

Accountable

Wesley Knew It Would Be Difficult

Discipleship

Margie Mayson

I was born into a Presbyterian family, I attended a Quaker High School, my sister has converted to Judaism, my husband is ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and I chose to enter into the ministry in the United Methodist Church! And for twenty-five years I have continued to affirm my choice because of the unique heritage which United Methodism brings to the protestant tradition in America.

At Asbury First United Methodist Church in Rochester, New York this is perhaps most evident in the nature of my job description at the church. I am one of four full-time clergy on staff and my job description is one that John Wesley would be indeed support. I am the Pastor of Outreach and Discipleship. What that means is that I am the one who oversees both the outreach programs of the church as well as the "in-reach" programs. In classic Methodist language, I make sure we are providing ways in which our members can participate in both Acts of Mercy and Acts of Piety. In many large churches, these areas are often separate endeavors but because we believe they are both essential to growing members into living as faithful disciples of Christ, we have made it a point to be sure to engage the membership in both arenas. We want to model that being a faithful Christian involves one's whole life.

Why is this combination so important? Because discipleship means living as a follower of Jesus Christ in today's complex and confusing world and being a faithful disciple is more than professing faith in Jesus Christ. It is more than worshipping God on Sunday morning. It is more than studying the scriptures. Jesus' greatest commandment was to love God and love neighbor. If discipleship begins with a personal experience of the saving love of Christ, it continues with learning how to live out one's life so that there is integrity between what we confess with our lips and do with our lives.

So we know what it means to be a disciple. The rub is that being a disciple is not easy. In a world that more than ever suggests that it is okay to bend the rules and take care of one's own, being a disciple means doing things differently.

- In a world that hoards wealth at the expense of the poor, it is not so comfortable being a disciple.

- In a world where churches are competing for members and entertainment is in and cost is out, it is not so convenient to promote discipleship.
- In a world that is wrestling with terrorism, it is not so easy to know how to follow the Prince of Peace.
- In lives that are busy raising children and working, there is no expedient way to follow Jesus who said "come away by yourself for awhile to a lonely place....".

In our world, in any world, it has never been easy to be a disciple of Jesus Christ even when we have known what has been expected of us!

John Wesley knew the difficulties associated with trying to faithfully follow Jesus so it is no wonder that he knew the important of developing some sort of method whereby people could both encourage and support one another in their efforts at discipleship. He understood that in a world that wants things to be easy, the expectations of discipleship could be and would be easily neglected. He understood that we need the support of like-minded Christians to hold us accountable for our discipleship in our daily lives. And he understood that all of us have natural preferences for certain things and natural dislikes for others. He understood that if we were going to be faithful in all aspects of discipleship we needed a place and a method whereby we could regularly and intentionally address the invitation of faithful discipleship.

Understanding the dangers and pitfalls of "cheap grace" and easy discipleship Asbury First has seen the need for incorporating some of Wesley's "methods" of discipleship into its life. Thus, for over 10 years we have promoted Covenant Disciple Groups (fondly known as CD groups) where as many as 10 and as few as three persons meet weekly to "watch over one another in love." We share in following a mutually agreed upon covenant which challenges us to grow in our discipleship. Although each group's covenant is different, all covenants encourage participation in doing acts of worship, devotion, compassion and justice in keeping with John Wesley's balanced approach to discipleship and the current General Rule of Discipleship. Reflecting on her experience, one member of a covenant group, Carol Avis Reed wrote:

Our “CD” is not
a current “LP”
but a modern-day gathering
of would be disciples
working together
to design our path,
to carve our arrow,
to reach out – and in –
toward the textbook model
of becoming more
Christ-like through
daily discipline.
Christ is present
in our small Wesley group....
Seen and heard through
the lives and the word
of our gathered few
as we hold each other
accountable for our deeds...
as we challenge each other
and ourselves—with love.

Not everyone in our church is ready for such accountable discipleship. We recognize that people enter the church at all different levels of commitment and interest. What is important is that we offer a variety of ways for people to grow in their commitment and level of involvement. We currently offer 10 Sunday School classes on Sunday mornings, some of which have been meeting together for over 50 years. We offer a variety of levels of *Disciple Bible Study* which often is people’s first exposure to serious study of the scriptures. We offer small study groups, book groups, support groups, prayer groups, as well as occasional seminars, classes, and retreats as, no doubt, do many large churches. What is important is that we recognize the cost of discipleship and the need to offer ways in which people might wrestle with impact of that cost of their lives. One member of one our Covenant Disciple groups, David Closson, summed it up this way: “We are learning that people are looking for opportunities to live more Christ-centered lives, that they yearn for a spiritual center to their lives, that they are looking for Christian structure and fellowship in their lives.” □



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