

COVENANT DISCIPLESHIP QUARTERLY

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

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Tending to The Foundation Luke 6:46-49

Steven W. Manskar,
Director of Accountable Discipleship

As we begin a new year I am prompted to think about the role Covenant Discipleship groups play in the life of a congregation. Now is a good time to be reminded of the basics. One of the basics of CD is that it is not another program. The groups are not intended to be an option on a menu of small group and study opportunities offered by a congregation. Rather, Covenant Discipleship, is by its nature, intended to be part of the infrastructure of a congregation's mission and ministry. In other words, Covenant Discipleship is designed to be part of the foundation of a congregation's ministry of making disciples of Jesus Christ.



To illustrate my meaning, I'm reminded of an experience I had with a VIM group from the Memphis Conference in August 2004. I went with them to Managua, Nicaragua to work with a group of young, emerging Methodist communities. We went for a week of work, service, and learning. Four of the five mornings were spent digging holes for the footings of a meeting house one of the communities was building. The VIM group, along with several members of the little, very poor Methodist community worked with shovels and picks to dig over 20 holes 2 – 4 feet deep. This was back-breaking labor because the ground was very hard and all the work had to be done by hand. We worked in pairs. One would loosen the soil with a pick and then the other would remove it with a shovel. By the end of the morning we were all drenched in sweat and, those of us who did not think to bring work gloves had blisters on our hands.

If a house is going to stand and provide shelter for any time, it must be built on a solid foundation. Laying and maintaining a foundation is hard, often tedious, work. But if that work is neglected the foundation will eventually give way and the house will fall.

Covenant Discipleship groups are intended to be part of the "foundation" of a congregation's mission and ministry. They equip and support leaders in discipleship who help others to witness to Jesus Christ in the world and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This work is sometimes easy and fun. It is also often much more like digging holes in hard ground for a foundation built on the rock of Christ rather than on the shifting sands of whatever is the latest "strategy" or program for church growth.

Many of the strategies and programs are good, but if a congregation does not attend to its foundation first and make tending to the foundation a regular part of its ministry, no program or plan will change anything. How are you tending to the foundation of your congregation's mission and ministry of making disciples of Jesus Christ? ☛

Quarterly Reflections

The More Excellent Way

By David Lowes Watson (The third in a series)

Those of us entrusted with the leadership of the church, both clergy and laity, quickly find that there are two kinds of Christian in our congregations: those who evince a deepening maturity in their walk with Christ, and those who seem to settle into a routine Christianity.



A Wesleyan Precedent

We can take comfort and encouragement from the fact that John Wesley found the same distinction among the Christians of his day. He reflects on this in a sermon titled *The More Excellent Way*, first published in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1787, in which he gives his seasoned reflections after a lifetime of preaching the gospel and nurturing those who responded in faith. He is clear that all who repent and accept forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ receive God's gift of salvation. But he is also clear that there are "two orders of Christians," the one "conforming in all things, not sinful, to the customs and fashions of the world," the other using "all diligence to attain the whole mind that was in Christ."

From long experience and observation I am inclined to think, that whoever finds redemption in the blood of Jesus, whoever is justified, has then the choice of walking in the higher or the lower path. I believe the Holy Spirit at that time sets before him the "more excellent way," and incites him to walk therein; to choose the narrowest path in the narrow way; to aspire after the heights and depths of holiness — after the entire image of God. But if he does not accept this offer, he insensibly declines into the lower order of Christians. He still goes on in what may be called a good way, serving God in his degree, and finds mercy in the close of life, through the blood of the covenant. *Wesley's Works* (Abingdon Press, 1986), 3: 266.

This "more excellent way" has never been popular, and in the church of today it especially means swimming against the tide. Again, we can take comfort and encouragement from early Methodism which, contrary

to church growth mythology, was not a mass movement. The harvest was ultimately plentiful, but not without years of labor with very mixed results. By contrast, the pressure for quick growth that now governs our ecclesial climate sends us shopping for *astroturf* rather than allowing the seeds of the gospel to take root. This artificial surface may give a good visual impression, but it is expensive, it is synthetic, and it smothers the real growth that is germinating below ground from the true seed of the gospel.

Holding Fast

By holding fast to the "method" of Methodism — the patient working out of our salvation in acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion through mutual support and accountability — we will forge a dependable and reliable discipleship honored by God. And in the process we will find that others are prompted to join us. We need to be faithful, watchful, not discouraged, and above all not resentful of fellow Christians who do not see things our way. We must remember that we did not choose Covenant Discipleship. We were called to this "more excellent way." Our privilege is to help Jesus feed the flock that is the wider church, and thence the whole family of God that is the world.



Sprouts



By Edie Harris

Questions of Accountability

As I write this in November of 2005, The United Methodist church is debating the issue of accountability and authority. Does the pastor have the authority to decide who can join the church? These are difficult issues, and at the moment, we as United Methodists don't agree on the answers. But the life of the local church goes on and we, as leaders, must deal with the issues that surface in our own groups and congregations. For example:

- My pastor once baptized the baby of a teenage single mother, a girl who had been a member of that con-

gregation all her life. A few members accused him of condoning the girl's sinfulness. Others thanked him for offering the entire family the love, forgiveness and support of God and the congregation.

- One of our early Sprouts groups was on a weekday afternoon. Ashley came to the church's after school day care and decided to take part in Sprouts because two of her friends (church members) were participating. Her family did not belong to or attend any church. Ashley tagged along but in Covenant Time it was clear that she was not receiving parental support and she consistently was not coming to church. When I urged her mother to see that Ashley got to church her mother objected to my pressuring her, explaining that they had "other things" to do on Sunday mornings. At that point I had to decide whether fulfilling the covenant was more important than Ashley's participation. If she wasn't being accountable despite our best efforts to help her, should she be asked to leave the group?

Or should we hope that continuing involvement might eventually result in a change in behavior?

As we participate in Covenant Discipleship groups and even our local church, we are faced with such questions of accountability. In Covenant Discipleship how far does accountability extend? How do we help children live their covenants? After all, a third grader can't get herself to church unless her family is cooperative. In Sprouts, does the adult leader make these decisions alone or should it be a group discussion?

For United Methodists grace is an essential part of our spiritual life. Do we always err on the side of grace? I can't give you hard and fast answers or rules to follow. These are difficult issues and this is one reason why Sprouts leaders dare not ignore their own spiritual life. You need to be in an adult Covenant Discipleship group; making sure you are keeping your appointments with God by practicing the means of grace and that you are receiving the support and accountability you need to faithfully nourish your Sprouts. ☘

"Covenant Discipleship and my journey into ministry," Part I

Rev. Andrew C. Thompson,
Associate Pastor
First United
Methodist Church
Searcy, AR



Hindsight offers remarkable clarity. And it is often only through such clarity that we can see how seemingly chance occurrences are actually formative experiences of the means of grace in our lives. Such is the story of my experience with Covenant Discipleship.

I admit I was confused during the fall of 1998 – my first year as a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School. I initially thought I was moving to Nashville to become a church historian and to pursue an academic career. But during that first year, things weren't turning out as planned.

My first semester was filled with personal struggle, as I began to wrestle with my sense of calling and voca-

tion. This was new territory for me, and the uncertainty of it caused no small amount of anxiety.

Then, towards the end of the fall semester, a seemingly minor event happened that would turn out to have major consequences for my spiritual formation: I was invited to join a Covenant Discipleship Group.

Taking a chance, I joined a CD Group that first year. What began as an awkward meeting of four students who didn't know one another well soon developed into an important weekly touchstone where the four of us could grapple with spiritual issues while also living out our discipleship in concrete ways.

Covenant Discipleship offered me three lasting gifts during my time as a divinity student, which I consider gifts from God. They are:

1) Grounding my study of the Christian faith with the practice of living out that faith through an active life of discipleship.

2) Formation of close relationships with fellow pilgrims in the ministry of Jesus Christ, which served to nurture our common callings.

3) Building a framework for my personal discipleship that has stayed with me to the present and which guides my understanding of living as a disciple everyday.

I left Nashville in the spring of 2001, ready to begin my first appointment as a chaplain at UM-related Lambuth University in Jackson, TN. Among the many other discoveries about life and ministry that I would make in those first few years after divinity school, I also learned that the mutual accountability of Covenant Discipleship would have a further, and sustaining, role to play in my spiritual formation. ☘

Book Reviews



How Great A Flame *Contemporary Lessons from the Wesleyan Revival*

by Dr. James C. Logan, Discipleship Resources, 2005.

Dr. James C. Logan taught for many years at Wesley Theological Seminary. He is a highly respected professor of theology and evangelism. His latest book, *How Great A Flame: Contemporary Lessons from the Wesleyan Revival*, published by Discipleship Resources, is a collection of his 2003 Denman Lectures sponsored by the Foundation for Evangelism.

How Great A Flame is a concise, winsome summary of the key characteristics of the Wesleyan revival. Dr. Logan has a way of bringing John Wesley and the early Methodist movement to life through story and teaching. In 94 elegantly written pages he describes the essentials of the Wesleyan/Methodist movement and what the 21st Century church can learn from it.

The book contains four concise chapters. In Chapter 1 Logan argues that the practice of regular preaching in public places by Wesley and other Methodist preachers was essential to evangelistic outreach. He proves his point by telling the story of Martha Thompson, who as a young servant girl in London happened upon one of Wesley's preaching services. She subsequently came to faith in Christ and eventually began a small Methodist society in her hometown where she served as a class leader.

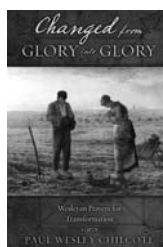
In chapter 2 Dr. Logan describes the anatomy of the Wesleyan revival. He names three essential elements that worked together to sustain the movement:

- Open-air preaching
- Organizing of converts into societies and classes
- Deployment of lay ministry

This "anatomy" is a living expression of Wesley's theology of universal grace.

Chapter 3 describes what Dr. Logan calls the "grammar of grace" that was the power behind the movement. And Chapter 4 contains lessons the 21st century church can learn from the Wesleyan revival for ministry and mission today.

How Great A Flame should be required reading for pastors and church leaders who seek to help The United Methodist Church live out its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ.



Changed from Glory into Glory

Wesleyan Prayer for Transformation

by Paul Wesley Chilcote,
Upper Room Books, 2005.

Paul Chilcote has given the church another gift. He is the author of *Praying in the Wesleyan Spirit: 52 Prayers for Today*, a book I highly recommend for personal devotional use and for teaching Wesleyan theology and spirituality. His latest book, *Changed from Glory into Glory* is a beautiful, elegantly written study of the practice of prayer. To aid in his effort of helping the reader understand and enter into various forms of prayer Chilcote uses works of art as a means of illustrating his point and as objects of contemplation. To that end, the book contains eight pages of full-color prints of each of the artworks highlighted.

Changed from Glory into Glory is an excellent resource for personal and small group study.

A Covenant from Community United Methodist Church, Naperville, Illinois

Our group of seven women has been meeting weekly for nearly five years at Community United Methodist Church:

Called into discipleship by the Holy Spirit, we exist for the purpose of covenant accountability to God. We assist each other by our prayers, presence, purpose, and confidentiality, watching over one another in love. In response to God's love and grace, we covenant to:

- Use opportunities to share in Christian fellowship and public worship each week
- Support our Church with time, talents, and gifts according to our abilities
- Practice daily devotions (Scripture, meditation,

recording spiritual insights) and remember our group members in prayer

- Strive for personal wholeness of body, mind and spirit
- Be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives
- Spend ___hour(s) each month in service to others
- Express feelings of genuine appreciation daily to at least one person
- Listen to other people as a ministry of grace
- Speak and/or act individually for God's justice as we become aware of injustice to others
- Support with prayer, action, and/or money, groups which act for God's justice in the world.

We hereby make our commitment, pledging to support each other, and trusting in the grace of God to give us the will and the strength to keep this covenant.

Wesleyan Institute

Scarritt-Bennett Center
Nashville, Tennessee
September 25-28, 2006

Opening Ourselves to Grace: Walking with Christ in the World

...God works in you; therefore you *must* be workers together with him otherwise he will cease working. ...he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves. He will not save us... unless we ourselves fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life; unless we... deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily, and labour, by every possible means...

(John Wesley, Sermon 85: On Working Out Our Own Salvation, §III.7).



This Wesleyan Institute will be a time of Christian conferencing with leaders seeking to help Christians grow from church membership to discipleship. We will explore together how spiritual disciplines help to form faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship is first and foremost a relationship with Jesus Christ. When Christians open themselves to grace they move from church membership to living in the world as faithful disciples.

Jesus summarized his teachings in two commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:50-51).

Christ has given to his disciples the means for following him. John Wesley called these spiritual disciplines *means of grace* because they are "signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end: to be the ordinary channels whereby Christ might convey to men and women preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace" (Sermon 16: The Means of Grace).

The means of grace are those holy habits through which God helps Christians and the church to take discipleship to a new level. They are how grace forms church members into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

In plenary sessions, small group table conversation, prayer, and worship we will explore the meaning and practical application of the means of grace in the life and mission of the church.



Leadership



Henry H. Knight, III is Donald and Pearl Wright Professor of Wesley Studies at St. Paul School of Theology.

Tom Albin is Dean of the Upper Room Chapel and Director of the Upper Room Program Unit.



Carmen M. Gaud is International Editor of *El Aposento Alto*, the Spanish edition of the Upper Room.

Bishop Ann B. Sherer is Episcopal leader of the Nebraska Annual Conference.



Sandra King-Shaw is a member and Class Leader at Asbury United Methodist Church in Washington, DC.

Steven W. Manskar is Director of Accountable Discipleship at the General Board of Discipleship. He is a clergy member of the Minnesota Annual Conference.



Who Should Attend?

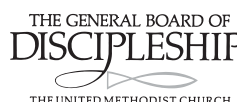
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Lay Leaders	Certified Lay Ministers
Lay Speakers	Christian Educators
District Superintendents	

Register before July 15 @ \$297 After July 15 @ \$372

The registration fee includes 3 nights lodging in a private room and 8 meals at Scarritt-Bennett Center. You will also receive a copy of *A Disciple's Journal: Daily Bible Reading and Guidance for Reflection (Year C)* by Steven W. Manskar.

For more information or to register call 877-899-2780, ext. 7059.

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