



To witness to Jesus Christ in the world, and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

# COVENANT DISCIPLESHIP QUARTERLY

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## Discipleship is Not a Program

By Steven W. Manskar



Church growth and marketing have replaced the historic, biblical call to holiness of heart and life. Joining a church is easier than joining a civic organization such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions. While the church will accept anyone as they are (as it should), it does so irresponsibly. I say irresponsibly because once the typical member joins he or she discover the very low expectations of membership. Consequently, they learn that there is little or no cost to being a Christian; that church membership means very little because very little is expected.

If you are a Rotarian or Kiwanian who habitually miss meetings, do not participate in or support the organization's mission and neglect to pay your regular dues you will be visited by a fellow member who will remind you of the commitment you made when you joined. He or she will also inform you that if you are not able or willing to live up to your membership promises, your membership will be discontinued. Very few congregations are willing to hold members accountable to their baptismal covenant for at least two reasons:

1. They do not provide the means for keeping the vows.
2. Congregational leaders fear that holding members accountable to keeping their promises to Christ and his Church will put people off and cause them to withhold their money, thus causing a decrease in income.

Consequently, discipleship is presented as simply another program rather than an expected outcome of church membership.

This reality is a consequence of a deadly misunderstanding of the nature of God and God's grace that says: "It costs us nothing. It is given freely by God. Because grace is free and freely given, God is like an indulgent parent who freely accepts us and forgives our shortcomings." Faith becomes nothing more than assent to belief in God, as God is understood or experienced by the believer. Therefore, all who profess belief in God and take the vows of church membership are regarded as "disciples." This is what

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" and John Wesley called "enthusiasm:"

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*"One general inlet to enthusiasm is, expecting the end without the means; the expecting knowledge, for instance, without searching the Scriptures, and consulting the children of God; the expecting spiritual strength without constant prayer, and steady watchfulness; the expecting any blessing without hearing the word of God at every opportunity."*

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This delusion becomes a major blockage to grace and puts the future of the church and its people in peril.

I am convinced that most church members want to be disciples of Jesus Christ. They are hungry for a faith that is bigger than themselves.

# Dragonflies

By Rev. Michelle Hargrave



*On a June evening we sat on the dock, seven chairs carefully arranged so we wouldn't topple backwards into the lake. It was our last Covenant Discipleship meeting before I moved to my new appointment, and we decided to meet at Mary's home for our meeting and meal. We went around the circle, sharing our acts of compassion, justice, devotion and worship, just as we had done the last few years. We spoke of how the spirit had been known to us that week, and shared our prayer requests and prayed together, again.*

All the while dragonflies swooped around us, startling us, settling down in the middle of us, brushing our arms briefly.

We went up the hill to have our dinner. Afterwards we celebrated our time together and discussed how we would handle this transition. I'd left congregations before, but not a Covenant Discipleship group. I was their pastor, certainly, and I knew how pastors take leave of parishioners, but I wasn't just a pastor in the Covenant group. We weren't sure how to do this.

I started Covenant Discipleship groups at my congregation because I wanted to help my parishioners grow in their spiritual lives in the

most thorough and powerful way I could. I was delighted with how well that worked. But I hadn't anticipated how powerful it would be for me. I learned so much from that group of women, and about my own spiritual life. Now I was leaving the church, leaving the group. I was going to a new congregation that doesn't (yet) have Covenant Discipleship groups. They were welcoming a pastor well trained in spiritual growth but not Covenant Discipleship. And we were simply grieving our separation.

We sat down and I brought out a box. I'd written each woman a card, naming the growth and spiritual qualities I'd seen developing in the last few years together. Then I gave each one a small painted pot with an aloe slip from a plant I've had since my first appointment. I told them I gave them part of my aloe plant because it had healing properties, survived drought and neglect but thrived quickly when cared for, and it multiplied so stubbornly.

Then they handed me their gift. I opened it and pulled out a vibrant blue and green stole, made by one of the women, covered with dragonflies. We all burst into tears. "Dragonflies!" I said when I could. "Did you know there would be dragonflies here tonight?" "No," they said through their tears.

Every week we had shared how the Holy Spirit had been present with us. As we sat together that last night I thought of the dragonflies again, how they swooped among us, settled down in the midst of us, startled us with their touch. "I think we're just going to have to trust we'll find our way through this time," I said. I finally understood we were going to have help. The Spirit was right there, in our midst.

*(Rev. Hargrave is a clergy member of the Minnesota Conference. In June she left Hope United Methodist Church in Duluth, MN to begin her new appointment as pastor of Fairmount Avenue United Methodist Church in St. Paul, MN. You can read Michelle's blog at [33namesofgrace.blogspot.com/](http://33namesofgrace.blogspot.com/))*



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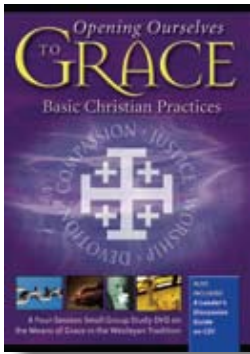
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*It helps the congregation understand that discipleship is not a program. Discipleship is their call and mission.*

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## Help Ensure Comprehensive Health Care

Much of Jesus’ ministry involved healing and wholeness. John Wesley and the early Methodists took Jesus’ healing ministry seriously when they opened the first free

health clinic for the poor of London.

Today growing numbers of Americans are living without health insurance or in fear of losing the insurance they have.

We urge you to contact your member of the House of Representatives to co-sponsor HR 676, the “United States National Health Insurance Act.” Read details of this act and its current status here: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d109:h.r.00676>

Numerous articles describe the looming crisis in the United States healthcare system, a “perfect storm” in which crises of cost, quality and access all converge. The number of persons without any

health insurance continues to increase, the quality of health care experienced by many Americans continues to deteriorate, and the cost of health care rises in double digits annually. These trends are unsustainable and some form of system wide collapse in the health care delivery system looms on the horizon.

The United Methodist Church (through the 2004 General Conference) has passed numerous resolutions calling for a major restructuring of the American health care system. HR 676 expresses very similar concerns. The United States is now the only industrialized country that fails to provide health care for all. The bill will establish a uniquely American health care system, not merely a copy of another system.

The United Methodist Social Principles (Para. 162T) terms health care a basic human right, and United Methodist Resolutions 108, 109, 110, 113 and 282 call for a health care system to which all have access.

*(continued next page)*

### ACTS OF JUSTICE

## Comprehensive Health Care (cont'd)

HR 676 will convert our health care to a non-profit model. There will be a grace period during which for-profit health care providers such as hospitals can convert to a non-profit basis. United Methodist Resolution 282 calls for a non-profit system.

HR 676 calls for a system financed by the federal government rather than health insurance companies. It contains provisions for the re-employment of administrative personnel who will no longer be needed by health insurance companies. United Methodist Resolutions 108 and 282 call for such a single payer system administered by the federal government.

These are far-reaching changes which cannot be effected without thoughtful discussion and vigorous advocacy in every legislative district. It can be anticipated that corporations that seek to profit from human illness, including for-profit hospitals, pharmaceutical

companies, and health insurance companies, will vigorously oppose this bill. It is therefore especially important that you take the following steps:

**Engage your own church congregation in discussion on these issues and a process of discernment of your understanding of God's will.**

**Engage your larger community in discussing these issues.**

**Write to your Representative thanking them for their sponsorship of this resolution or encouraging them to co-sponsor it if they have not already done so.**

(This article is from the UMPower web site of the General Board of Church and Society: [www.umpower.org](http://www.umpower.org))

## WOULD JESUS PLAY "GRAND THEFT AUTO"?

By Edie Genung Harris

It has always been a problem. After we have committed ourselves to being disciples of Jesus Christ, how do we live? How do we make specific decisions in our daily life? To say, "follow the Ten Commandments" or "do what Jesus said to do," begs the question. Daily life is vastly different today. Our choices seem innumerable. Children are faced with a more complex set of temptations. No one ever offered Jesus a smoke. He didn't have 24-hour cable "news" channels to watch. In those days, getting an infection could be a death sentence.

Charles M. Sheldon's "In His Footsteps" written in 1896 continues to be very popular. At the height of its popularity scores of Christians used it as a way to live Christian lives. More recently it was WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets. Trying to envision Jesus making the decision one needed to make can provide clues as to what one should do.



would he solve the immigration issue? Jesus wouldn't fight the bully at school, but how would he respond to those who harassed or intimidated others?

There are no easy answers to many of the issues that children (and adults) face today. Tony Campolo uses the example of his student days when the math book came with the answers in the back. The teacher pointed out that while they could get the correct answers from the back of the book, they wouldn't learn much math that way. Campolo says that maybe life is like that too. Only by struggling to find the answers on our own do we grow as Christians and develop as Christians.

Sprouts provides a wonderful opportunity for children to work through some of their decisions about their behavior. In the supportive community of the covenant group, with adult leaders who guide but don't insist on their own way, they consult scripture, tradition, reason and the experiences of themselves and others in order to find their way. They discuss how they can invite the lame, the poor and the blind to the table or how to be a servant. With the accountability and support

of their group, Sprouts decide which TV shows, movies or video games are appropriate and why. They may develop a strategy for dealing with bullies or the demands of prestige and status. The immersion in practices of devotion, worship, kindness and justice gives them a framework for becoming faithful disciples and witnesses of Jesus Christ in the world.

[WWW.GBOD.ORG/SMALLGROUP/SPROUTS](http://WWW.GBOD.ORG/SMALLGROUP/SPROUTS)

I don't think Jesus would play violent games of any kind or wear expensive, status clothes. But some issues are more complex and perplexing. Jesus would be concerned about the lack of health care for many of America's children, but what would be his solution? Jesus would reach out and care for immigrants—legal or illegal—who needed help, but how

## GUEST WRITER

## Esther's Choice

By Andrew Thompson



*The young queen was terrified.*

She had just been told by her cousin Mordecai that the Prime Minister had convinced her own husband, the King, to exterminate all the Jews in the empire. As Queen, she was the only one with access to the King to convince him otherwise.

Some serious problems made her situation even stickier: First, the Prime Minister

was a powerful man who hated the Jews. Second, unknown to the King, she was a Jew herself. Finally, to stop the massacre, she would have to go to the King uninvited – such a presumptuous act was a crime punishable by death.

She first tried to find a way out. But Mordecai reminded her of the consequences of inaction:

“Do not think that in the King’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews,” he told her. “Do nothing,” Mordecai warned, “and you and your father’s family will perish.”

That young queen’s name was Esther. She was stuck between a rock and hard place. Esther could risk her life by going to the King uninvited, only to face arguing a nearly hopeless case against his most powerful official.

Or, she could do nothing and allow her people (and herself) to be slaughtered.

Before Esther acted, Mordecai offered one more piece of encouragement: “Who knows?” he said, “Perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this.”

Those words, evoking God’s providence, galvanized Esther for action. She instructed Mordecai to have all the Jews hold a fast, and she fasted herself.

Esther gathered her courage and went uninvited to the King. To her surprise, he was delighted to see her. She charmed him and threw a great dinner. Then she revealed the depth of evil that the Prime Minister was planning against her people. Esther was vindicated. The King canceled the planned extermination just in the nick of time, and the Prime Minister was put to death.

This story is one of the best loved in the Bible, both for the plucky courage of the young queen and for the wonderful suggestion by Mordecai that God might call her forth “for just such a time as this.”

But we should recognize exactly what gave Esther the courage to act:

She was a member of a close-knit religious community.

She had been raised to understand her faith as the guiding force in her life.

When she needed to act, Esther instinctively resorted to the practices of the faith she knew – especially fasting.

Without strong Jewish identity and her connection to spiritual practices, there is little chance she could have faced the King alone.

There is a lesson in Esther’s story for those who practice Covenant Discipleship. CD Groups help to imprint our Christian identities deep within our souls, and they teach us the basic practices of Christian faith.

Formed in this way, we can have the courage to act for God; like Esther!

*(Andrew Thompson is a clergy member of the Arkansas Conference and a Th.D. student at Duke University Divinity School. He writes for the UM Portal and his blog, GenXRising -- [www.genxrising.com](http://www.genxrising.com))*

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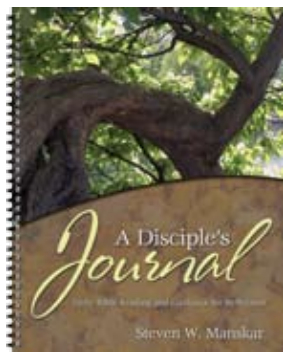


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# Covenant Discipleship Quarterly

The United Methodist Church

## *A Disciple's Journal—Year A is available*



*A Disciple's Journal offers guidance for personal reflection and helps individuals connect works of mercy and works of piety, private acts of compassion and devotion with public acts of justice and worship. The book includes scripture readings for each day of the year and space for notes*

*and prayer concerns. In addition to this material, each week includes words from the vast expanse of hymns by Charles Wesley and a pertinent quotation from the works of John Wesley. This volume follows Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary and begins with the first Sunday of Advent.*

The Rev. Oscar N. Carrasco, Director of Connectional Ministries of the Northern Illinois Conference, wrote: "...an essential and timely companion for those who strive to live a life of accountable discipleship....The *Journal* is an authentic Wesleyan road map for wisdom and guidance as we surrender our 'self' to God's purposes,

willingly and passionately incarnating justice, compassion, devotion, and worship in our private and public lives."

Dr. Manskar includes a fine introduction that focuses on the nature of grace. In addition, the book contains a small chart that illustrates dimensions of daily discipleship.

The book's cover flaps, which may serve as bookmarks, include orders for morning and evening devotion, the Wesley Covenant Prayer, and daily morning and evening prayers for each day of the week. The book is perfect for individuals who participate in the variety of accountability and spiritual formation/growth groups. Also a suitable Advent–Christmas gift.

Steven W. Manskar is Director of Accountable Discipleship at GBOD. His Doctor of Ministry degree is from Wesley Theological Seminary.

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