 3 are gathered, I am there with them.” Matthew 18:20
- \* Clearness Committee

#### \* Celebration

- \* “The Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot!”
- \* “Freedom from anxiety and care forms the basis for celebration.”

### Prayer Requests and Prayer

#### Lectio Devina

Psalm 40:1-10

- \* Group leader reads the text three times, each time followed by silence and an opportunity to share
- \* 1st Reading is to hear a word or passage that speaks to you
- \* 2nd Reading is to hear where that word or phrase touches your heart and life
- \* 3rd Reading is to be called forth into doing or being

### Prayer



## Lesson 7: Service

“Self-righteous service comes through human effort. It expends immense amounts of energy calculating and scheming how to render service.”

“True service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large service. Where difference is noted, the true servant is often drawn to the small service, not out of false modesty, but because he genuinely sees it as the most important task.”

“Self-righteous service requires external rewards. It needs to know that people see and appreciate the effort. It seeks human applause—with proper religious modesty of course. True service rests contented in hiddenness. It does not fear the lights and blare of attention, but it does not seek them either.”

“Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. It eagerly waits to see if the person served will reciprocate in kind.”

“Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve.”

“Self-righteous service is insensitive. It insists on meeting the need even when to do so would be destructive. It demands the opportunity to help.”

“Self-righteous service fractures community. In the final analysis, once all the religious trappings are removed, it centers in the glorification of the individual.”

“When we choose to serve, we are still in charge. We decide whom we will serve and when we will serve. And if we are charge, we will worry a great deal about anyone stepping on his, that is, taking charge over us. But when we choose to be a servant, we give up the right to be in charge.”

Service of allowing yourself to be served.

Service of courtesy, hospitality, listening, bearing one another’s burdens and the service of sharing the word of life with others.

\*All Quotations from Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (126-40).

## **Lesson 8: Life in Common**

Discipleship should never result in continuous navel gazing. Instead discipleship calls disciples to share their life and faith with others.

Prayer

HouseKeeping

- \* Weekly Journals
- \* Questions or Comments

Watch over One Another in Love

- \* We are to honor (Rom 12:10), accept (Rom 15:7), bear with (Eph 4:2; Col 3:13), forgive (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), pray for, and confess sins to one another (James 5: 16). We are to cheer and challenge (Heb 3:13), admonish and confront (Rom 15: 14; Col 3:16; Gal 6:1–6), warn (1 Thess 5:14), and teach one another (Col 3:16). We are to stop gossiping and slandering (Gal 5:15) or being fake (Rom 12:9) with each other. We are to bear burdens (Gal 6:2), share possessions (Acts 4:32), and submit to each other (Eph 5:21)
- \* Most people are not self reflective and need the groups' help

Bearing Each Other's Burdens

- \* Praying for One Another
- \* Keeping in touch outside of group time

Jesus' model of discipleship was not a program he made people take, but it was Him sharing his life with them.

The most important part of the group's relationship is how they are sharing life together outside their group time. Do their families know each other, do they serve together in their neighborhoods, are they reaching out to others? Life in common, not a "deep" one hour meeting, is the goal of discipleship groups life together. — ideas from Scott Boren

Prayer Requests and Prayer

*Lectio Devina*

James 5:13-20

- \* Group leader reads the text three times, each time followed by silence and an opportunity to share
- \* 1st Reading is to hear a word or passage that speaks to you
- \* 2nd Reading is to hear where that word or phrase touches your heart and life
- \* 3rd Reading is to be called forth into doing or being

Prayer

## **Lesson 9: Fellowship**

During our time of fellowship remember its okay to talk about football, but try and have more meaningful conversations too. Try and get to know each other and their families. Play together and laugh together.

Having family here is a wonderful way to get to know who we all are, because our families are a huge part of who we are.

## **Lesson 10: Group Dynamics & Prayerfully Building Groups**

Special Thank you!

Prayer

HouseKeeping

- \* Final Journals
- \* Questions or Comments

Participation

- \* Read others during group time
- \* Quiet one Week?
- \* Overly Talkative?
- \* Disengaged?

Final Thoughts

- \* Discipleship groups are not a program
- \* Discipleship is not a program but a relationship
- \* Being a part of one of these groups doesn't make you better than others
- \* Both to be there for others, and to let others be there for you

Prayer for Building Groups

- \* Ask God to bring people to mind that could be a part of the group
- \* List names, pray over the names
- \* Repeat

Prayer Requests and Prayer

*Lectio Devina*

Ephesians 3:14-19

Prayer

Communion

Post-Intervention Questionnaire

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