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The United Methodist Church

## What My Covenant Discipleship Group Means to Me

*Comments from First United Methodist Church in Memphis, Texas*

A safe, comfortable place to share my weekly ups and downs. A place to pull strength from plus a straight-forward phone line to GOD. If I need something, like prayers, a hug or help in some way or another, I don't feel guilty asking for it because that is why we are a Covenant Discipleship group, to nurture each other. I have a written guide/outline of our goals we have to meet each week and for me, this helps me to stay focused and also accountable. It brings me back to that same Loving/ Caring PLACE every week.

*"I believe this will help to bring our church even closer together as we continue to "Hatch"/"Birth" more and more of these small groups. Some day, we will have one big CD group made up of many small CD Groups. The only thing I see coming from this is "GOOD". Apparently Wesley knew something, ha ha." – Rhonda*

I can not place into words the closeness, the accountability, nor the level of responsibility in which we hold each other. It is a feeling unlike any other that I have come to experience. I go through the day now wondering if my actions and words will be acceptable not only in the eyes of my covenant but to God. – Brenda

It has given me a better insight into what young people face today and helped me to get to know the younger members of the church on a personal level. I think this has brought us all closer to Christ. – James

My Covenant Discipleship group has given me a place where I do not feel like I have to be on constant alert. In a world where we are constantly on guard against what others will or could do to us it is so nice to have a group of people who are really interested in my life just for me. The group has also helped to make me more aware of how each decision I make every day should be to benefit the kingdom of God no me. – Wendy



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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## Do you have a compass?

By Steven W. Manskar



Before leaving the security of the dock I took a compass heading for our paddle across Lake Saganaga to American Point. There was a light drizzle of rain. The lake was shrouded in fog. I could barely make out the outline of some of the nearby islands as I pushed our canoe away from the dock. As my friend and I quietly began to paddle into the mist I placed my compass on the bottom of the canoe.

After paddling for three hours, we stopped on a small island to have lunch. By then the sun had burned off the fog and we could see the lake more clearly. I wasn't sure where we were. So I took another compass headin. The compass indicated we were headed in the right direction.

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*We know where we need to go (holiness of heart and life). We have a map that shows us the way (the Bible). And we have a guide to help and sustain us (the Holy Spirit).*

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After lunch we got back into the canoe and followed the compass heading. After about an hour we reached American Point. The compass and map helped to bring us to our destination and to the safety of the shore. It helped bring us across a potentially dangerous lake. We didn't get lost because I trusted my compass and map. We reached our destination safe and sound.

The life of Christian discipleship is a lot like my trek across Lake Saganaga that day. We know where we need to go (holiness of heart and life). We have a map that shows us the way (the Bible). And we

have a guide to help and sustain us (the Holy Spirit). But, when we try to go it alone, we don't know how to reach our destination.

When we accept Christ's invitation to follow him he doesn't remove us from the world. He invites us to follow him in the world. And, like Saganaga, the world is a big and dangerous place with many places and ways to get off course and lost. That's why Christ invites us to follow him alongside fellow disciples. When we follow together, in small groups that provide mutual accountability and support, we are more likely to reach our destination (holiness of heart and life).

Covenant discipleship groups help disciples take a weekly compass heading for their walk with Christ in the world. They write a covenant shaped by the General Rule of Discipleship, To witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under guidance of the Holy Spirit. They meet weekly for one hour to pray and to give an account of what they have done, or not done, in light of their covenant. Covenant Discipleship groups give people the support and accountability they need to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

In this issue of CDQ we welcome two people who have agreed to be regular contributors for the next several issues. They are Michelle Hargrave and Andrew Thompson. Michelle is a pastor in Minnesota. Andrew is a doctoral student at Duke University Divinity School. Both have several years of experience in Covenant Discipleship groups. They are also interesting writers. You can read more from them on their respective blogs:

Andrew: **GenX Rising**  
[www.genxrising.com](http://www.genxrising.com)

Michelle: **33 Names of Grace**  
[33namesofgrace.blogspot.com](http://33namesofgrace.blogspot.com)

I'm very pleased to welcome them to the pages of Covenant Discipleship Quarterly.



# Holy Conversation

By Michelle Hargrave



*In Covenant Discipleship we set aside normal conversation for holy conversation. This sounds lovely, but it is difficult to get used to.*

In normal conversation when someone shares something uncomfortable, we usually hurry to make them feel better. So, say I share that I am really struggling with how to live out the compassion part of the covenant. I might say, "I get really impatient at other drivers in traffic. I'm in a hurry and they are so inconsiderate! They can't hear me but sometimes I swear at them. Yet I'm wondering how I can be more compassionate to them."

In normal conversation, we might say, "Oh, I get impatient too." "Everyone does that." "The traffic has gotten so bad lately." "Just yesterday someone cut me off and I almost had an accident." Recognize normal conversation in this?

A few things happen here we are trying to avoid in our covenant process. First, the emotional energy has shifted from the person sharing about her driving issue and dissipated to everyone else. When it is someone's turn to share the emotional energy needs to stay anchored with them until they willingly hand it to the next person. A talking stick or candle the speaker holds or places in front of them may help signify this. It takes a symbol, and practice, because this isn't how we normally talk together.

When we do offer comments the key is to focus on the speaker's concern. "What are you feeling you could do about this?" "What has made you aware of this just now?" "What is your prayer life suggesting to you about this?" "I try praying for people who cut me off; it has changed my commute."

Secondly, we lose the moment of discomfort when we move too quickly. It is uncomfortable to be with someone who is struggling. It is hard not to "fix" it. But doing the work of discipleship involves being uncomfortable. We are uncomfortable thinking about starving people. We are uncomfortable thinking about people with no homes. We are uncomfortable thinking about injustice, and uncomfortable considering those in our lives who need our compassion. Yet if we are to follow the path of Christ we have to face these issues. There are things we can do, thank God, but we can't fix it by ourselves. We are stuck, if we pay attention, with the pain of it.

So perhaps our sitting together in our discomfort is practice for sitting lovingly with the world's discomfort. Covenant Discipleship is a safe place to try out this way of communicating and caring. So by holy conversation I mean conversation that can listen, offer space for healing, and move us to growth in love.

In our hour of Covenant group we are trying to shift out of normal conversation into holy conversation. Then, afterwards, in the hallway, we can chat and do the normal thing. After some thoughtful listening, a gentle, "I get mad in rush hour too," would be different.



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## GUEST WRITER

# The Pursuit of Happiness

By Andrew C. Thompson



*I was listening to the radio in my car one day recently when I came across the earnest voice of a man from a local auto dealership. His sales pitch concluded, “Come on down and get the new car you deserve.”*

*“How about that,” I thought. “I deserve a new car!”*

Like most other advertisements on TV or radio, this one was designed to convince me that the car I deserved would finally bring me happiness.

Our consumer culture’s #1 job is in convincing us of the ability of material things to bring happiness. This puts the culture squarely at odds with Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, of course, which says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-20).

Recently, I’ve been reminded how much it is at odds with the wisdom of the Christian tradition as well. Early church teaching was especially pessimistic about the value of material luxury. The fourth century Egyptian monk St. Antony taught, “Let none among us have even the yearning to possess. For what benefit is there in possessing these things that we do not take with us?”

Yearning for that new car, St. Antony might say, is just looking for happiness in the wrong place. It distracts our attention away from God. And an obsession with material luxury even endangers the welfare of our souls.

St. Antony reasons with us, “Why not rather own those things that we are able to take away with us – such things as prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, concern for the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from anger, hospitality? If we possess these, we shall discover them running before, preparing hospitality for us there in the land of the meek.”

We might imagine John Wesley saying the very same thing.

As Wesleyan people, we should ask ourselves how to train our hearts away from illusions of happiness and toward those things that can offer us real joy and peace. Through the concrete practice of Christian virtue, we can know the prudence, justice, love, and faith that St. Antony is talking about.

Sure, these things are hard for us to learn on our own. But that is why God calls us into the church. Together with other Christian pilgrims, we can engage in those practices that teach us real virtue. In the Wesleyan tradition, our best model is through relationships of mutual accountability – like a Covenant Discipleship Group.

Such a practice is decidedly counter-cultural. It is not like purchasing that lucky lottery ticket, in the hopes of winning a fortune. It happens instead over time, with sustained dedication, and a willingness to commit ourselves to the path of Christian discipleship.

But this, after all, is the path that Jesus invites us to walk. The good news is that we never walk it alone. We always go with our brothers and sisters, knowing that Christ is leading us every step of the way.

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(Charles Wesley)

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- Charles Wesley as Spiritual Guide – Tom Albin
- Sprouts: Covenant Discipleship with Children – Cari Vega
- Covenant Discipleship with Youth & Young Adults – David Sutherland
- Covenant Discipleship for Pastors – Mark Young & Vicki Brendler
- How to Introduce Covenant Discipleship to Your Congregation – Steven Manskar

**PLENARY SPEAKERS & PREACHERS:**

- Bishop Janice Riggle Huie – Texas Conference Resident Bishop
- Dr. David Lowes Watson – Wesley Scholar & Seminary Professor
- Dr. Daniel Flores – Pastor of La Trinidad United Methodist Church, Ft. Worth, TX & President of The Hispanic Wesleyan Society
- Mrs. Sandra King-Shaw – Member of Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, DC
- Rev. Tom Albin – Dean of the Upper Room Chapel, GBOD

- Dr. Steven W. Manskar – Director of Accountable Discipleship, GBOD
- Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell – Senior Pastor, Windsor Village United Methodist Church, Houston, TX

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**To register go to [www.gbod.org/WesleyanInstitute](http://www.gbod.org/WesleyanInstitute) to register, or call Becky Caudill at 877-899-2780, ext. 7059**

# RELIGIOUS HABIT OR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE?

By Edie Harris

In The United Methodist Church, children can participate in the Lord's Supper. Some Christian educators make the point that even though children may not understand the Lord's Supper, they can experience God's love and acceptance in the shared practice of the congregation.

I recently saw that demonstrated. When my congregation celebrated a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, two-year-old Kate was given a small white shell from the bowl of water. When she put it into her mouth her mother explained that Kate is used to eating the bread from Communion and so assumed that this is what she should do with the shell. Is Kate just responding to religious habit? Does the Lord's Supper have any meaning for her? Yes and no. Kate comes to a traditional worship service almost every week. She is comfortable in worship. She is learning what Christians do in worship. Kate is learning that worship is what her family does on a regular basis, that her family values worship and finds it meaningful. At this stage of her life worship is a habit.



It is important that children have consistent worship experiences. It is even more important that children are taught the meaning of what happens in the liturgy.

In Sprouts, children learn how to live in the world as disciples of Jesus Christ. They learn how to practice their faith in acts of devotion, worship, kindness and justice. That's why it is so important that Sprouts participate in worship and that they learn about worship and the Lord's Supper.

I recommend that Sprouts leaders enlist the help of their pastor to teach about the meaning and importance of worship and the Lord's Supper. For instance, Sprouts can see the connections between the manna in the desert, Jesus' petition to "Give us today our daily bread," his feeding the five thousand, and the last supper with his disciples to what happens during the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper will become a meaning filled experience in which children experience God's love in the sharing of bread and cup. This is one more excellent argument for weekly celebration of the sacrament.

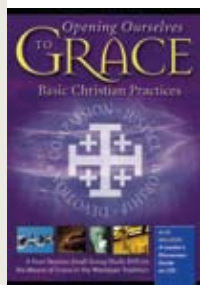
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The purpose of Christian education is to help children develop holy habits. Spiritual disciplines are practices that open us to grace. They are means of grace because they are the places God promises to meet us in daily life.

Kate doesn't fully understand what baptism or the Lord's Supper are, but she knows that God loves her because every Sunday she goes to a place where she is loved and nurtured. These experiences can be built upon in a Sprouts group so that regular worship and participation in the Lord's Supper become holy habits that open her to grace.

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