


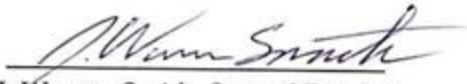
The Direction for Small Groups in the United Methodist Church

by

Intek Oh

Date: 3/19/18
Approved:


Randy L. Maddox, Supervisor


J. Warren Smith, Second Reader


J. Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Today the United Methodist Church faces a sharp decline of spirituality in general, and of church attendance in particular. Attendance at Sunday worship service has steadily decreased. In addition, those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” has certainly increased. Compared with the 1900s, it is more difficult for people today to believe in God because of the wide-ranging effects of secularism. Modern people find truth within themselves, rather than from a transcendent source.

Many small groups in the United Methodist Church aim to overcome this condition of secularism. Examples of such groups are the Covenant Discipleship group, the Disciple Bible study group, and the class meeting. To better understand whether these groups are able effectively to respond to contemporary needs, I conducted a survey of twenty-one churches in the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church that sponsored Covenant Discipleship groups or Disciple Bible study groups. This thesis investigates whether small groups (a Covenant Discipleship group and a Disciple Bible study group) are effective in spiritual growth and church growth. In addition, it uses the theory of the class meeting, which Kevin Watson reclaimed in his book *The Class Meeting* and the concept “mutual accountability” to present the direction for small groups in today’s United Methodist Church.

As this thesis argues, a Covenant Discipleship group somewhat helps to recover the language for speaking of a living, breathing relationship with God. A Disciple Bible study group is also an effective way to change the locus of the authority from the self to

the Word of God. However, these groups have limitations. While they are effective for supporting discipleship, they are seldom willing to foster conversation about deep matters such as a person's relationship with God, with one another, and with the world. On the other hand, a class meeting deals with the basic question "How is it with your soul?" By sharing our spiritual status and being accountable for the growth of the relationships—as the class meeting seeks to do—our faith will grow into maturity in the Lord.

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1. The Present Situation of Contemporary Churches

“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

John Wesley¹

The United Methodist Church has been declining in numbers for the last half century. This phenomenon is not peculiar to the United Methodist Church, but appears throughout mainline Protestant churches in the U.S. According to data from the General Social Survey, average worship attendance among mainline Protestants has declined from 27.8% in 1972 to 10.2% in 2016.

Ed Stetzer explains, “If the data continues along the same pattern, mainline Protestants have an expiration date when both trend lines cross zero in 2039. If the trend line continues, they have 23 Easters left.”² It is unlikely that the mainline church would cease completely in 2039, because the trend will probably slow before it reaches absolute zero. However, the data do not bode well for its future.

Likewise, the United Methodist Church has experienced decline in worship attendance every year for the last four decades. Dr. Don House, a professional economist

¹ Wesley, “Thoughts upon Methodism” (1786), in *The Works of John Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies, History, Nature and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 527-530, here 527.

² Ed Stetzer, “If it doesn’t stem its decline, mainline Protestantism has just 23 Easters left,” *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/04/28/if-it-doesnt-stem-its-decline-mainline-protestantism-has-just-23-easters-left/>.

and former chair of the United Methodist Church's General Council and Finance and Administration (GCFA) economic Advisory Committee, said

Between 1974 and 2002, we lost an average of 4,720 in worship attendance per year. But a major shift occurred in 2002. The rate skyrocketed to an annual rate of 52,383 between 2002 and 2012, and now we've seen losses of 62,571 (2012–2013), 75,671 (2013–2014), and 82,313 between 2014 and 2015. This is not sustainable.³

In addition, recently released data from GCFA shows that the United Methodist Church lost 90,499 worshippers between 2015 and 2016.⁴ While worship attendance had declined slowly between 1974 and 2002, the decline since 2002 has been exponential. The period from 2013–2014 saw a decline of 2.6% in worship attendance, 2014–2015 a decline of 2.9%, and 2014–2016, a decline of 3.2%.

³ Quoted in Walter Fenton, "Plunge in Worship Attendance," *Good News*, January 24, 2017, <https://goodnewsmag.org/2017/01/plunge-in-worship-attendance/>.

⁴ According to GCFA, the total average weekly worship attendance for 2016 was 2,659,427. In comparison to the average for 2015 (2,749,926), the UMC lost 90,499 worshippers. For the data, see The General Council on Finance and Administration for The United Methodist Church, "United Methodist Facts," accessed November 17, 2017, <http://www.umdata.org/UMFactsHome.aspx>.

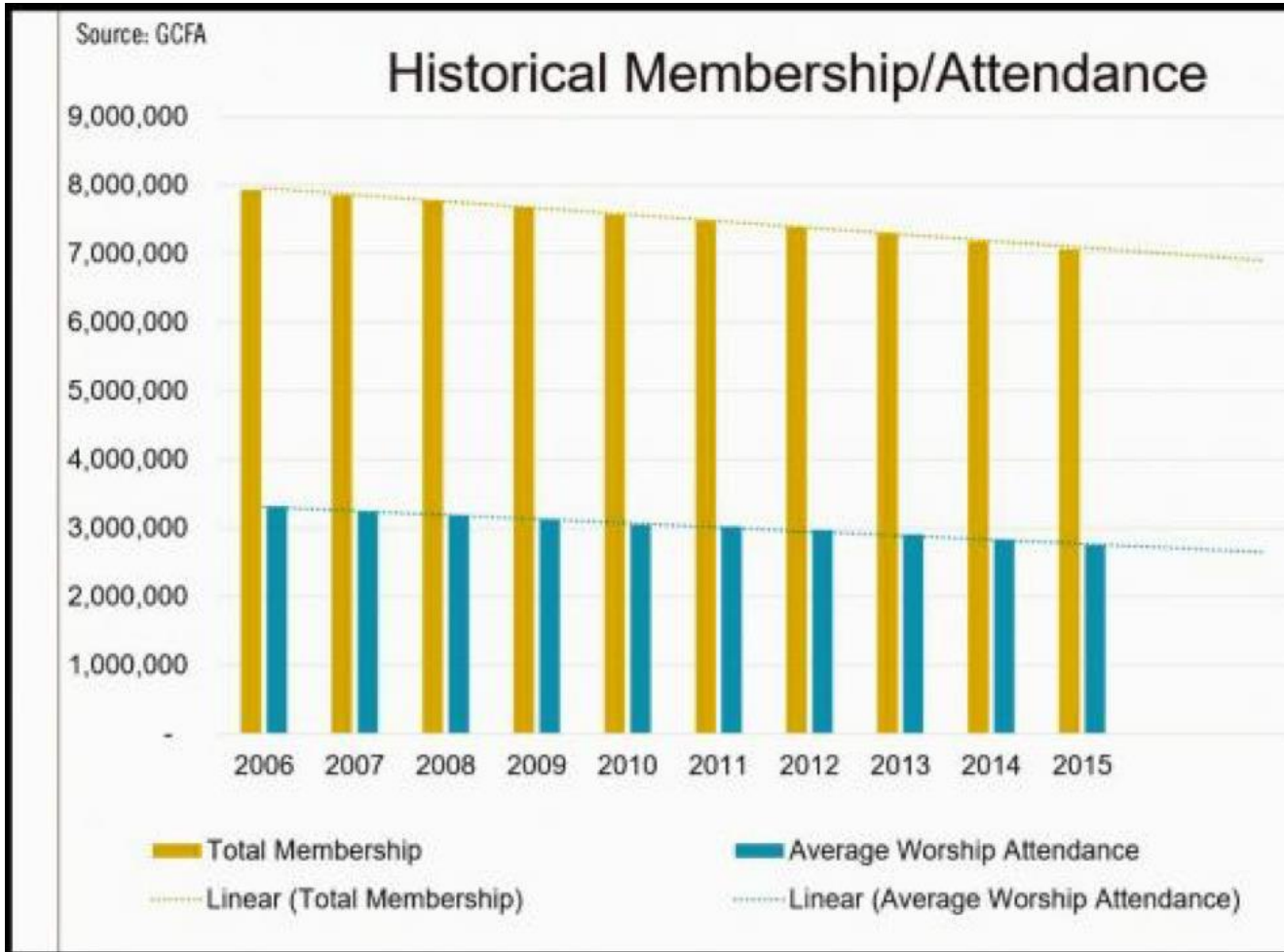


Figure 1: Declining the membership and attendance of the United Methodist Church

In a 2014 report to the GCFA and the Connectional Table, the denomination's highest administrative body, Dr. House warned that if the UM church fails to actively address the decline of worship attendance, they would slide into permanent decline by 2030 and would face collapse by 2050. Declining rates of worship attendance have secondary effects. As local churches see fewer and fewer worshippers, they find it harder to stem their decline. Eventually, they cannot afford a full-time pastor, which only exacerbates their situation.

Mark Chaves explains that "members, money, and leaders are fundamental to congregations' organizational well-being."⁵ Hence, they cannot survive very well without people showing up regularly, contributing, passing along the tradition, working at common goals, and committing to a shared ethos.⁶ Therefore, observing trends in worship attendance is a way to predict the future of the United Methodist Church.

There are various reasons for the decline in attendance. One is that many local churches are located in areas where the population has been declining for years. When those churches were planted in the 19th century, their locations made good sense. However, nowadays, due to declining population, these local churches are difficult to sustain. Also, the UM churches' members are aging, so some churches have declined due to attrition. This natural decline is not being offset by church growth in the major metropolitan areas where population increases because only a few churches are growing. Walter Fenton, a United Methodist clergy person and an analyst for Good

⁵ Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 17.

⁶ Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28.

News, said that there are about 32,100 local United Methodist Churches in America, and of these, 76% (24,654 churches) have an average worship attendance less than 100.⁷ Moreover, nearly 70% (16,909 churches) of those churches with less than 100 worshippers in fact have less than 50 worshippers on Sunday morning. These churches often struggle to afford a full-time pastor or to find the resources necessary for a sustained plan of evangelization. Thus, UM churches ought to examine why—beyond natural decline—worship attendance has fallen for the past 15 years straight, and why the rate has accelerated so dramatically in the past six.

1.1 Religious Crisis

The 1950s and early 1960s was a good time for American Christianity, especially mainline Protestantism. Religion was on the rise. The churches were full and built new sanctuaries. In addition, Protestant clergy were some of the most respected professionals in land. However, soon after, young adults began to disparage the religion, protested nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War, and found alternative spiritualities, liberation movements, and communal living far more interesting.

Many of the changes went against the ethical prescriptions their parents had taught them. These were the inherited prescriptions about gender and race, institutional loyalty, self-sacrifice, self-control, community involvement, and the importance of religion. It was a true cultural revolution.⁸

Many young women had more work opportunities, so they did not have to defer to men. “Blue Laws” had restricted Sunday commerce, but the old “somber Sunday”

⁷ Quoted in Walter Fenton, “Plunge in Worship Attendance,” *Good News*, January 24, 2017, <https://goodnewsmag.org/2017/01/plunge-in-worship-attendance/>.

⁸ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 24.

was gone. Instead it had become a day of leisure, recreation, and shopping. In addition, the birth-control pill and sexual revolution had changed married life. Finally, many people vowed never to push religion or its old-fashioned values on their own children.⁹ Eventually, large numbers of people lost the habit of regular churchgoing, and Protestant churches saw a serious drop in membership. By the late 1970s, the rate of Americans identifying with “no religion” had more than tripled from the 1950s, increasing from only 2–3% in the 1950s, to 9%. Since then, the rate of “no religion” has continually increased, and now according to Pew Research Center, nearly 23% identify with “no religion.”

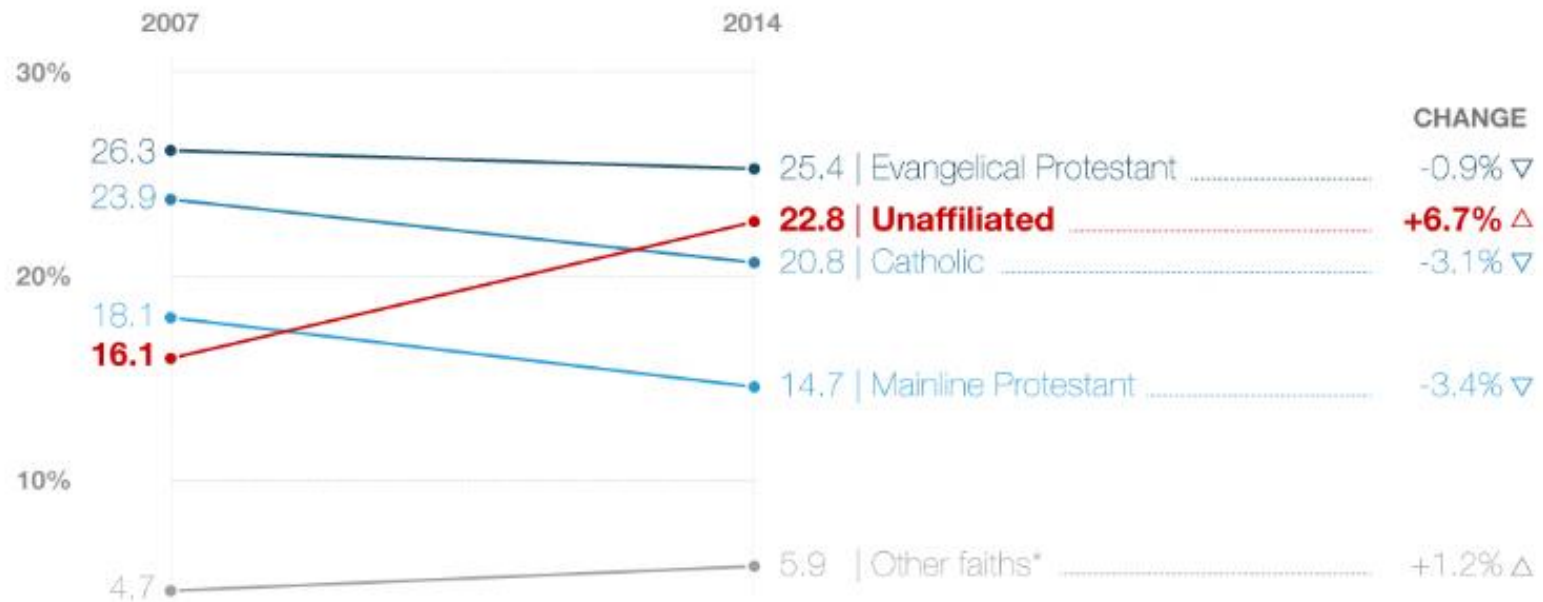
1.2 Change of the Trend in Belief

Not just young people are leaving the church. Whether married or single, rich or poor, young or old, living in the West or the Bible Belt, almost every demographic group has seen a significant drop in people who call themselves Christians, the Pew Research Center found.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, “Changing U.S. Religious Landscape,” April 30, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pf_15-05-05_rls2_1_310px/.

CHANGING U.S. RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE



* Includes Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, other world religions and other faiths. Those who did not answer the religious identity questions, as well as groups whose share of the population did not change significantly, including historically black Protestant tradition, Mormons and others, are not shown.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center

Figure 2: Changing U.S. religious landscape

According to the Pew study, people who profess no faith affiliation formed 22.8% of the country's adult population. This proportion (unaffiliated) was on par with Evangelical Protestants (25.4%) and ahead of Catholics (20.8%) and mainline Protestants (14.7%). Unaffiliated does not equate atheism or agnosticism. Rather, many people who belong to the category "unaffiliated" pay attention to spiritual matters but are uninterested in organized religion. Of those who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious," Mark Chaves states:

Remember that saying you have no religion is not the same as saying that you do not believe in God or that you do not attend religious services. Indeed, in 2008, 22 percent of people who said they have no religion still said that they know God exists, and 5 percent said they attend religious services at least monthly. Perhaps these religiously active "nones" are among the small but growing number of people who think of themselves as "spiritual but not religious."¹¹

Likewise, recently released data from Pew study reports that 27% of the "unaffiliated" were "absolutely certain" God exists, 22% "fairly certain," and about 50% disbelieved in God. In addition, 24% of the "unaffiliated" said that they attend religious service once or twice a month or a few times a year. Only 3.1% of the "unaffiliated" call themselves atheists, and 4% say that they are agnostic, meaning they do not know whether God exists.

The rate of the "unaffiliated" has increased continually. In 2007, 16.1% reported being "affiliated," but in 2014, the number had increased by 7%. Likewise, the number of people who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) has continually increased. In 2012, 19% described themselves as SBNR, but in 2017, 27% did so. At the

¹¹ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19.

same time, those who identified as “religious and spiritual” has decreased from 59% to 48%. In addition, the rate of the people who consider themselves “neither religious nor spiritual” and “religious but not spiritual” has barely changed over the past five years. This data thus suggests that some people who had been affiliated with religious organizations have shifted to SBNR.¹²

¹² The Pew Research Center, “Increase of ‘spiritual but not religious’ is broad-based,” September 6, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/ft_17-09-05_spiritualnotreligious_420px/.

A quarter of Americans now see themselves as spiritual but not religious

% who identify as ...

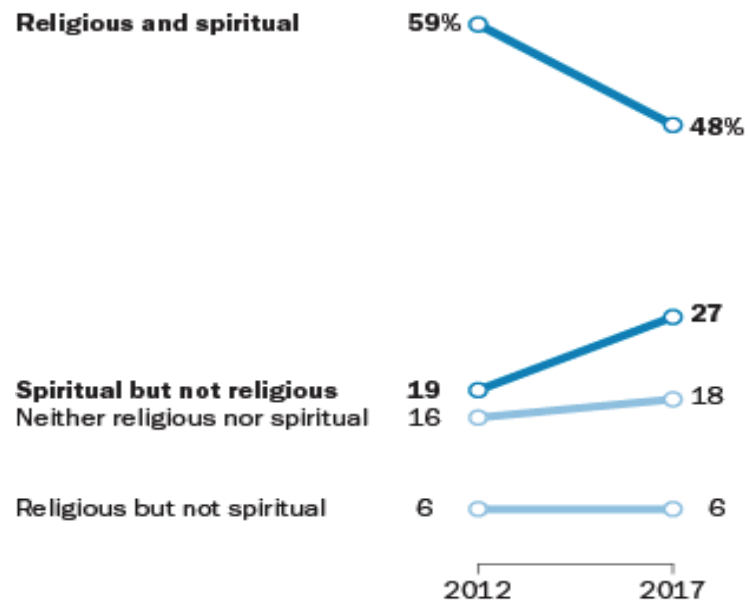


Figure 3: A quarter of Americans now see themselves as spiritual but not religious

Linda Mercadante, professor of theology at Methodist Theological School in Ohio, explains that “ritualists” often go through the motions rather than holding a deep commitment to their religious beliefs. These may actually be “SBNRs in the making.”¹³ The defining characteristic of the SBNR is an emphasis on spiritual practice rather than belief and organized religion. Mark Chaves claims that the people who belong to SBNR “consider themselves to be generally concerned with spiritual matters (whatever that means) but are not interested in organized religion.”¹⁴ By increasing the number of the people who consider as SBNR, the “market for certain kinds of religious products, such as self-help books with spiritual themes”¹⁵ has grown. In short, they have left traditional religion and have searched for something to believe in. Perhaps they are “seekers” rather than “apostates.” They may stand on the threshold between affiliation and disaffiliation. Therefore, it is important for churches to study the SBNR movement because SBNRs may be likely to return to churches.

Mercadante, who had an SBNR background, held formal and informal interviews with over 200 people who consider themselves SBNR in order to investigate how larger social trends (religious affiliation or traditional churches) function in SBNR’s individual lives. She chose a “qualitative” research methodology. The first part of each interview covered the person’s spiritual journey, and the second half dealt with their beliefs in four major areas (the sacred, human nature, community, and afterlife).¹⁶

¹³ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 9.

¹⁴ Chaves, *American Religion*, 41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 15. The four themes she chose to examine—the sacred, human nature, community, and afterlife—are based on some major life questions: (1) Is there anything larger

Mercadante finds that many SBNRs leave their religious traditions because they have theological difficulties with particular beliefs and values. In other words, inadequate theology – or inadequately understood or interpreted theology – often played a large part in their lack of interest in religion.¹⁷ For the SBNR, religious beliefs seem unimportant, unessential, and even potentially harmful.

When I have spoken with SBNRs, they take a decidedly anti-dogmatic stance against religious belief in general. They claim not only that belief is non-essential, but that it is potentially harmful or at least a hindrance to spirituality.... They often insist they do not need to believe in anything in particular to grow spiritually, and that it really does not matter what you believe. Instead, they claim that spiritual and/or religious beliefs are personal, individualistic, open-ended, and beyond proof.¹⁸

The SBNR interviewees are further frustrated by religious affiliations because they perceive them as constraining their beliefs. The interviewees revoke religious authority in favor of personal decision. Linda quotes Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury: “One of the most significant lessons to be learned from the great shift towards post-religious sensibility is how deeply the coercive and impersonal ethos of a good deal of traditional religion has alienated the culture at large.” As a result, they take a new ethos. This ethos includes an impersonalization of transcendence, a sacralization of the self, a focus on therapeutic rather than civic goals, and a focus on self-needs in relating to community and commitment.¹⁹

Starting with the idea of God, in the new ethos, God is transposed from transcendent actuality into the sacred or divine self. The “sovereignty” or

than myself, any sacred or transcendent dimension, any Higher Power? (2) What does it mean to be human? (3) Is spiritual growth primarily a solitary process or is it done with others? (4) What will happen to me, if anything, after death?

¹⁷ Ibid., 229.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 231.

freedom of God becomes instead readily accessible, even impersonal, divine energy to be sued by the individual as he or she sees fit, with progress nearly guaranteed. The Spirit becomes less an agent of God than self-generating personal intuition. Instead of a savior figure or prophet, there may be multiple guides or gurus to provide help, so the individual can heal him or herself.²⁰

Chaves analyzes the result of the survey that belief in an inerrant Bible has declined although many other religious beliefs have not. He claims that the contemporary people less likely “say that their religion provides the only path to truth or salvation.”²¹ This implies that they do not trust creed what organized religions assert. For instance, in General Social Survey and Gallup Polls, people are asked the question: “Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?” The result of the survey is clearly that a gradual but steady decline in belief in an inerrant Bible has occurred. In 1980, about 40 % believed an inerrant Bible, but after 20 years, about 30 % believed an inerrant Bible. This data shows that they have practiced their religions, but they do not trust somethings what traditional institutions understand. They can belong to the category “SBNR.” In addition, as Mercadante’s insistence, the characteristic of the SBNR is to trust one’s own inner voice rather than trusting God as traditionally and institutionally understood. The authority of traditional Christian doctrine is supplanted by personal experience as final authority. What SBNRs share are lifestyles or practices, rather than a belief system.

²⁰ Ibid., 232.

²¹ Chaves, *American Religion*, 37.

1.3 Implications of the Trend in Belief

The people who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” pay attention to spirituality, but typically remain uninterested in belief. Nevertheless, they want to maintain a connection between their inner life and outward behavior. Thus, they do live out their beliefs in various ways. They seek and make meaning in their own lives. Indeed, they are looking for an ultimate reality. In short, the real difference is not that belief has disappeared, but that the spiritual instinct has shifted to one’s inner self. A related characteristic of the SBNR is to resist particular beliefs that are forced on them. Together, these trends emerge as a new ethos that pervades contemporary society, not just the SBNR movement.

The “pick and choose” attitude can make churches more focus “on one or more aspects of the faith, divorced from the larger Christian theological structure.”²² We should beware of a “pick and choose” attitude toward beliefs. Focusing on one aspect is not welcomed by SBNR and modern society. For example, if churches focus on too much the gravity of sins, people will see God as a punisher. However, God is also love and grace. We should understand something with not only one perspective, but also others like the scripture, human reason, tradition, and experience.

It is simply an observation that for a religion with such a strong conceptual heritage as Christianity, things can go out of balance easily. To avoid that, we must be holistic, and all aspects must be carefully tended and remain part of belief and practice. There is much that is theologically pertinent about SBNR longings. That is where we must start the conversation when we engage this ethos.²³

²² Mercadante, *Belief without Borders.*, 253.

²³ *Ibid.*, 255.

In modern society, a “pick and choose” attitude cannot be a sensible way to approach modern people even SBNR. They are less likely to remain in churches that maintain traditional ways, like placing pressure for up-front commitment. Churches need to take a new approach to this phenomenon.

While the new ethos tends to make people “self-centered,” becoming Christian means a shift from “self-centered” to “Christ-centered” existence. Encouraging this shift is the challenge for today’s church leaders. Many people—even Christians—are confused about the essence of Christianity. For example, they often identify positive thinking with one of the values of Christianity, but such positive thinking is based on self-centeredness. By contrast, Jesus said that whoever wishes to come after him must deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow him.²⁴

As Mercadante’s study suggests, ritualists who go through the motions have a high probability of shifting from “affiliated” to “unaffiliated.” This fact should motivate today’s churches to seek revitalization in the face of spiritual crisis. It would be difficult to prove that this spiritual crisis is the main cause of the church decline. However, it is certain that the crisis is one factor in the church’s decline.

Even though the United Methodist Church has tried to overcome its decline and spiritual crisis, these efforts have been insufficient. The UMC has tried to reinstate Wesley’s small groups, the class meeting and band meeting. Indeed, in the late twentieth century, the UM church conducted Covenant Discipleship groups in hopes of

²⁴ Matthew 16:24 NRSV.

overcoming the looming spiritual crisis and restoring the spirit of Wesley's discipline, but the Wesley's small groups do not become popular. Nevertheless, the assumption behind these Covenant Discipleship groups was well founded: the vitality of small groups does seem to correlate with the overall vitality of churches. The database provided by the General Council on Finance and Administration for the United Methodist Church²⁵ suggests a link between a decline in Sunday school vitality and decreasing church attendance. It is difficult to determine which comes first, declining number of small groups or declining number of church members. In either case, some kind of causal relationship is evident.

Mercadante also proposes a method that today's churches can apply. A significant number of SBNRs, she explains, "had their first encounter with spirituality through a recovery group." In groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, participants receive strength and support from one another.²⁶ Such groups carry on the spirit of the early Methodist movement, whose focus was mutual accountability. By contrast, typical small groups in contemporary United Methodist churches are quite different from the small groups of early Methodism. These contemporary small groups focus on delivering

²⁵ I have served as a pastor in the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, and every Sunday I record worship attendance, amount of offering, the number of small groups, and the number of persons engaged in mission. All churches in the Virginia Conference should put the data in EVC (Equipping Vital Congregations). EVC shows information about worship attendances, membership, the number of small groups, the number of ongoing Sunday School classes, the number of professions of faith, etc. It is a good resource to analyze what happens in church. Also, I can see the statistics of other conferences by the UM data which the General Council on Finance and Administration for The United Methodist Church maintained. See the website at <http://www.umdata.org/Default.aspx>

²⁶ See "Lessons for Church from the 'Spiritual but not Religious' at <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/lessons-for-church-from-the-spiritual-but-not-religious>

biblical knowledge and are driven by curriculum or textbooks.²⁷ Wesley's small groups emphasized growth in holiness and were driven by participants' shared discussion of their spiritual status. Wesley's small group model thus represents a way to revitalize churches that has been largely ignored. Since the new ethos dislikes a "pick and choose" attitude toward beliefs, a "hands on" approach is more effective than simply expecting commitment to belief. In other words, people are fed up with having beliefs forced on them. Rather, they need a mentoring relationship.

We must remember that the mission of United Methodist churches is not to make members, but to "make disciples for the transformation of the world."²⁸ In light of this mission, the concept of membership itself may have to be rethought, perhaps refigured to look something like what the Shakers practiced, with concentric circles of participation from the "gathering" order, all the way to the fully committed. House churches, cell groups, and other creative alternatives to traditional structures may open up the reality of religious community to more people.²⁹ In any case, the benefit of small groups is to help people to keep a religious life, and this benefit extends even to newcomers. Dynamic small groups will have an effect on our church life.

While we cannot draw a necessary correlation between spiritual growth and the numbers of people attending church, being present in church is likely to signify both a

²⁷ Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten and Essential Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 5.

²⁸ This is the United Methodist Church's mission statement, which is based on the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 93. ¶ 120.

²⁹ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 233.

willingness to be a witness for Jesus Christ and to foster growth in the Christian life. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, John Wesley's bands and class meetings were dynamic and helped bring about a repentance movement, which constituted a turning point in British churches. This thesis will investigate Wesley's model of discipleship and reclaim it hopes of overcoming spiritual crisis.

2. The Study of John Wesley's Small Groups

"We can truly say, that through the grace of God our classes form the pillars of our work, and, as we have before observed, are in considerable degree our universities for the ministry."

Coke and Asbury, *the Discipline of 1798*¹

Wesley's small groups offer today's church leaders a model for the direction of United Methodist churches. Many of these leaders have already emphasized the significance of Wesley's small groups. Also, many books dealing with the class and band meeting have been published in the past decades. Although many theologians have studied the class and the band meetings, David Watson is the representative theologian of the study of Wesley's small groups. Watson formed various programs, such as Covenant Discipleship groups and class meetings, in order that people could experience renewal of spiritual formation. For instance, "Covenant Discipleship groups have been formed in countless United Methodist congregations, on seminary and college campuses, and in a number of sister Methodist churches around the world."² However, Methodist churches still face decreases in those who profess the faith and are members. This graphic shows this gradual trend in the UMC Virginia conference.³ (See Figure 4.)

¹ Quoted in Robert Emory, *History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: J. Collord, Printer, 1845), 328.

² Gayle Turner Watson, *Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 6.

³ See The General Council on Finance and Administration for the United Methodist Church, "Received by Profession of Faith: Virginia Conference" (graphic), accessed November 27, 2017, <http://www.umdata.org/ChartViewer.aspx?&Width=500px&height=500px&Data=POF&seriesname=Received%20by%20Profession%20of%20Faith&confNo=803&Title=Received%20by%20Profession%20of%20Faith&level=Conference&GBNO=C80300&StartYear=2006&EndYear=2016>.

Moreover, many churches prefer Bible study groups, Sunday School classes, or prayer groups to Covenant Discipleship groups. “These groups are focused on conveying information and are organized by a common curriculum.”⁴ As a result, they tend not to change people or make disciples of Jesus Christ who will transform the world.

2.1 History of Wesley’s Bands

Before examining the history of Wesleyan bands and classes, we should first consider the history of Pietism prior to John Wesley. The *Collegia Pietatis*, established by Philipp Jakob Spener, the “Father of Pietism,” was a major influence on later Wesleyan movements.

Pietism as a movement emerged in the 17th century. The 16th century had been marked by tension between Protestants and Catholics, culminating in the Reformation, which further exacerbated these tensions. The people of Europe were forced to decide which side they would take. As Protestants increasingly emphasized their distinctive doctrines, Protestantism gradually became an established institution. While this development led to the expansion of Protestantism, some Protestant Christians felt that it had lost its vitality in the process. For these critics, the Pietist movement was a necessary corrective, just as the original Protestant movement had responded to a Catholic Church that had similarly lost its vitality.

⁴ Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten and Essential Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2014), 5.

In the 17th century, Philipp Jakob Spener established the *Collegia Pietatis*, thus formally marking the beginning of Pietism. The defining feature of Spener's movement was the personal and communal pursuit of holiness. Spener's influence spread, and in the summer of 1727, an important revival occurred at Herrnhut in Germany, leading to the distinctive Moravian focus on the role of community in Christian formation. This focus became especially evident in the Moravian *Banden* (bands) and Chor (choir).

The *Banden* were created on July 9, 1727 and were divided by gender and marital status. The first band consisted of married men, followed by a band of married women on February 9, 1728, one of single women on February 14, 1728, and the band of single men was formed last.⁵

The Moravian *Banden* were "a crucial forerunner of the early Methodist bands, which adopted their name."⁶ Two features in particular would anticipate the later Wesleyan bands. First, the *Banden* were divided in terms of gender and marital status. Second, the aim of the *Banden* was for members to share the true states of their souls in order to become more disciplined in their pursuit of holiness.⁷ Within the bands, they would confess their sins and mutually support their efforts to grow in holiness. The *Banden* used questions in order to uncover these sins. The following is an excerpt from Wesley's 1738 rule for his bands, with questions modeled on those used by the Moravians.

Some of the questions proposed to everyone before he is admitted amongst 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?

⁵ Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

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 five following at every meeting:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How was you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sins or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?⁸

In 1729—several years before John Wesley would encounter the Moravians—four people, including John and Charles Wesley, gathered at Oxford for what would become a historically crucial meeting. They gathered for the “desire to work out [their] salvation and to engage in the pursuit of perfection.”⁹ Later, Wesley himself called this Oxford meeting the “first rise of Methodism.” During this meeting, confession emerged as a crucial key to church reform, and the four talked explicitly about their progress in holy living. The Oxford Methodists gathered often in order to further their aim of seeking holiness through their meetings. Ultimately, two features of the Oxford

⁸ Wesley, “Rules of the Band Societies” (1738), in *The Works of John Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 77–79, here 77–78.

⁹ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 30.

Methodist movement—communal support and accountability—would leave a lasting influence on the Wesleyan bands. But the creation of the bands themselves would depend on Wesley’s encounter with the Moravians.

On October 14, 1735, Wesley headed to Georgia for a mission that he described in his journal:

The design that moved us all to leave our native country was not to avoid want (God having given us plenty of temporal blessings), nor to gain riches and honors, which we trust he will ever enable us to look on as no other than dung and dross; but singly this—to save our souls and to live wholly to the glory of God.¹⁰

During his trip to Georgia, Wesley’s ship met with a severe storm. Wesley was enveloped by the fear of death, but he noted that the Moravians on board seemed to have a profound peace during the storm. Wesley described the events during this storm:

At seven I went to the Germans. In the midst of a psalm, wherein we were mentioning the power of God, the sea broke over, covered the ship, and split the mainsail. Many of the English screamed out. The Germans looked up, and without intermission sang on. From them I went to their crying, trembling neighbors, and found myself enabled to speak with them in boldness, and to point out to them the difference in the hour of trial betwixt him that feareth the Lord and him that feareth him not. At twelve the wind abated. That was the most glorious day I have hitherto seen.¹¹

The Moravians’ assurance of their salvation deeply impressed Wesley. Afterwards, he would continue to meet with Moravians, who left a profound and lasting influence on him.

¹⁰ Wesley, “Manuscript Voyage Journal for October 14, 1735” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 18: Journal and Diaries I (1735–1738)*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater and W. Reginald Ward (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 312.

¹¹ Wesley, “Manuscript Journal for January 25, 1736,” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 18: Journal and Diaries I (1735–1738)*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater and W. Reginald Ward (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 345.

Wesley's missionary work in Georgia was a failure, so he came back to London in February 1738. He had not achieved holiness and had come to the painful conclusion that he himself had never been truly converted.¹² Upon returning to London, he met Peter Bohler, a Moravian minister. Under the tutelage of Bohler, he began to preach salvation by faith even before he himself fully believed in it.¹³ At that time "Wesley and a number of others organized themselves into a religious society meeting in Fetter Lane."¹⁴ These meetings of the religious society, where he underwent further Moravian influence, led Wesley to his famous Aldersgate experience on the evening of May 24, 1738. While someone was reading part of Luther's Preface to Romans, "Wesley's heart was strangely warmed. With joy, he joined his brother in their mutual discovery of faith. 'By a Christian I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin hath no more dominion over him; and in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May the 24th last past.'"¹⁵

Shortly after his Aldersgate experience, Wesley went off to learn more details about Moravian *Banden*. He went toward at Herrnhut in Germany. There, he was deeply impressed with their faith and systemic communal formation. "The system of bands and societies into which the believers were organized as a means of watching over each other's morals, as well as making for their more orderly supervision by the leaders of the

¹² Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York, NY: Basic Books 1973), 30.

¹³ Richard E. Lyddon, *The Relevance for the Contemporary Church of the 18th-Century British Methodist Class* (The School of Theology at Claremont, Doctor of Ministry dissertation, 1978), 39.

¹⁴ Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*, 31.

¹⁵ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1974), 27.

church.”¹⁶ Wesley took this pattern of bands back to England and began to implement them in the societies in which he had influence.¹⁷ Wesleyan bands formally began in England on March 1739. Frank Baker notes that “as early as March 1739 [Wesley] and Boehler had established a band for Oxford students, and another for town women.”¹⁸

Wesley’s involvement with the Moravians was short-lived. A theological controversy made him break with the Moravians, even though he was impressed with many of their aspects. Wesley believed that people who wanted to be saved from their sins would continue to evidence their desire of salvation by being shown by its fruits. Wesley mentioned “General Rules” which we are taught of God to observe. Also, the “General Rules” helped us to walk with God throughout our whole life. The General Rules were composed of three principles:

First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind – especially that which is most generally practiced. Such is: The taking the name of God in vain. The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work thereon, or by buying or selling... *Secondly*, by doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity doing good of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men... *Thirdly*, by attending upon all the ordinances of God. Such are: The public worship of God; ...¹⁹

The three principles are (1) do no harm; (2) do good; (3) attend upon all the ordinances of God. In addition, the early bands took the agenda of their meetings from James 5:16. By confessing their sins to one another, and praying for one another, they sought to be healed and thus to grow in holiness.

¹⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁷ Lyddon, *The Relevance for the Contemporary Church*, 41.

¹⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹⁹ Wesley, “General Rules and Rules of the Band Societies”, in *The Works of John Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 67–76, here 70–73.

Wesley felt the Moravians were insufficiently focused on the second of these rules.

According to Wesley, the Moravians were ‘by no means zealous of good works, or at least only to their own people.’ Here Wesley highlighted the key affirmation that became the second rule in the ‘General Rules,’ where Methodists were exhorted to do good, ‘by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity doing good of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men.’²⁰

Because the Moravians seemed to focus on inward religion to the detriment of good works, Wesleyan bands remained distinct from the Moravians. As a result, Wesley left the Fetter Lane Society bands, which were under Moravian influence.

2.2 History of the Classes

As we have seen so far, the early Methodist movement was marked by the system of bands. Another crucial feature of early Wesleyan social organization was the class meeting—a distinct concept from the bands. But to understand this distinction between bands and classes, it is first necessary to understand the concept of the society within Methodism.

The 18th-century Methodist societies were small and intimate groups whose gatherings were much like contemporary public worship services. The first United Society came into being at Bristol on July 11, 1739. Although Wesley did not use the term “United Society” until April 7, 1741,²¹ scholars consider the 1739 meeting to be the beginning of the United Society. However, Wesley himself considered the Foundery Society to be the first United Society because he thought that the Foundery Society was

²⁰ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 76.

²¹ Lyddon, *The Relevance for the Contemporary Church*, 43.

the most important one within Methodism.²² In the Foundery Society in July 1740, people accepted Wesley as their spiritual guide. According to Richard Cameron, “the Foundery Society was from the beginning under Wesley’s personal control.”²³ The United Societies eventually came to be divided into bands, classes, select societies, and Penitents.

Wesley did not initially plan to implement the classes, but, as he would eventually come to think, their birth was providential. Wesley was talking with the members of the Society in Bristol concerning the payment of some chapel debts.²⁴ There, someone suggested dividing the whole society into classes with about twelve members in each class. The leaders of each class would collect a penny from each member weekly while visiting their home. The suggestion was adopted in 1742, but the weekly visitations of the leaders soon proved to be not only time consuming, but also frequently inconvenient. Therefore, it was agreed that the members of each class should meet together once a week, not only to collect the weekly contributions, but also to give advice, reproof, or encouragement as needed. A dynamic quickly developed within these classes, as members began to “bear one another’s burdens,” and to “care for each other.”²⁵

²² Ibid., 43–44.

²³ Richard M. Cameron, *The Rise of Methodism: A Source Book* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 258.

²⁴ O. P. Fitzgerald, *The Class Meeting: In Twenty Short Chapters* (Nashville, TN: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1888), 32.

²⁵ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985), 94.

Wesley issued tickets to the members of the classes in the shape of small cards bearing pointed texts of Scripture. These tickets were practically their certificate of membership in the society. Moreover, the tickets were quarterly examined by one of their preachers.²⁶

In order to pass the quarterly examination of the classes, people had to follow Wesley's General Rules.

First, members were enjoined to do no harm, and to avoid "evil in every kind." Second, they were to do good "of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all Men." Third, they were to attend upon "all the Ordinances of God: Such as the public Worship of God; the Ministry of the Word, either read or expounded; The Supper of the Lord; Private Prayer; Searching the Scriptures; and Fasting, or Abstinence."²⁷

The classes were intended to foster spiritual maturity. In the classes, people would check whether they had followed the General Rules during the last week, and then they would ask each other the question: "How is your life with God?" Lastly, they were encouraged to give weekly to the relief of the poor. Wesley maintained both the classes and the bands in the societies, especially in the larger ones, such as in London and Bristol.²⁸ Each member renewed their membership quarterly in order to participate in the societies.

²⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Class Meeting*, 35.

²⁷ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 108.

²⁸ Lyddon, *The Relevance for the Contemporary Church*, 50.

2.3 The Select Societies and the Penitent Bands

Two final divisions within the United Society were the groups known as the penitent bands and the select societies. John Wesley explained the purpose of the penitent bands.

And yet while most of these who were thus intimately joined together went on daily from faith to faith, some fell from the faith, either all at once, by falling into known, willful sin, or gradually and almost insensibly, by giving way in what they called little things – by sins of omission, by yielding to heart sins, or by not watching unto prayer. The exhortations and prayers used among the believers did no longer profit these. They wanted advice and instructions suited to their case; which as soon as I observed, I separated them from the rest, and desired them to meet me apart on Saturday evenings.²⁹

Wesley established the penitent bands for those who could not live up to the demands of the class meeting. The penitent bands—each of which contained three or four members—gave them hope of restoration. In addition, participants had a time of singing and prayer before dividing into smaller groups for more personal guidance from a small group leader. Once the participants had faithfully completed their allotted time in the penitent bands, they could again return to the classes.³⁰

The select societies, by contrast, were formed for those who “outran the greater part of their brethren, continually walking in the light of God, and having fellowship with Father, and with his Son, and Jesus Christ.”³¹ The membership of the select societies

²⁹ Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists” (1749), in *The Works of John Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 253–280, here 268–269.

³⁰ Thomas R. Albin, “‘Inwardly Persuaded’: Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism,” In *“Heart Religion” in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, edited by Richard B. Steele, 33–66 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 51.

³¹ Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists” (1749), in *The Works of John Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 253–280, here 269

was drawn from among the bands.³² To qualify, one needed to be truly awakened in seeking holiness. Music was an important element in the select societies because its formative focus was on the heart. Prayer could be offered by any member. Unlike the bands, the select societies were not divided by gender or marital status. And while the leaders of the classes were appointed by Wesley, the select societies had no hierarchical leadership. Everyone could freely speak to others because the members had an equal liberty of speaking. They had an open discussion and welcomed criticism. The select society had six to sixty-five members. However, in some cases, when the number of members approached twenty, the select societies were subdivided into smaller groups in order to foster intimate conversation.³³

As we have seen, Methodist Societies had been divided into bands, classes, select societies, and penitent bands. The goals of these small groups were not radically different. Instead, they had the same function: to usher people into a deeper relationship with others and with God. The bands and the classes in particular played an important role in forming Methodist churches.

2.4 Distinction Between the Classes and the Bands

From our perspective, the bands and the classes look very similar to one another. They were small groups and gathered regularly. However, the two were significantly different. First, the bands were smaller groups than the classes. Each band included about five people. By contrast, in the class, twelve or twenty people gathered at a house.

³² Albin, "Inwardly Persuaded," 52.

³³ *Ibid.*, 50.

In addition, the bands were divided by age, sex, and marital status, but the classes were divided more pragmatically, according to the topography of the society membership and the exigencies of available leadership.³⁴

Second, the point of a band meeting was to bring to light the actual sins of its members, to encourage one another in the common goal of pursuing entire sanctification, or being made perfect in love for God and neighbor. By confessing one's sins, as Wesley's rules for the bands prescribed, participants were encouraged to pursue holiness. The bands provided the key communal support structure that Wesley believed was most helpful for growth in holiness.

In contrast, the classes led every Methodist to the kind of life that the "General Rules" called for. According to Kevin Watson, "the class meeting served to help Methodists grow in their love of God and neighbor, one of Wesley's favorite definitions of holiness."³⁵ For example, by posing the question, "how is your life with God to every member?" the class meeting helped them to grow in their relationship with Christ.

Moreover, what distinguished the class meeting from the band meeting was the degree of accountability expected from each. In the band meeting, participants were asked to confess their sins to one another, but in the class meeting, participants did not have to confess their sins in the meeting. Rather, they supported and encouraged each

³⁴ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 94.

³⁵ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 62.

other in the common goal of growing in faith and being transformed by the grace of God.³⁶

Next, being the member of a class was an essential prerequisite for participating in the societies. Wesley issued the tickets to the members of the classes, and these had to be presented for participation in the societies. Since Methodism did not force all members to confess their sins to their peers, the bands were optional. Nevertheless, Wesley strongly encouraged the early Methodists to participate in the bands, because he was certain this would lead to sanctification and perfection. In addition, the classes were less intense so that every person could talk at a more general level about their life as a Christian. However, they did require that every Methodist weekly give an account of how things were going in their walk with God. Therefore, more accountability was required of those who wanted to join the bands than of those who wanted to join the classes.

The bands had been structured to foster mutual fellowship and spiritual oversight, with the leader chosen from the members. The classes, by contrast, were formed around appointed leaders.³⁷ Indeed, Wesley's "Rules" did not address the role of a band leader because the band meeting could progress successfully without a skilled leader.

Wesley's "Rules" described the chief activity of the band meeting as consisting of the members 'speaking, each of us in order, freely and plainly the true state of

³⁶ Kevin M. Watson, "The Methodist Class Meeting for the 21st Century," *Vital Piety*, July 29, 2010, <https://vitalpiety.com/2010/07/29/the-methodist-class-meeting-for-the-21st-century/>

³⁷ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 95.

our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting.’³⁸

Because the leader did not play an important role within the band, the band did not require skilled leaders. The band was where the class leaders had their accountability, so every class leaders should participate in the bands. On the contrary, the classes need skilled leaders because the class leader was responsible for making the meetings dynamic. When people spoke about their spiritual status, the class leader had to guide them through a process of willingly mutual response and support of one another. By doing so, the class would incarnate an accountable discipleship among the society members. Finally, the class leaders had to report weekly on the classes’ members to the pastors. Therefore, the class leaders played a far more important role than the band leaders.

Mutual trust was necessary for the survival of Wesleyan small groups. James 5:16 was a basic rationale for the importance of the band meeting: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” The bands thus required more mutual trust of their participants than did the classes. In the band meetings, participants were asked the question: “What sins have you committed since our last meeting?” However, when one tells one’s sins to others, the assumption is that these will not be shared with others outside the group. If the participants fail to keep others’ secrets, the band meeting will collapse. Thus, participants in the bands have to possess some degree of spiritual maturity.

³⁸ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 103.

Given the demand of spiritual maturity by band members, how could the band effectively recruit new members? What conditions of eligibility must govern membership in the band? These questions are connected to another concern: What kind of grace is prerequisite to participating in small groups like the band and the class. People have different spiritual levels. Some have just become interested in God's love. These people are like infants. Others have a deeper spiritual level. They may seek Christ-like perfection. Moreover, different people have different needs. Some want to experience freedom from their guilt. They need small groups that will help them experience God's forgiveness, mercy, and love. The early Methodists adapted small groups in accordance with their distinctive understanding of divine grace, so that different groups were organized to meet the needs of people at different points in their spiritual life.³⁹

The agenda of the band meeting is for members to confess their sins to one another. By confessing actual sins, members will recognize sin's power over their lives. At the same time, they will recognize the need for freedom from the slavery of sin. However, because they are under original sin, it is impossible to free themselves from the slavery of sin. They need God's grace, especially justifying grace. While grace cannot be cleanly divided into justifying grace, convincing grace, and sanctifying grace—for these are all aspects of the same reality—God shows love in various ways.

Grace prevents, convinces, justifies, regenerates, and sanctifies. Wesleyans often refer to these as preventing grace, convincing grace, justifying grace,

³⁹ Albin, "Inwardly Persuaded," 38.

regenerating grace, or sanctifying grace. But they are all the same thing. There are not different graces. There is just God, acting in love for us in various ways.⁴⁰

New birth (justification) is an essential experience for the participants in the band. In addition, there is an intimate connection within the band meetings between divine grace and mutual trust. If one participant reveals another's secret, the mutual trust that undergirds the band meeting will disintegrate. Thus, since "mutual accountability" is so important to the Wesleyan small groups, genuine trust is necessary for their success.

Since early Methodists were required to be members of the classes, the class meetings had been grown spontaneously. However, membership in the bands was not required and was expected only of those with notable spiritual maturity. When the classes emerged, some kinds of the bands were replaced by them. For instance, the different small groups within Methodism included the trial band, the penitent band, the select band, and the class meeting. Wesley offered the trial band in particular for people who wanted to begin a life of faith. The trial band served as a bridge between those who still under sin and those who had begun to repent of their sin. In other words, the trial band was the entry-level group. After newcomers completed the trial band, they typically joined a band meeting. However, the trial band was replaced by the class meeting after the birth of the classes. "The class meeting was intended to be for everyone, even those who had not yet had an experience of justification by faith and the new birth. The band meeting, by contrast, was intended to be for those who already had

⁴⁰ Kevin M. Watson and Scott T. Kisker, *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), 49.

these experiences.”⁴¹ Moreover, the class meetings were less intense since its participants did not need to confess their sins. This made joining the class easier than joining the band. While the class meeting thrived in American Methodism, the band meeting gradually disappeared, giving way to the class. By 1816, the year of Francis Asbury’s death, the band meeting had largely disappeared from American Methodism. By that time, the class meeting had become popular in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC).⁴²

2.5 The Reasons of Decline of Wesley’s Small Groups

In Britain, band meetings were in rapid decline by the end of the eighteenth century. By the middle part of the nineteenth century, the original band meeting had completely disappeared in Methodism.⁴³ Likewise, the class meeting declined in the early nineteenth century. In addition, before 1900 the class system had lost its vitality in most of British Methodism.⁴⁴ A similar pattern occurred in American Methodist Churches. From the 1770s to the 1850s, “the class meeting was a thriving institution which gave a distinctive mark to the Methodist way.”⁴⁵ However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the classes had declined. Eventually the classes disappeared entirely from American Methodism.

David Watson found two reasons for the decline of the classes. First, such decline was symptomatic of Methodism’s transformation from a society to a church. He

⁴¹ Ibid., 97.

⁴² Ibid., 95.

⁴³ Matthew Alan Mobley, *Common Bound: The Small Groups of Methodism* (The Divinity School of Duke University, Doctor of Ministry dissertation, 2016), 13.

⁴⁴ Andrew Goodhead, *A Crown and A Cross: The Rise, Development, and Decline of the Methodist Class Meeting in Eighteenth-Century England* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 192.

⁴⁵ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 131.

criticized formalism and a loss of accountability. In Wesley's small groups, accountability was a significant element, namely, a loss of accountability meant the loss of vitality of the classes.

For example, as time went on, the classes acquired a fixed agenda and took the catechetical format of question and answer. The tendency of such catechesis during the nineteenth century moved away from accountability for good works, and more toward an inbred pietism that marked the decline of the class meeting—a tendency already evident in this early post Wesleyan account. But as Wesley had introduced and developed them, the classes promoted accountability for the General Rules as well as for inward spiritual growth.⁴⁶ As the classes took on the catechetical format, the classes become routine and repetitive. As a result, the classes gradually declined due to being so formalized. Later generations of Methodists were unable to maintain the dynamic class meetings.

Second, as the traveling preachers replaced the class leaders, the original Methodist system changed. American preachers moved from appointment to appointment for preaching, and the class leaders led their classes. However, when the preachers settled down in one place, the role of class leader was rendered unnecessary. The preachers themselves began to play the role of class leader. In short, American Methodist churches lost the active ministerial participation of lay people, which had been crucial to its success.

⁴⁶ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 115.

Andrew Goodhead has analyzed the decline of the classes in eighteenth-century England and identifies two reasons for it. The first is found of the shift within Methodism from movement to organization. It is inevitable that a movement become an institution if its organization is to be maintained. Thus, Goodhead suggests, the decline of Wesley's class meeting was unavoidable in late-eighteenth-century England.

Either a movement disintegrates, or it becomes an institution—this is simply a sociological law. Every religious group that started out as a movement and managed to survive did so because it was gradually institutionalized: the Waldensians, the Quakers, the Moravians, the Pentecostals.⁴⁷

Goodhead draws on Max Weber's theory of the routinization of charisma to support his claim. Routinization simply means that "the outward form remains; the internal charisma has gone."⁴⁸ Wesley eventually became a figurehead, rather than the controlling charismatic leader he was in the earliest period. As a result, class meetings and other small groups weakened, gradually losing their dynamic movement toward holiness and growth within individuals,⁴⁹ who in turn were less likely to influence others. This presents a difficult paradox. Since the purpose of the class meetings is to promote members' growth in holiness and make true disciples of Jesus Christ, dynamic movement is necessary. Class meetings thus should avoid being formalized. However, as times passes, formalization is necessary to maintain any movement.

⁴⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 52.

⁴⁸ Goodhead, *A Crown and A Cross*, 202.

⁴⁹ "Any model that lacks dynamic movement toward holiness and its growth within individuals and its dissemination throughout the world is clearly inadequate." David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 57.

Goodhead identified the second reason for the decline of class meetings as “totemism.” Because Wesley himself had experienced God's grace through small groups rather than large society meetings, he insisted that people who wanted to enter the society meetings should first join class meetings. Wesley's class meetings were intended to promote conversion and sanctification. However, over time, the purpose of the class meetings became idealized, and then totemism followed. For instance, the prerequisite for joining the class meetings was a desire to flee from the wrath to come. Such a rule has authority only for those who sense a need to flee. Later generations of Methodists, however, joined the class meetings not because of the desire to flee from the wrath to come, but because the Methodists became respectable and needed to gather into the class meetings to share the week's burdens and receive comfort and encouragement.⁵⁰ The class meetings attained a sacred status that developed into a totem. Then, the class as a totem had become immutable even when it needed reformation.

Moreover, as Methodism became routinized, the class gradually lost its vitality and degenerated into religious activities. Membership in the early class had required the desire “to flee from the wrath to come,” but second-generation Methodists rarely felt this burning desire. The class “left the appearance of the experiential class in place, but in reality, operated as a shell of its former being.”⁵¹

As a result, later generations of Methodists were unable to maintain the dynamic class meetings. Rather, these were replaced by prayer meetings or a large society

⁵⁰ Goodhead, *Crown and A Cross*, 241.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

meeting. As class meetings diminished, people lost opportunities to discuss their spiritual status openly and honestly in class meetings. Early Methodism recognized the importance, of encouraging people to be regularly accountable, to make their own General Rules, and to practice those rules so that they keep their individual holiness and social holiness.

Indeed, for the first half of the nineteenth century, when Wesleyan small groups were central, American Methodism experienced phenomenal growth. However, as Kevin Watson describes, as the Methodist Church became the largest Protestant denomination in America, its leaders began to increasingly to follow the dictates of American culture. Wesleyan small groups evolved from being chiefly transformational to being primarily informational. The Methodist Church replaced the classes and bands with Sunday, which lacked an equivalent focus on conversation about members' relationship with God. By the mid-1900s, the Sunday School was the primary form of small group in most American Methodist churches. This change led to a situation where many Methodists today have never heard of either the class meeting or the band meeting.⁵² As Watson argues, this change from transformational to informational small groups has contributed to the church's decline.

2.6 The Spirit of Wesley's Small Groups

Wesley's small groups, as exemplified by the class and the band meetings, were crucial the early Methodist church. Wesley's small groups were the instruments for

⁵² Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 98.

“long-lasting spiritual transformation”⁵³ and spiritual growth. “The ‘Method’ that gave Methodism both its name and its overwhelming effectiveness was the class meeting.”⁵⁴

The sacraments, worship, and preaching are fundamental practices of the Christian faith. In response, the class-meeting was that holy place where the effects of those practices took root and flourished. Leaders in the early Methodist Church – both laypeople and clergy – understood that the class-meeting was the heart of Methodism that pumped the life-giving blood of Jesus Christ to all the other parts of the Body.⁵⁵

Wesley’s small groups made Methodism a dynamic organism. The early Methodists grew in faith through an intimate fellowship and accountability for spiritual stewardship. While it is important for churches to have a well-ordered worship service and excellent preaching, these elements are insufficient by themselves to effect spiritual renewal.

Wesley asked people to join the class meeting in order to become members of the Methodist movement. At the same time, he traveled to different places for field preaching. The combination of field preaching, and Wesley’s small groups defined the Methodist movement and transformed English society in the late eighteenth-century. Historians agree that the Methodist movement played an important role in sparing England from the kind of bloody revolution which France had experienced.⁵⁶ In

⁵³ Michael D. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN; Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁵ James B. Scott and Molly Davis Scott, *Restoring the Wesleyan Class-Meeting* (Dallas, TX; Provident Publishing, 2008), 223.

⁵⁶ Wesley and Whitefield worked together for salvation of people in the working class. They hoped that this evangelical attempt would revitalize the Anglican church. However, their attempt brought unexpected outcomes. Elie Halevy, French historian, states that “For sixty years before our date (1815) Methodism had been the one really civilizing influence of work among the miners in Durham or in Cornwall” in his book *A History of the English People 1815*. As a result, they did begin to accomplish their own goals but with unintended political outcomes.

addition, a powerful preacher George Whitfield lived in the same period. He was the recognized leader of the evangelical awakening. However, many people understood the movement in the late eighteenth-century England as Wesleyan Revival rather than the Whitefield Revival. This fact shows a significant lesson. According to Adam Clarke, a historian of early Methodism, “it was by this means [the formation of small groups] that we have been enabled to establish permanent and holy churches over the world.”⁵⁷ In short, Wesley recognized the necessity for the spiritual formation group.

Recent Methodist churches are more interested in Wesley’s small groups. David Watson formed “Covenant Discipleship” group, and Kevin Watson reclaim Wesley’s class meeting. However, many churches could not easily apply the Wesley’s small groups into their context although they see the necessity of the small groups. Some church leaders may have insufficient knowledge. Some may have misunderstanding of Wesley’s small groups. Some may feel fear of failure when they execute the small groups. Today’s churches can never back down. Rather, they need spiritual renewal. In next chapter, I will deal with what kind of form contemporary churches have small groups such as Covenant Discipleship groups and Disciple Bible study groups. Also, we will see the reasons why so hard contemporary people become religious from mainly Charles Taylor’s book *The Secular Age*, and then I will examine how the two small groups overcome the secularism in contemporary churches. The primary value in

Elie Halevy, *A History of the English People in the nineteenth century – I England in 1815*, translated from the French by E. I. Watkin and D. A. Barker with an Introduction by R. B. McCallum, (Great Britain; Ernest Benn Limited, 1961), 263.

⁵⁷ Henderson, John Wesley’s Class Meeting, 30.

studying Wesley's small groups is to gain insights and methods for the church's mission: making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

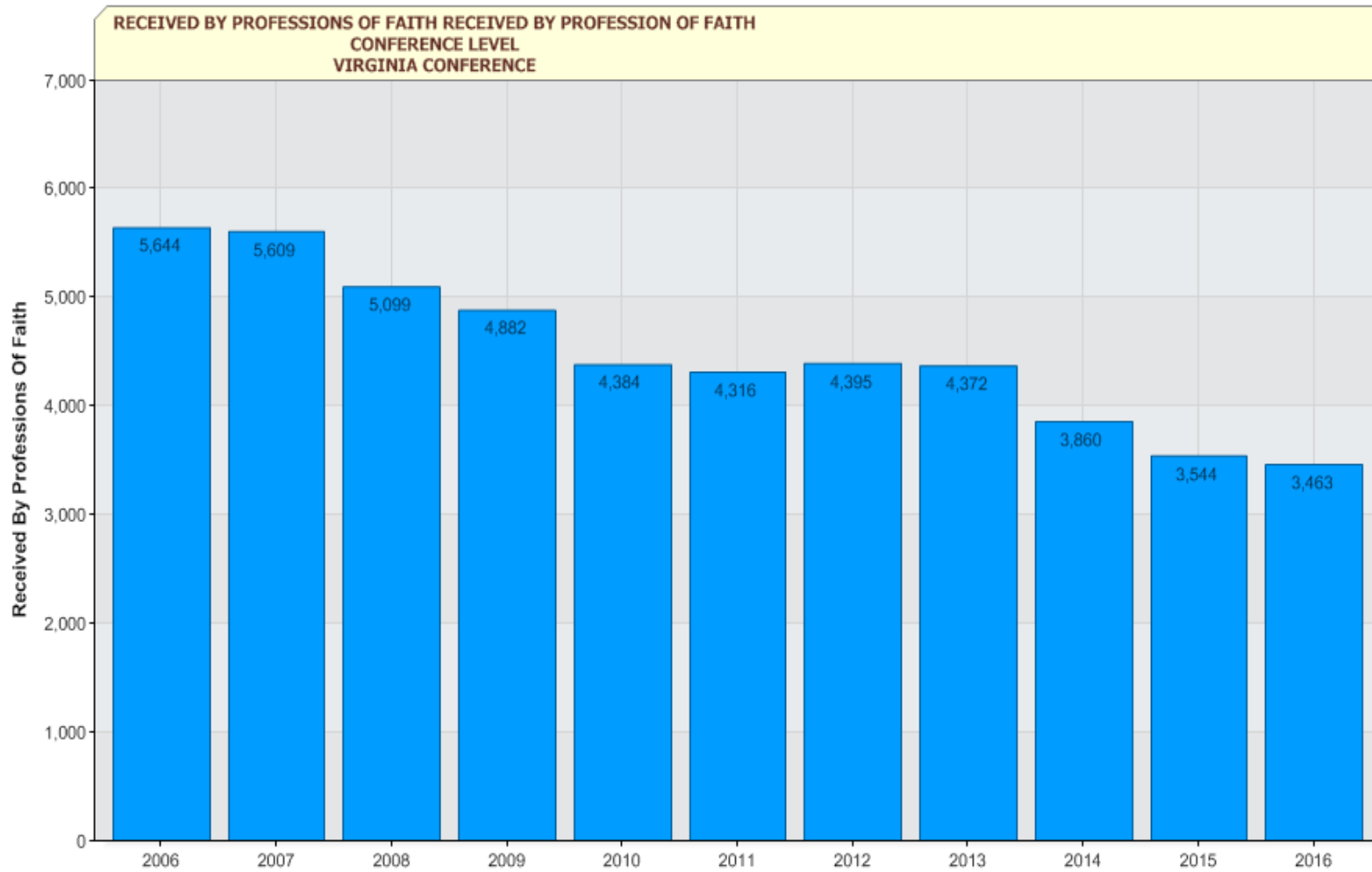


Figure 4: Declining number of those who profess the faith in the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church

3. Covenant Discipleship Groups and Disciple Bible Study Groups

“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.”¹
The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church

The eighteenth century marked “the beginning of the industrial revolution which whisked England out of the Middle Ages and into the modern industrial era.”² Those who owned factories enjoyed all the luxuries this revolution brought, while the economic situation of the working class became worse. The violent upheaval of the French Revolution began in 1789. However, “in England the revolution was entirely opposite: It was quiet, orderly, and of a spiritual nature. It was led not by armed insurgents but by Anglican revivalists and their lay assistants. It was the Wesleyan Revolution.”³

The most tragic victims of the industrial revolution in eighteenth-century England were the children of the working families. They began at four or five years of age to work in the mines and factories. They did not have a chance to receive an education because they worked from Monday to Saturday. Thus, the original Sunday School started with the purpose of educating the poor.

¹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016) ¶1117.2. a)

² D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

Inspired by British examples, most [Sunday schools] were designed to provide rudimentary instruction to poor working children on their only free day of the week. Robert Raikes and other British evangelicals had pioneered this model during the 1780s by collecting children off city streets, cleaning them up, and keeping them in school for two long Sunday sessions.⁴

In short, the purpose of the early Sunday school was moral and social reform amidst a moral crisis. The poor working children did not have opportunities to receive formal school education, as well as many families' lives were devastated by alcoholism and others. "One of the most demoralizing vices of the poor was widespread alcoholism, even among the children. In 1736, every sixth house in London was licensed as a grogshop."⁵ The painting *Gin Lane* depicts the addiction of the English people to alcohol and subsequent corruption. Therefore, John Wesley wanted to reform English society, especially the Anglican church.

John Wesley expressed his aim: "To reform the nation, especially the Church, and to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land."⁶ In the eighteenth century, the Methodist movement began with Wesley and George Whitefield. Whitefield was a powerful preacher and ignited the spiritual revival, the Great Awakening. Wesley was also a powerful and field preacher. The difference between Wesley and Whitefield is that Wesley intentionally organized groups like classes, bands, and societies for the purpose of facilitating intentional and meaningful growth in holiness. He "created an

⁴ Ann M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institute 1790–1880* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 6.

⁵ Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 19.

⁶ Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversation", in *The Works of John Wesley Third Edition: Complete and Unabridged Volume VII: Addresses, Essays, Letters*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 299.

instructional system which brought about a national spiritual renewal in eighteenth-century England. His techniques for nurturing and training Christian disciples not only brought personal transformation to tens of thousands of individual working-class believers, but a moral reformation to the nation as well.”⁷ Indeed, Sunday schools were influenced by Wesley’s small groups.

The groups like the class, band, and society were invaluable for transformation of the nation and church. In short, Wesley’s ultimate goal was to transform our lives. For Wesley, to reform English society and church posed a tremendous challenge. Therefore, he wanted people to experience conversion by God. In addition, Wesley emphasized fellowship because it helps people receive God’s grace. He believed that societies, bands, and classes helped them to live Christian life. He understood the fellowship these groups provided as means of grace.

According to Lacey Warner, in Wesley’s days, small groups like the classes, bands, and societies “provided a context in which most early Methodists experienced spiritual conversions facilitated by consistent practices of piety and mercy.”⁸ Wesley understood that people change when they are shown how to live. When they joined a Methodist society, people were not given a book to study and discuss. They were initiated into the basic practices of discipleship described for them in the General Rules.⁹

⁷ Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 11.

⁸ Lacey Warner, “Spreading Scripture Holiness: Theology and Practices of Early Methodism for the Contemporary Church”, *Asbury Journal* Volume 63, no 1, (2008). 124.

⁹ Steven W. Manskar, *Disciples Making Disciples: A Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups & Class Leaders* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2016), 42.

The purpose of the General Rules is to guide people in their ongoing walk with God. Wesley stated that the one condition to join the societies was “a desire to flee from the wrath to come to be saved from their sins.”¹⁰ If people want to be saved from their sins, the desire will be shown by its fruits. True followers of Jesus should prove their desire for salvation by following the General Rules. Wesley’s focus on the General Rules precipitated his split with the Moravians. The Moravians, Wesley thought, were insufficiently interested in doing good works, which the second general rule enjoins. They seemed to focus on inward religion (works of piety) to the exclusion of works of mercy.

Methodism focused on both the works of mercy and works of piety. Wesley believed that true disciples of Jesus have to deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Jesus. These steps can be summarized in the two Great Commandments: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your hearts, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”¹¹ Jesus clearly states that loving God and loving our neighbors are the chief imperatives of the Christian life. The Methodist church expressed these “greatest commandments” in its General Rules, which provided Methodists with a set of basic practices to help them obey the teachings of Jesus.

¹⁰ Wesley, “General Rules and Rules of the Band Societies,” in *The Works of Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) 67–76, here 70.

¹¹ Matthew 22:37–40 NRSV.

Discipleship is not just about knowing God or doing the right thing. Instead, it is about loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbors. Thus, as John Wesley saw, in order to become real disciples of Jesus, one must follow the General Rules, which correspond to the two commandments. By performing the General rules faithfully and over and over, people will experience a transformed life by God's grace. Andrew Thompson states that having habits of experience of God's presence leads people to true spiritual growth.¹² Also, these habits will precipitate transformation. In his perspective, the General Rules are means to experience God's presence. Indeed, the General Rules are an important element of today's Wesleyan small groups like the Covenant Discipleship groups.

3.1. Challenges to Spiritual Formation in the 21st Century

Just a few years ago, churches were the center of local communities. People gathered at their local churches for not only worship, but for various other events. In addition, religious belief was an important role in people's ordinary lives. However, contemporary churches no longer play a crucial role in the local community, nor in the daily lives of many people. Religious belief is now an option for many people rather than a given.

Charles Taylor deals with secularism in his book *A Secular Age*, which helps us to understand the tendency of religious life in modern society. He starts with the question:

¹² Andrew C. Thompson, *The Means of Grace: Traditioned Practice in Today's World* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2015), 135.

Why is it so hard to believe in God in the modern West, while in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to? He argues against the view that secularity is caused by the rise of other beliefs like science, reason, or “deliverances of particular sciences: for instance, evolutionary theory, or neuro-physiological explanations of mental functioning.”¹³ He argues that the view is far too simplistic.

Instead, Taylor claims that “new conditions of belief”¹⁴ effect the rise of secularity. For instance, in the Middle Ages, it was easy to believe in God because people understood God as transcending the world. They believed that God directly controlled the natural world. However, in the Late Middle Ages, a new condition of “exclusive humanism”¹⁵ put an end to “the naïve acknowledgment of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing.”¹⁶ God is no longer embedded in the cosmos. In addition, the notion of human flourishing had to change. “The highest goal can no longer just be to flourish, as it was before. Either a new goal is posited, of a salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing. Or else Heaven, or the Good, lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness.”¹⁷ People no longer need a transcendent existence. Instead, they find their deepest meaning from immanent rather than transcendent sources. As a

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ Taylor described “exclusive humanism” as a way of being in the world that locates the deepest sources of meaning with reference only to human life, rather than with reference to transcendent existence.

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

result, “the belief that life can be lived fully and completely without reference to a transcendent reality,” a belief Taylor calls “exclusive humanism,” “required moral and spiritual resources to sustain that life.”¹⁸ People need a moral order in order to keep peace among them. The idea of “benevolence” functionally replaced agape as the basic of society, which was now understood as a moral order of mutual benefit. This order may have jettisoned the notion of divine love, but it maintained a commitment to benevolence.

Taylor insists that people in modern society are uncomfortable with orthodox doctrines like original sin and atonement. These doctrines are at odds with the new condition of “exclusive humanism,” which claimed benevolence as a defining feature. In addition, such “benevolence” directly opposes the necessary condition for admission into Wesley’s small groups: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come to be saved from their sins.” In short, contemporary churches face the challenge of transforming men and women who are deeply shaped by “exclusive humanism.” The church’s mission may involve a more explicit articulation of Christian humanism that corresponds to the proclamation of gospel.

In addition, Taylor insists that a further trend reaches its culmination in the latter half of the twentieth century. “There arises in Western societies a generalized culture of ‘authenticity’, or expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to find their

¹⁸ Vic Froese. “Recommended Reading: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*”, *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* Volume 40. No.1. 90–100. <http://www.directionjournal.org/40/1/charles-taylors-ia-secular-age-i.html>

own fulfillment, 'do their own thing.'"¹⁹ This cultural phenomenon supplanted the spiritual in human life, for it is similar to the idea of "self-spirituality." Paul Heelas describes "self-spirituality" as pervasive in modern society. "Self-spirituality" begins with a question like "why do not your lives work?" The answer is that "you are all living mechanically in your belief systems instead of freshly in the world of actual experience."²⁰ "Since the person is held to be essentially spiritual, to experience the 'self' itself is to experience God."²¹ This inner realm can help people to live a perfect life. Consequently, modern people highly value autonomy and freedom, and authority lies with the experience of one's self or, more broadly, the natural realm.²² In short, the locus of authority shifts to one's own spiritual authority.

Another feature of secularism, according to Taylor, is the new sense of the self, which he has dubbed the "buffered self." Modern people no longer understand themselves as inhabiting a world with spirits, demons, or other entities that can inhabit or possess them. The buffered self "was necessary to have confidence in our own powers of moral ordering."²³ It also led to the "disenchanted world"²⁴ of modern society. In this "disenchanted world," power and authority lie primarily with the individual self.

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

²⁰ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 18.

²¹ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 73.

²² Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 18–29.

²³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 27.

²⁴ Taylor's central argument in *A Secular Age* is that a society can continue to live in an "enchanted world" even while adopting many of the structures, institutions and practices associated with modernization. Here, "enchanted world" indicates the pre-modern world. In the "enchanted world," people believed that transcendent existence determined the world. However, in the "disenchanted world," people no longer hold to that belief.

By contrast, Wesley understands Christian fellowship as a means of grace by which believers can grow spiritually through their relationships and experiences with other followers of Jesus. However, such a notion of fellowship is countercultural in modern society. "Our society is the most hyper-individualistic that has ever existed on earth."²⁵ Individuals dislike being intruded for the well-being of others in a community. However, sometimes people will have to do something for the good of others, which makes them deny what they might want to do for themselves. It will constrain their freedom.

This emphasis on individualistic culture has rendered the church a mere option, one typically given less priority than soccer practice, a favorite television show, or the laundry. People are more concerned about personal gratification than communal goods. They pursue the well-being of their body, mind, and spirit. As a result, temple stays, Yoga, and training of the mind have become widely popular.

In addition, the individualistic culture makes forming Wesley's small groups difficult. According to Wesley, salvation is not given to us one-time event or is not possessed by people. Rather, salvation is ongoing process throughout their whole life. In other words, "salvation comes in the form of a relationship."²⁶ First, it is a relationship with Jesus Christ. Second, it is a relationship with the community of faith which Jesus called us into. Our commitment to one another in the Christian fellowship bears fruit

²⁵ Thompson, *The Means of Grace*, 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

like holiness. Then, we learn that Christian fellowship has power, as a means of grace, to transform us.

3.2. The Disciple Bible Study

Bishop Richard Wilke of the United Methodist Church created the Disciple Bible study in 1986, drawing from John Wesley's efforts to reach out to people with smaller class meetings. Many of the people Wesley encountered were poorly educated farmers and working people who gathered at home, much like the early church in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."²⁷ In the context, "the apostles' teaching" means Bible study, and the "fellowship or koinonia" means sharing life's experience together.²⁸ With this in mind, Bishop Wilke rooted the Disciple Bible study in characteristics of the early Christian church and Methodism.

In an interview,²⁹ Bishop Wilke stated his reason for introducing the Disciple Bible study: simply that people do not know the Bible. With Disciple, he aimed for a different kind of Bible study. He envisioned the leaders of the Disciple Bible study as playing the role of "facilitator," not "teacher." He wanted the Disciple Bible study to be "formation" rather than "information". The second principle of the Disciple Bible study states that "No Christian has a monopoly on understanding either God's word or the

²⁷ Acts 2:42

²⁸ See at <http://www.beadisciple.com/disciple30/> Be a Disciple.com is the online education of Wesley theology.

²⁹ See at <http://www.beadisciple.com/blog/the-history-of-disciple-bible-study-with-bishop-richard-wilke/>.

words of the Scripture. This includes biblical scholars and the most unlearned Christian. All of us must listen to one another as we seek to understand the richness of God's gifts."³⁰ The members of the Disciple Bible study have equal standing as they discuss and share their understanding of God's words. While ordinary Bible studies establish a vertical relationship like a teacher-student relationship, a horizontal relationship is formed in the Disciple Bible study because of its second principle.

The Disciple Bible study requires participants to do daily scripture reading and notetaking. "The main purpose for taking notes is to have a personal record of information gleaned from Scripture and of insights and questions about the Scripture."³¹ Participants then share their insights and questions with other colleagues. They spend two and one-half hours each week for thirty-four weeks in the weekly group meetings. The meetings are led by pastors or lay leaders. During the first twenty minutes of each meeting, the participants watch videotaped lectures; these include scholarly presentation on key themes and passages. Next, they have a time for discussion and exploration of scripture and of what it means to live as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. The first book in the Disciple Bible comprises a 34-lesson study of the Old Testament and the New Testament (17 lessons each) that focuses on becoming disciples or followers of Jesus. The course will take about nine months to complete.

³⁰ *Disciple: Becoming Disciples through Bible Study*, Teacher Helps, second edition (Abingdon Press, 1987), 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Unlike many forms of Sunday School or small groups, the subject of the Disciple Bible study is the Bible. The participants apply the meaning of assigned scripture to their lives. Therefore, the Disciple Bible study assumes that participants will place themselves under the power and authority of Scripture. They believe that they will experience new life through studying the Bible and practicing discipleship in a specific way. In contrast to modern secularity, the Disciple Bible study recognizes the authority and power of the Bible (which lies outside the human mind). The Disciple Bible study acknowledges the Bible as the standard for how to live as followers of Jesus and helps Christians to practice discipleship through daily scripture reading and studying major characteristics of the disciple of Jesus. In short, the Disciple Bible study attempts to change the locus of authority from the self to the Bible.

3.3 Covenant Discipleship Groups

In the late twentieth century, David Watson introduced Covenant Discipleship groups to the United Methodist Church. These were modeled on Wesley's class meeting. According to Steven Manskar, Covenant Discipleship groups are especially suited for those who want to serve as class leaders, a fact that may limit wider interest in Covenant Discipleship groups. The purpose of the Covenant Discipleship groups is to help center people on Christ. However, the becoming "Christ-centered" is not an easy task in modern society.

From the perspective of Charles Taylor's *Secular Age*, the way of being "Christ-centered" opposes modern tendencies like "exclusive humanism." Modern people carve

out their own unique spiritual path and eschew traditional, 'spoon-fed' answers to life's existential questions. Nevertheless, true disciples are centered on Christ. "The only true center of our discipleship is Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and soon to come again. When we are centered on Christ, we see that our salvation is truly God's gift, graciously offered, and with no conditions other than a willingness to accept it."³² In contrast, if we are not centered on Christ, if faith in Christ is not the priority of our discipleship, we ourselves become the focus of attention. Therefore, disciples ought to pursue the way of "Christ-centeredness." Watson points out that "self-centeredness" has been pervasively in Protestantism and enumerates examples of this pitfall within Protestant churches.

The most damaging consequence of our Protestant pitfall is that we who call ourselves his disciples have usurped the role of Christ in these matters. We have determined what is appropriate discipleship and have presumed to judge who meets our criteria of personal faith. Instead of witnessing to Jesus Christ and the fullness of his salvation, we have witnessed to that small part of his salvation we have been privileged to receive. Instead of presenting the teaching of Jesus and allowing people to follow them with whatever grace they receive from the Holy Spirit, we have presented our understanding of his teachings – an understanding, let it be said again, of very limited capacity – and tried to persuade people to see things our way.³³

In addition, Watson claims that "our discipleship becomes 'inside out' rather than 'outside in.'"³⁴ In the light of "Christ-centeredness," the community of faith and discipleship emphasize turning "inside out" rather than "outside in," because to be disciples means to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As Jesus said,

³² David Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1991), 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

“You are the salt and the light of the world.”³⁵ By actively engaging in the world, Christians transform the world into the new earth, the new age, the new order. We intentionally adopt an attitude quite opposite of the “safe house” mentality.

If the church is understood as “a sign community of the coming reign of God,” the task of the church is to fulfill God’s mission on earth: God’s “universal reign of love, justice, and peace.”³⁶ In short, God’s mission tends to and “inside-out” rather than “outside-in” attitude. Watson warns against the danger of self-centered discipleship, so the church must beware of the pitfall of self-preoccupation in carrying out its task as a sign community. Watson points to Covenant Discipleship groups as a helpful means of forming disciples who are centered on Christ. Indeed, Covenant Discipleship groups may present an effective response to the challenge contemporary churches face to transform “the new context” of secularism in modern society.

Watson states that the general rules of Covenant Discipleship groups play an important role in forming “centered-Christ” disciples. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016, ¶1117.2. a) states the General Rules’ aim: “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.”³⁷ The image below nicely expresses the General Rule of Discipleship.³⁸ “By first addressing works of mercy,

³⁵ Matthew 5:13–16.

³⁶ Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples*, 24.

³⁷ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶1117.2. a)

³⁸ Gayle Turner Watson, *Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), 12.

Wesley emphasized that Methodists must take care of people's physical needs first, giving food to the hungry, clothes to the needy, and caring for those who were sick or in prison."³⁹ Works of mercy, he recognized, are a primary obligation of Christian disciples. After prescribing works of mercy, the General Rules moved to works of piety. Wesley believed that by doing works of mercy piety, we open ourselves to grace. We do not earn God's grace by doing such works. However, by taking on this obligation, we can so order our lives that we are more receptive to grace.

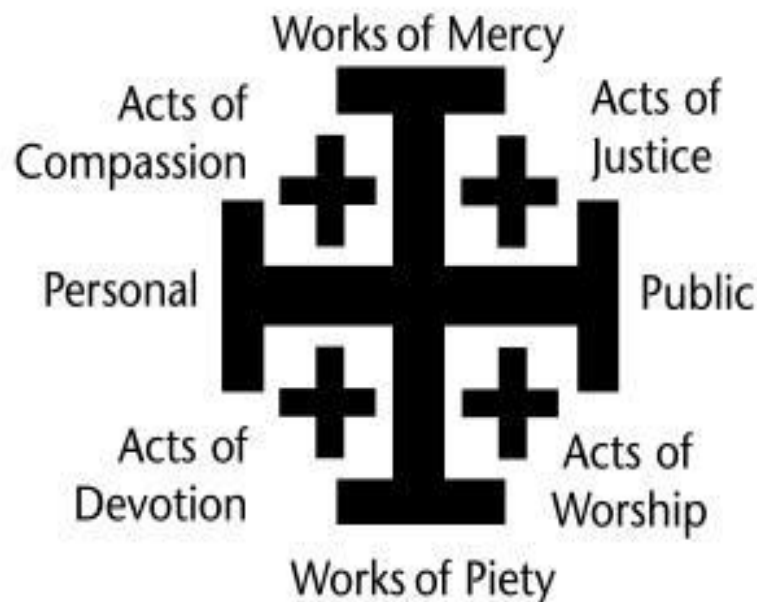


Figure 5: General Rules of Discipleship

Since the General Rules are so important to Methodism, Watson developed consonant rules for forming Christian disciples. Each Covenant Discipleship group writes a covenant shaped by the General Rule of Discipleship. In the covenant, the

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

group names the practices members are willing and able to integrate into their lives, and each member commits to giving a weekly account of what they have and have not done. The covenant sets the agenda for the weekly meeting.⁴⁰

Participants in each Covenant Discipleship group ask each other to perform faithfully the covenant every week, and the purpose of the covenant is to help the members grow in holiness. If the members find themselves turning a clause in the covenant into a routine, the group is encouraged to revise that clause to make it more challenging. The covenant is thus always open to adjustment to meet their spiritual needs. Indeed, groups are encouraged to evaluate their covenant at least annually, and any time they feel the need.

In short, the Covenant Discipleship group aims to form disciples who have a Christ-centered attitude. The General Rule of Discipleship helps to shape “inside-out” and “Christ-centered” congregations, so that their members will be formed as Christ’s faithful disciples. This way, however, stands in opposition to the tendency of the modern secular age, marked by its “exclusive humanism” and tendency to forge a spiritual path via the immanent rather than the transcendent. This self-centered or “outside-in” attitude stands in sharp contrast to the Covenant Discipleship groups.

Since Covenant Discipleship groups aim for the way of “Christ-centered” discipleship, its membership is limited to leaders in the church, such as class leaders. Steven Manskar uses the structure of Salisbury Cathedral to explain the purpose of

⁴⁰ Steven, *Disciples Making Disciples*, 84.

Covenant Discipleship groups. He compares the walls, ceiling, windows, and paraments to members of the church. Each has a particular function and is supported by the pillars. These are the “apostles and prophets” Paul mentions in Ephesians 2:20. Jesus is the keystone of the arches that holds the pillars of the church together, allowing it to be faithful to its mission of glorifying God and representing his kingdom to the world.⁴¹

In the Wesleyan tradition, class leaders serve as the apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers. In other words, they support church members by teaching and nurturing them in order to glorify God. As Manskar explains, the ultimate purpose of Covenant Discipleship groups is to support the church’s mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. These groups provide mutual accountability and support as individual disciples seek to discern God’s call to fulfill the church’s mission. Some will answer God’s call through the work of a class leader.⁴² As a result, the Covenant Discipleship groups are particularly suited for church leaders, especially class leaders. “Class meetings and class leaders provided our Methodist forebears with a means of forming a balanced discipleship and living it out faithfully in the world.”⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

⁴² Ibid., 83.

⁴³ Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples*, 61.

4. A Survey and An Analysis of the Disciple Bible Study Group

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”²

2 Timothy 3:16–17

The Disciple Bible study group differs from Sunday school or ordinary Bible studies because participants actively share their understandings of God’s Word. We generally view Bible studies as information-driven groups “focused on conveying information and...organized by a common curriculum.”³ Through ordinary Bible study groups, people may gain knowledge of the Bible, but this way is insufficient for becoming the disciples of Jesus Christ. Only when we follow Christ do we become true disciples of Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, describes what it means to follow Christ in his book *The Cost of the Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer is unwilling to separate the

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995), 47.

² 2 Timothy 3:16–17 NRSV.

³ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 5.

concepts of faith and works. Instead, he claims that works and faith are intertwined. He points out that grace is not cheap but costly.

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.⁴

Bonhoeffer insists that true disciples follow Jesus. They never belittle grace.

Instead, they take their cross and follow Jesus.

Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."⁵

The ultimate aim of the Disciple Bible study groups is to make true disciples of Jesus. Hence, the Disciple Bible study groups help to firmly establish the Bible as the standard of participants' lives. Such standard is crucial because the Bible reveals Jesus as the Word of God.

This chapter will examine whether the Disciple Bible study groups truly help to make disciples of Jesus Christ in the real world by examining a survey of church leaders involved in the Disciple Bible study groups in the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church where about 1,300 churches have been. In my research, ten church leaders answered to a questionnaire on Disciple Bible study. Participants are mainly church leaders or elders for their congregation that conduct the Disciple Bible study groups. I had access to the Yahoo Group for the Virginia Conference and emailed to all

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

clergies who participate in the Yahoo Group. My recruitment message asked for church leaders whose congregation has the Disciple Bible study group and who were interested in participating in my research to contact me. Participants completed questionnaire online. Questionnaire was posted on Duke Qualtrics. The questionnaire includes about 20 questions.

4.1. Bible as Standard of Lives

The population of religious people in the U.S. has steadily declined over past years. For instance, every year in recent decades the percentage of those who attend regularly worship service has seen a decline. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2007, 39 percent of people said that they attended religious services at least once a week. However, in 2014, 36 percent said that they attended religious services at least once a week.⁶ Those who attended religious services at least once a week had declined by 3 percent. On the other hand, in 2014, 23 percent of people considered themselves as religiously unaffiliated, including some who self-identify as atheists or agnostics as well as many who describe their religion as “nothing in particular,” compared with 16 percent of people who were considered religiously unaffiliated in 2007. The religiously unaffiliated (also called the “nones”) had increased by 7 percent. This outcome shows that the trends among the religiously unaffiliated segment of the population looks like secularization. Not only have the unaffiliated grown in size, they also have become less religious over time.

⁶ See The Pew Forum, “Attendance at Religious Services,” <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/>.

For example, the share of religious “nones” who say religion is “very important” in their lives has declined by 3 percentage points in recent years, and the share saying religion is “somewhat” important in their lives has declined by 4 points. Meanwhile, the share of religiously unaffiliated adults who say religion is either “not too important” or “not at all important” to them has grown by 8 percentage points since 2007. Roughly two-thirds of the “nones” now say religion is of little importance in their lives, up from 57% in 2007.⁷

Altogether, we can conclude that over time the population of the religiously unaffiliated will continue to increase. In line with Charles Taylor’s claim that contemporary people find their deepest meaning from immanent rather than transcendent existence, more and more people who consider themselves as the religiously unaffiliated seek truth from immanent sources.

In order to examine whether the Bible becomes the standard in the lives of those involved in the Disciple Bible study groups, I asked the leaders of these groups the question: “Do you agree or disagree that the Bible has become the standard of participants’ lives?” The options are: “Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; and Strongly disagree.” About 60 percent responded, “somewhat agree,” and about 20 percentage responded, “strongly agree.” However, 20 percent of people answered, “neither agree nor disagree.” This result was unanticipated result because I assumed that the Disciple Bible study groups were typically successful in their attempts to change the locus of authority from the self to the Bible. I expected that the Bible would be the standard of their lives, but 20 percent of church leaders neutrally answered to the question. (See Figure 6.)

⁷ See The Pew Forum, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/#fnref-23913-1>.

4.2 Authority of Bible

We are asked to follow Christ in order to become his disciples. Just as Jesus was the Word of God in the flesh, now “the Church is the real presence of Christ.”⁸ The Church becomes the witnessing agent to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, “the witness to the physical event of God revealing himself in Christ.”⁹ Bonhoeffer said that the work of following Christ was not something given just to the first disciples, but was meant for all disciples for all time. Since the Word of God is revealed in the Bible, the Bible should be the standard of those who want to be true disciples of Christ. As a result, all church programs, including the Disciple Bible study groups, ought to aim at encouraging people to follow Jesus Christ, so they can become His disciples.

Most of the church leaders surveyed said that participants in the Disciple Bible study groups accept the authority of the Bible. However, some church leaders reported that some participants did not hold to inerrancy. This reflects a broader trend throughout post-modern society, in which Christians cease to see the Bible as inerrant. According to Mark Chaves, belief in an inerrant Bible has declined since the 1970s.¹⁰ People have often assumed that education level determines the belief in an inerrant Bible, but Claude Fischer and Michael Hout have noted that over the twentieth century the belief in an inerrant Bible declined most among people without a high school

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁰ Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 33–35.

diploma.¹¹ Therefore, the overall decline of belief in an inerrant Bible is not wholly explained by increasing educational attainment. Chaves claims that “no longer seeing the Bible as inerrant is part of a more general shift, even among practicing Christians, away from seeing Christianity as uniquely true.”¹² He points out that while every indicator of traditional religiosity is either stable or declining, “the only thing that may be increasing slightly is what we might call diffuse spirituality.”¹³ He substantiates his claim with convincing examples. About 75% of people in the 1970s said that they believed in the afterlife, a figure that increased to over 80% in 2008. Even though the percentage of attendance at religious services has declined, belief in the afterlife has slightly increased. This outcome suggests an increase in diffuse spirituality rather than in traditional religious belief. In addition, while the percentage of people who attend religious services at least weekly does not correlate with an increase in belief in the afterlife, the percentage of people who attend less frequently has increased from 71% in the 1970s to 79% in the twenty-first century. The increase in diffuse spirituality in America is small but obvious. Figure 7 depicts this trend.¹⁴ (See Figure 7.)

Those that Chaves categorizes as practicing a diffuse spirituality often describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious (SBNR).”¹⁵ Indeed, the number of people who identify as SBNR has gradually increased since the 1970s. In short, the tendency of some

¹¹ Claude Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 208–209.

¹² Chaves, *American Religion*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ They consider themselves to be generally concerned with spiritual matters but are not interested in organized religion.

participants in the Disciple Bible study groups rejecting the inerrancy of scripture reflects a broader trend in modern society. Another way of describing this trend is that, even while they agree with the authority of the Bible, they avoid interpreting the Bible literally. They believe that God is real in their lives and therefore, they seek for what His Word says about how to live their lives, rather than literally believing the Bible.

In addition, the church leaders were asked the question: “Disciple Bible study groups have been most effective in?” The options are: “Gaining a clearer understanding of scriptures; Leading members to grow in missions; Leading members to serve their neighbors or local communities; Leading members’ spiritual growth; Leading church growth; and None.” They were invited to select all options that applied. About 41% of church leaders answered, the “Disciple Bible study groups have been most effective in leading to members’ spiritual growth.” About 36% of the church leaders answered, the “Disciple Bible study groups have been most effective in gaining a clearer understanding of scripture.” This outcome was quite different from what I had expected. I expected them largely to indicate that the Disciple Bible study groups give its members a clearer understanding of scripture, but the result of the survey differed from my expectation. People experienced their spiritual growth through the Disciple Bible study groups. (See Figure 9.)

The church leaders answered that by discussing the Bible, participants experienced spiritual growth. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says that “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for

every good work.” People are likely to grow in spirit through studying the Bible because the Word of God is living and active.

4.3 Effectiveness of the Relationship with Fellows

Next, in order to examine whether the Disciple Bible study groups help their members grow in relationship with God and their fellows, the church leaders are asked two questions. First: “Do you agree or disagree that through the Disciple Bible group experience, members' relationships with God become stronger.” And second: “Do you agree or disagree that through the Disciple Bible group experience, members' relationships with other believers become stronger?” The options are: “Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; and Strongly disagree”.

In response to the first question, 90 percent agree that members' relationship with God becomes stronger. However, 10 percent of people strongly disagree that members' relationship with God becomes stronger. The church leaders who answered “strongly disagree” consider that Disciple Bible study groups do not help the growth of members' relationship with God. On the other hand, all church leaders agree that through Disciple Bible study groups, members' relationships with other believers become stronger. About 60 percent of people strongly agree that Disciple Bible groups help the growth of the relationship with others. About 40 percent of people agree. None of them answer “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree.” This trend, depicted in Figure 8, suggests that the Disciple Bible study groups are more effective for the growth

of the relationship with fellows than they are for the growth of the relationship with God. (See Figure 8.)

4.4 Hardship of Continuance

The church leaders said that particular Disciple Bible study groups come to a conclusion once participants in the study have completed a Disciple book. Particular Disciple books are what guide the groups. If one group finishes a Disciple book, they will decide whether they will study another Disciple book. The decision is based on their interest or needs. According to the “Disciple Bible Study Groups Survey,” about 80% of church leaders feel that their members satisfy the Disciple Bible study groups.¹⁶ However, six churches out of ten responded that their Disciple Bible study groups had come to an end. In other words, most groups that have finished a Disciple book have lost their interest or felt no need to continue the group’s meeting. This result is odd, but it shows that, because particular books guide the Disciple Bible study, these groups are not permanent.

In addition, according to the survey results, some churches’ leaders answered that after the 34-week curriculum, participants wanted something less intense and took a break from the series. They chose the book *A Short-Term Disciple Bible Study* rather than long-term study books. In such circumstances, contemporary churches find it difficult to gather and share life experiences as the early church did in Acts 2:42.¹⁷

¹⁶ The church leaders were asked the question: “How satisfied are the members with Disciple Bible groups?”

¹⁷ They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Individualism also leads to a general lack of interest in fellowship or *koinonia*.

Fellowship is an important element for growth in faith. By sharing our experiences and encouraging others, we can grow in holiness and faith. Individualism prevents people from enjoying Christian fellowship. In contrast to the Disciple Bible study, which aims to form disciples of Christ, social clubs are formed to fulfill members' desires. If people join the Disciple Bible study groups with no desire other than knowledge of the Bible, the Disciple Bible study will fail to make them disciples. Therefore, a person who desires to join a Disciple Bible study should know the truth: We become disciples of Jesus Christ not when gain knowledge of the Bible, but when we follow Jesus Christ.

According to the survey, most church leaders (about 78%) responded that less than 24% of the total membership engaged in the Disciple Bible study groups. The other church leaders (about 22%) responded that 25%–49% of the total membership engaged in the Disciple Bible study groups.¹⁸ In addition, about 44% of participants in the survey answered that their churches have run the Disciple Bible study groups longer than 10 years. About 33% of participants answered that their churches have run the study group for 6 to 10 years.¹⁹ Most of the church members may know the Disciple Bible study, but in comparison with Sunday School, the Disciple Bible study is not popular, and a small number of the total members attend the Disciple Bible study groups.

¹⁸ The survey question is: "What percentage of your church members engage in the Disciple Bible groups?" The options are: "75%–100%; 50%–74%; 25%–49%; 0%–24%."

¹⁹ The survey question is: "How long have the Disciple Bible groups run?" The options are: "Less than 1 year; 1–2 years; 3–5 years; 6–10 years; Longer than 10 years."

4.5 Conclusion

Disciple Bible study groups tend to help people to have a strong relationship with God and thus to grow spiritually. The church leaders said that by discussing and sharing their understanding of the scriptures, the participants experienced spiritual growth. In addition, being with others in the Christian community of small groups plays an important role in the growth of their faith and spirit. Participants shared their joys, concerns, and prayer in their groups, and thus were able to cultivate intimate relationships with each other. The church leaders value this fellowship as a channel by which their members receive grace. As earlier chapters explored, John Wesley recognized Christian fellowship as an important means of grace.

While the Disciple Bible study groups have attempted to change the locus of authority from the self to the Bible, some church leaders remain unconvinced of the success of this attempt. For instance, church leaders were asked the question: "Do you agree or disagree that the Bible has become the standard of participants' lives?" In response, 20 percent of church leaders indicated "Neither agree nor disagree." In addition, when the church leaders were asked the question: "Do you agree or disagree that through the Disciple Bible group experience, members apply insights or lessons of the given daily scripture into their lives?" one church leader answered, "Neither agree nor disagree." All other respondents offered a more positive assessment. In short, the Disciple Bible study groups somewhat help to transform participants' lives and change the locus of authority, but the groups have limited effects. There are several reasons for this mixed outcome.

First, the groups have come and gone episodically, based on interest. There was a time a few years ago when the Disciple Bible study group was going strong in many churches, where groups worked through several levels of the study. However, the results of the survey show that after most groups finished the year-long study, participants wanted to do something less intense, choosing to take a break from the series. The reason the Disciple Bible study groups tend not to be permanent is that particular books lead the Disciple Bible study groups, and then, when the curriculum finishes, the groups lose their interest and focus.

Second, the Disciple Bible study groups focus on sharing participants' insights or understandings of the Bible, rather than their stories or experiences of God. In the Disciple Bible study groups, people share understandings of the scripture and how they have attempted to apply lessons from the discussion into their lives. However, they do not share their stories or experiences of God in the past week. Rather, they focus exclusively on the Bible and its application in their lives. Through the survey, I found that some groups even share their joys, concerns, and prayers with each other, but do not take responsibility for other members' spiritual condition. Since the Disciple Bible study groups are not accountable for supporting spiritual growth, they do not check their spiritual conditions. In addition, no one asks the important question, "How is your soul?" All of this suggests that participants are not sufficiently interested in others' spiritual states.

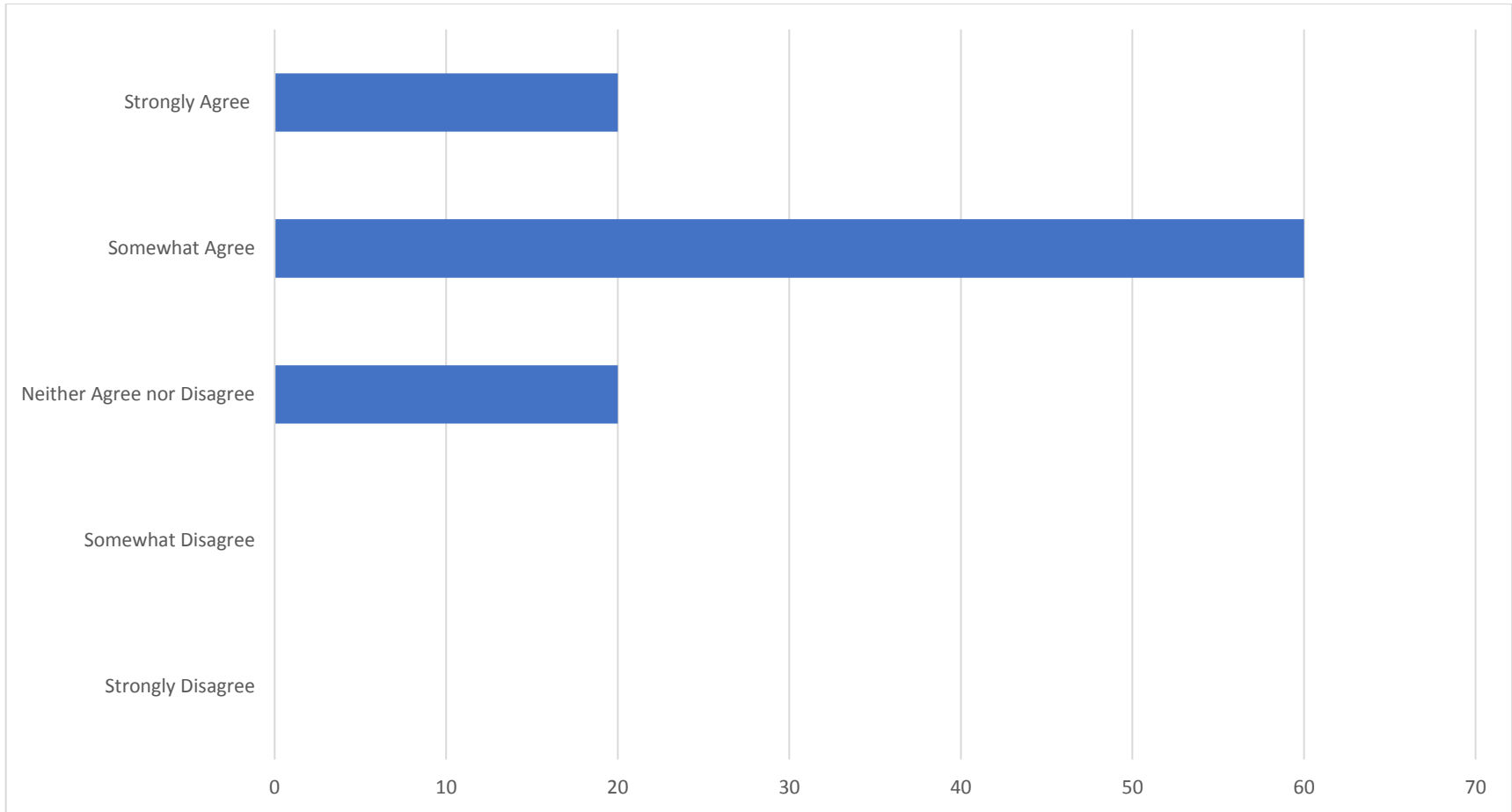


Figure 6: Do You Agree or Disagree that the Bible Has Become the Standard of Participants' Lives?

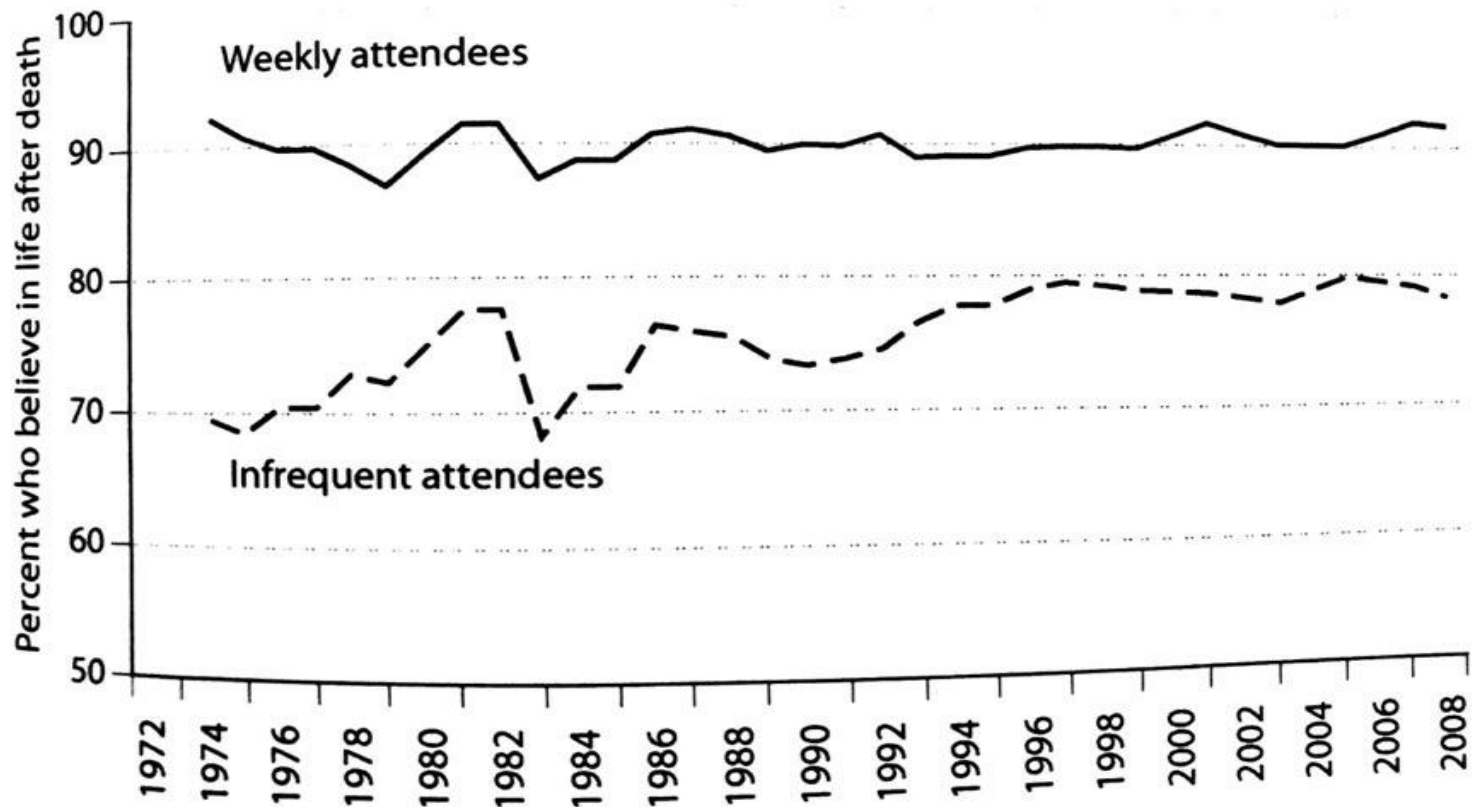


Figure 7: Belief in the Afterlife Increasing Only Among Less Regular Attendees. Source: General Social Survey

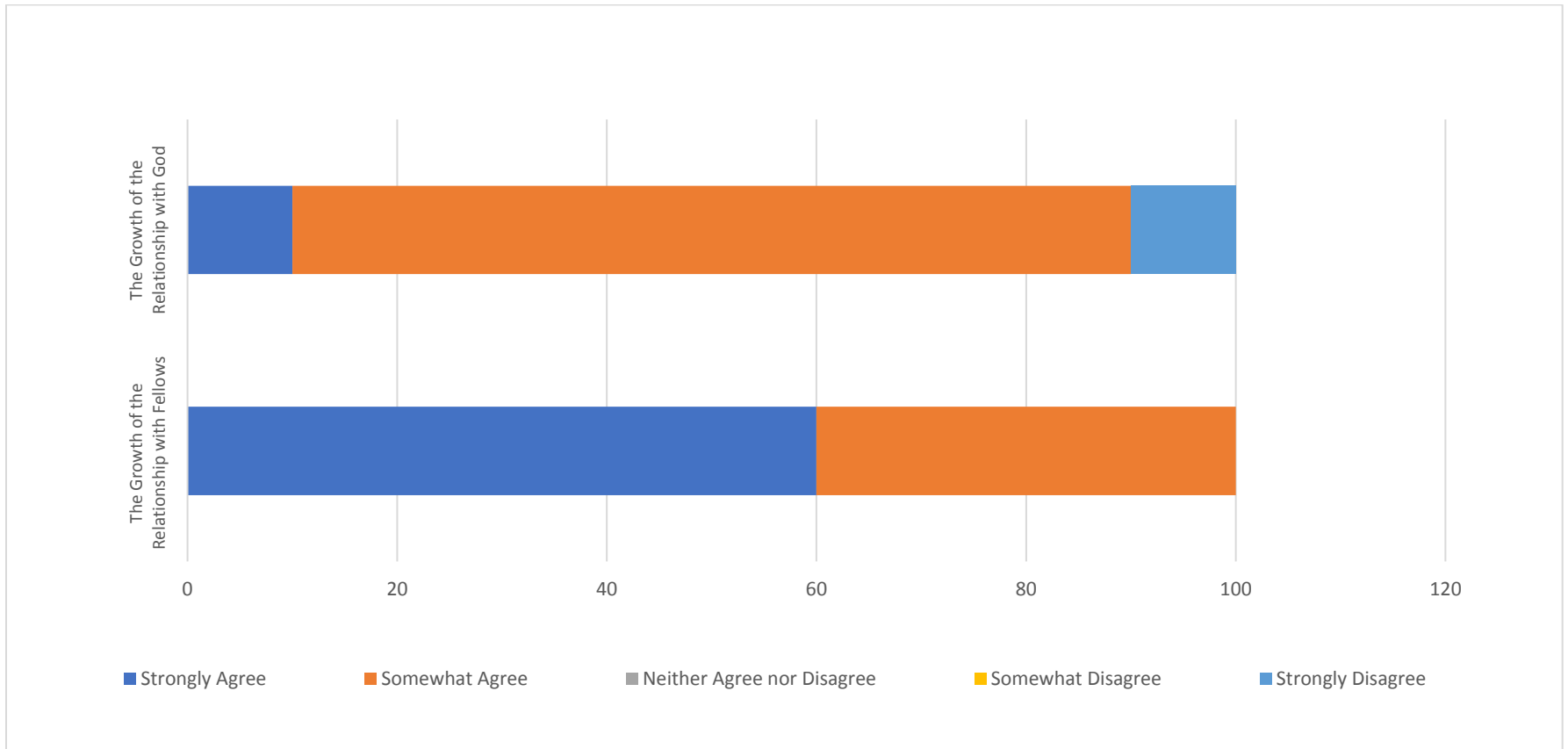


Figure 8: Disciple Bible Study Groups Are More Effective for the Growth of the Relationship with Fellows

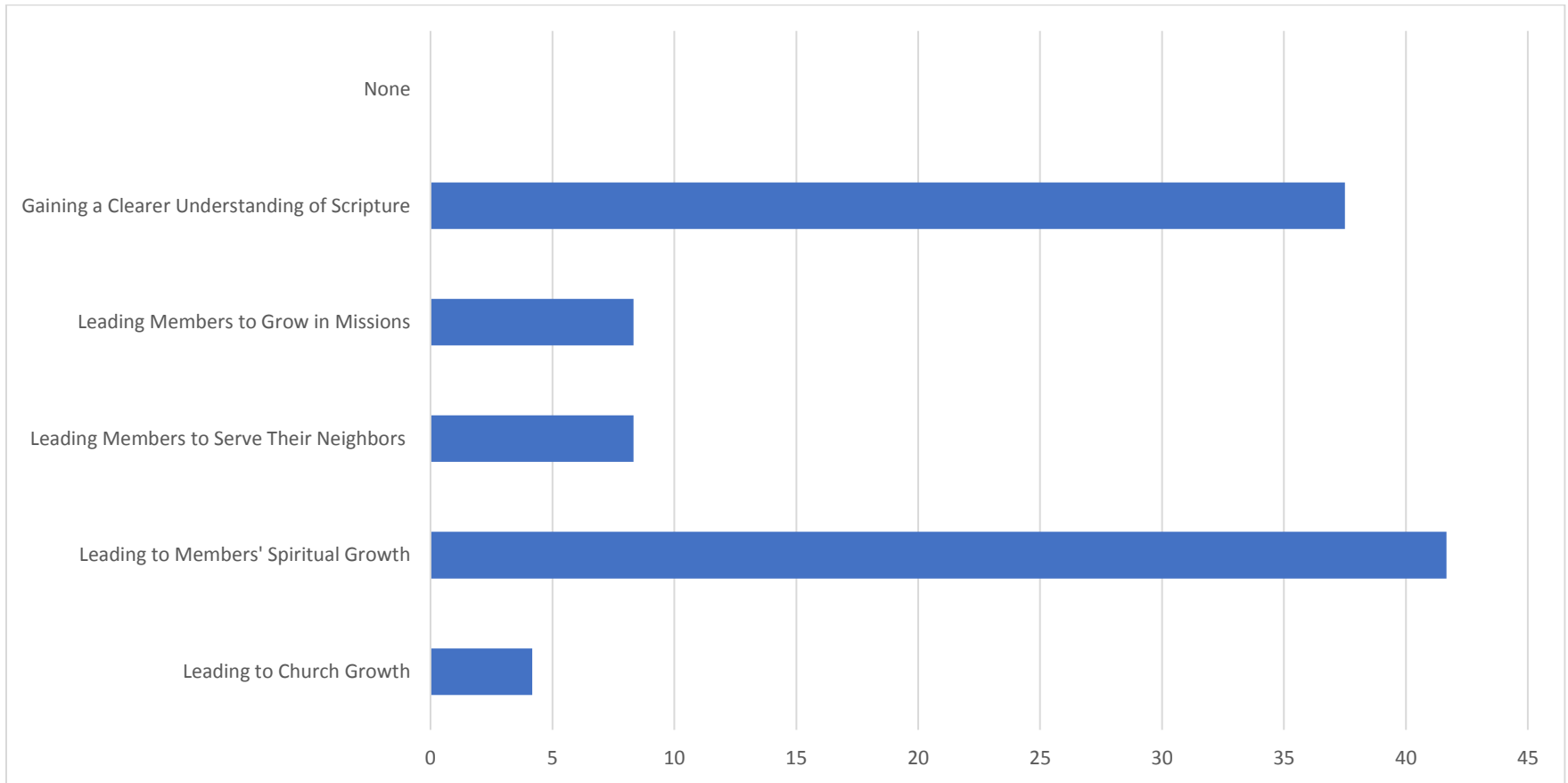


Figure 9: Disciple Bible Groups Have Been Most Effective in (Select All That Apply)

5. A Survey and An Analysis of the Covenant Discipleship Group

“The Christian life is dangerous terrain to travel alone. We get easily discouraged when our disciplines become boring or difficult. We become distraught when they do not produce the results we expect. We are subject to confusion in our practices in part because we are just learning them, and in part because of our own distorted perceptions and personal limitations. Any spiritual discipline can be manipulated for our own ends rather than offered as a means of God’s transforming grace in us.”¹

Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*

Covenant Discipleship groups attempt to make their members’ more “Christ-centered.” These groups, which attempt to change the locus of authority from self to Christ, offer an effective means of resisting the cultural trend of secularization. In this chapter, I will examine a set of Covenant Discipleship groups. My research focuses on the United Methodist Churches in the Virginia Conference. About 1,300 churches exist in the Virginia Conference, but I expected that few churches have a Covenant Discipleship group. The aim of the survey is to examine the effectiveness of Covenant groups for church growth and spiritual growth. The churches I’ve surveyed are demographically limited to United Methodists in Virginia. However, I expect that these results will be similar to those in other geographical regions.

Only eleven church leaders responded to my research. Participants included church leaders or elders for congregations that currently have a Covenant Discipleship group. I had access to the Yahoo Group for the Virginia Conference and emailed to all

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 144.

clergies who participate in the Yahoo Group. My recruitment message asked for church leaders whose congregation has Covenant Discipleship group and who are interested in participating in my research to contact me. Participants will complete questionnaire online. Questionnaire will be posted on Duke Qualtrics. The survey comprised a questionnaire of about twenty questions (See Appendix 1.).

Some Covenant groups begin each session with a Bible study. They choose a textbook and work through the textbook together. This approach differs from the basic form of a Covenant Discipleship group. Other groups begin with a time of sharing joys, concerns, and prayer. These groups mostly follow the typical framework of Covenant Discipleship groups.

While most of the respondents positively evaluated the Covenant Discipleship groups, they reported that the Covenant groups are typically short-lived because of a lack of interest and an inconsistent leadership. Nevertheless, the respondents suggested that the Covenant group are the most effective means of promoting the members' spiritual growth despite these weaknesses.

5.1 Effectiveness in Leading the Member's Spiritual Growth

The church leaders were asked the question: "Covenant groups have been most effective in?" The options were: "Leading to church growth; Leading to members' spiritual growth; Leading members to serve their neighbors or local communities; Leading members to grow in missions; and None." They could select all that applied. About 45 percent of the respondents answered, "Covenant Discipleship groups have been most effective in leading to members' spiritual growth." About 23 percent of the

respondents said that “Covenant groups have been most effective in leading members to grow in missions.” (See Figure 10.)

Most of the people who selected “leading to members’ spiritual growth” pointed to a particular strength of Covenant Discipleship groups: members met regularly and cared for one another. They consider mutual accountability to be a strength of Covenant Discipleship groups. For example, participants in a Covenant Discipleship group meet every week to support for living the Christian life. They evaluated the members’ status in the four areas of their daily living (acts of compassion, acts of justice, acts of devotion, and acts of worship). Each week they pray and encourage each other to follow covenants they have written together based on the four areas.

5.2 Accountability

The word “accountability” may scare people because “they regard it as judgment. Nobody wants to be judged and held accountable for his or her shortcomings, perceived or real.”² The members of an accountability group offer accounts of what they have done in their relationship with God, with one another, and with the world. “The primary purpose [is] to support members’ responsible participation in the transforming work of God’s grace.”³ The accountability the group offers has twofold: corporate and personal.

² Steven W. Manskar, *Small Groups & Accountability: The Wesleyan Way of Christian Formation* (The General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church, 2004), 11.

³ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 212.

First, the feature of corporate accountability is that the participants are responsible for the mission and goals of their group. The character of accountability varies depending on the group's type. For example, members of a church choir have a responsibility to be present at rehearsals and be prepared to help lead the congregation in worship on Sunday morning. Likewise, participants in a Bible study group are accountable for reading their Bible and being prepared to contribute to the group meeting. Members of the Bible study group are accountable for forming the participants as disciples of Jesus Christ and for increasing their knowledge of the Bible. In short, accountability helps a group maintain focus on its mission and thus contribute to building up the body of Christ.

Second, personal accountability is just as important as corporate accountability. If participants in small groups contribute to building up the body of Christ, they are at the same time also accountable for the growth of their individual faith and holiness. The purpose of the personal accountability is to promote the participants' growth in relationship with God, with one another, and with the world.

Overall, an accountability is a crucial means of grace that helps us to walk with Christ in our corporate and individual lives. The means of grace are the vehicle that helps human beings to experience God and to grow into God's will. The following chapter will deal with the means of grace in detail.

Jesus practiced spiritual disciplines and taught his disciples to follow his example. He showed how to pray, how to worship, and how to remember his own sacrifice on the cross. By practicing the means of grace, we "are able to tap into the

power of God for living, witnessing and serving in ways that transform us into the person God created us to become. We also become channels of grace for others and for the world because Christ will be revealed in us and in the way we live.”⁴

5.3 Covenant Discipleship Groups as Accountability Groups

Covenant Discipleship groups have attained a measure of success in terms of corporate accountability. The aim of Covenant Disciples groups is to make church leaders in order to support the church’s wider mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, I asked the question: “Do participants lead other small groups?” (See Figure 11.)

About 82 percent of the respondents said that the members led other small groups. In addition, I asked among those people who answered “Yes” the question: “How many of them lead other small groups?” Eight respondents responded to the question, and on average, 47 percent of Covenant Discipleship group members lead other small groups, such as Bible studies or class meetings. (See Appendix 2.)

In addition, a Covenant Discipleship group seems to satisfy personal accountability as well. This group helps the members live out the way of centering on Christ. In order to measure the success of the personal accountability, I asked the question to the church leaders: “Do you agree or disagree that through the Covenant group experience, members practice the way of centering on Christ?” The options are:

⁴ Manskar, *Small Groups & Accountability*, 12.

“Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; and Strongly disagree.” More than 91 percent of the respondents agreed that Covenant groups help the members to practice the way of centering on Christ. Only 9 percent of respondents answered the question neutrally. This outcome suggests that accountability helps the members to live out a “Christ-centered” life. Moreover, this emphasis of accountability groups on living a “Christ-centered” life helps people to move the locus of authority from self to Christ.

Next, in order to examine how often the members of Covenant groups practice works of mercy, including social justice work and other acts of compassion, the respondents are asked the question: “How often do they practice works of Mercy in everyday life?” The options are: “Very often; often; Somewhat often; Not very often; and Not at all.” About 63 percent of the respondents answered that the members very often or often practice works of mercy in everyday life. Similarly, they are asked the question: “How often do they practice works of Piety in everyday life?” The options are the same. About 72 percent of the respondents answered that the members very often or often practice works of piety (worship, devotion, mercy, and obedience) in everyday life. (See Figure 12.) The members seem to have followed their covenants faithfully. Overall, Covenant Discipleship groups seem to satisfy the twofold goal (corporate and personal accountability).

5.4 Challenges

“Watson estimates that 15% of the active membership or 5–7% of the total membership in a United Methodist Church are ready to take part in Covenant

Discipleship Groups.”⁵ Indeed, about 82 percent of the respondents said that less than 24 percent of their total church membership engaged in Covenant groups. Accordingly, a few principles must be understood in order to form Covenant Disciple groups. James Reuteler lists seven principles in his book *The Class Meeting: Christian Discipleship Today*.

1) the pastor should be involved; 2) the staff should be involved, but they should not be expected to provide permanent leadership; 3) Discipleship groups should last one hour; 4) a new members should visit three times; 5) there are regular opportunities for changing the covenant; 6) Covenant Sunday is a good time for groups to review their meeting schedule; 7) The accountability of the groups is for the purpose of the forming of faithful disciples and holding them on course as they live out their discipleship in the world. Covenant Discipleship Groups are not to be used as work groups for the church.⁶

The seventh principle clearly states that a Covenant Discipleship group is an accountability group for forming discipleship and not a work group for the church. By checking whether the members follow covenants, they expect to become the disciples of Jesus Christ. However, for some, following the covenants is a burden, so they practice the covenants very unwillingly. In other words, they might find themselves practicing these acts, much as children do their homework, against their will. The members mainly discuss whether they fulfill the expectations in the four areas, rather than whether they support each other’s relationship with Christ, with one other, and with the world. The group, however, should be the place for caring of the members’ spiritual status rather than for checking whether they practice the covenants.

⁵ James T. Reuteler, *The Class Meeting: Christian Discipleship Today* (Aurora, CO: Covenant Bible Studies, 2013), 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

In addition, two of the eleven respondents answered that the Covenant Discipleship groups in their churches were coming to an end because of a lack of interest and an inconsistent leadership.⁷ Also, four of the respondents had already experienced the end of Covenant groups. When we consider that the respondents' Covenant groups have existed less than 5 years, it is clear that the Covenant groups are not long-lived. The respondents were asked the question: "How long have the Covenant groups been running?" About 36 percent of the respondents answered that their Covenant groups have run from 3 through 5 years. About 64 percent of them reported that their Covenant groups have run less than 2 years. (See Figure 13.)

As the survey shows, maintaining a Covenant group over the long run poses a formidable challenge to church leaders. Accordingly, pastors should regularly encourage their members to be vigilant about maintaining the groups. At the same time, the members should take responsibility for the wellbeing of their groups.

⁷ The respondents were asked the question: "If some of the Covenant groups end, what are the reasons?"

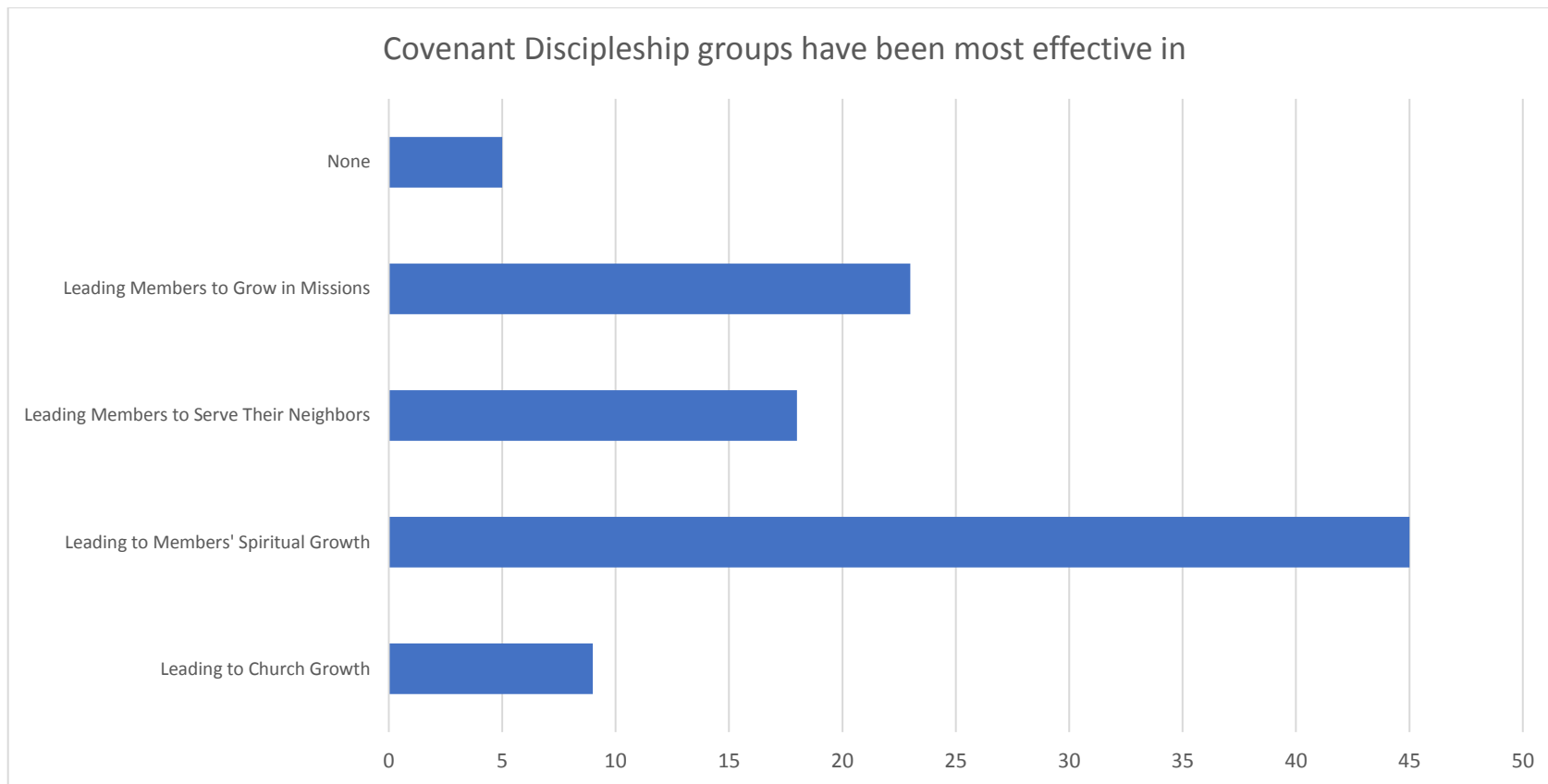


Figure 10: Covenant Discipleship Groups Have Been Most Effective in Leading to Members' Spiritual Growth.

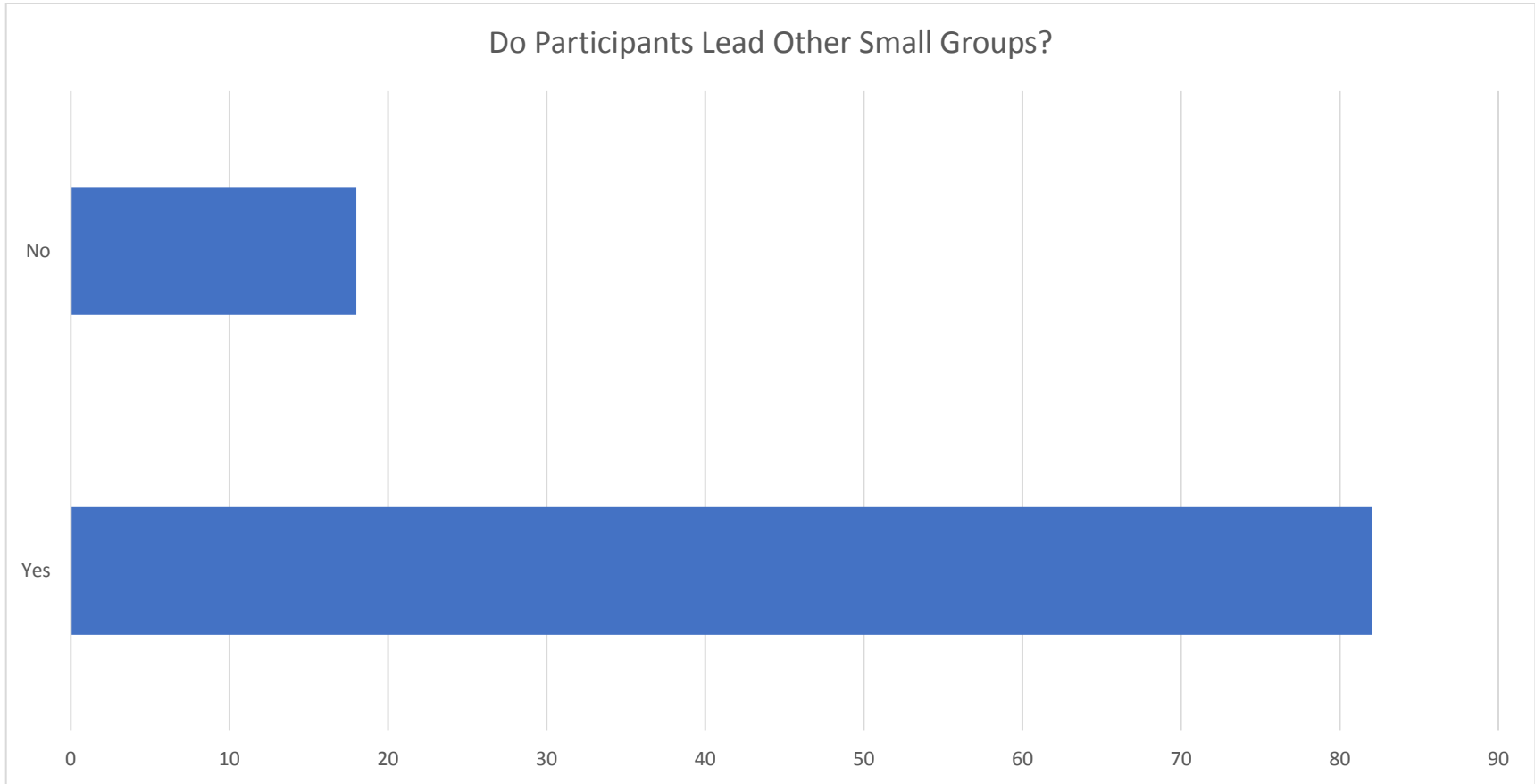


Figure 11: Almost Respondents Agreed That the Members Led Other Small Groups.

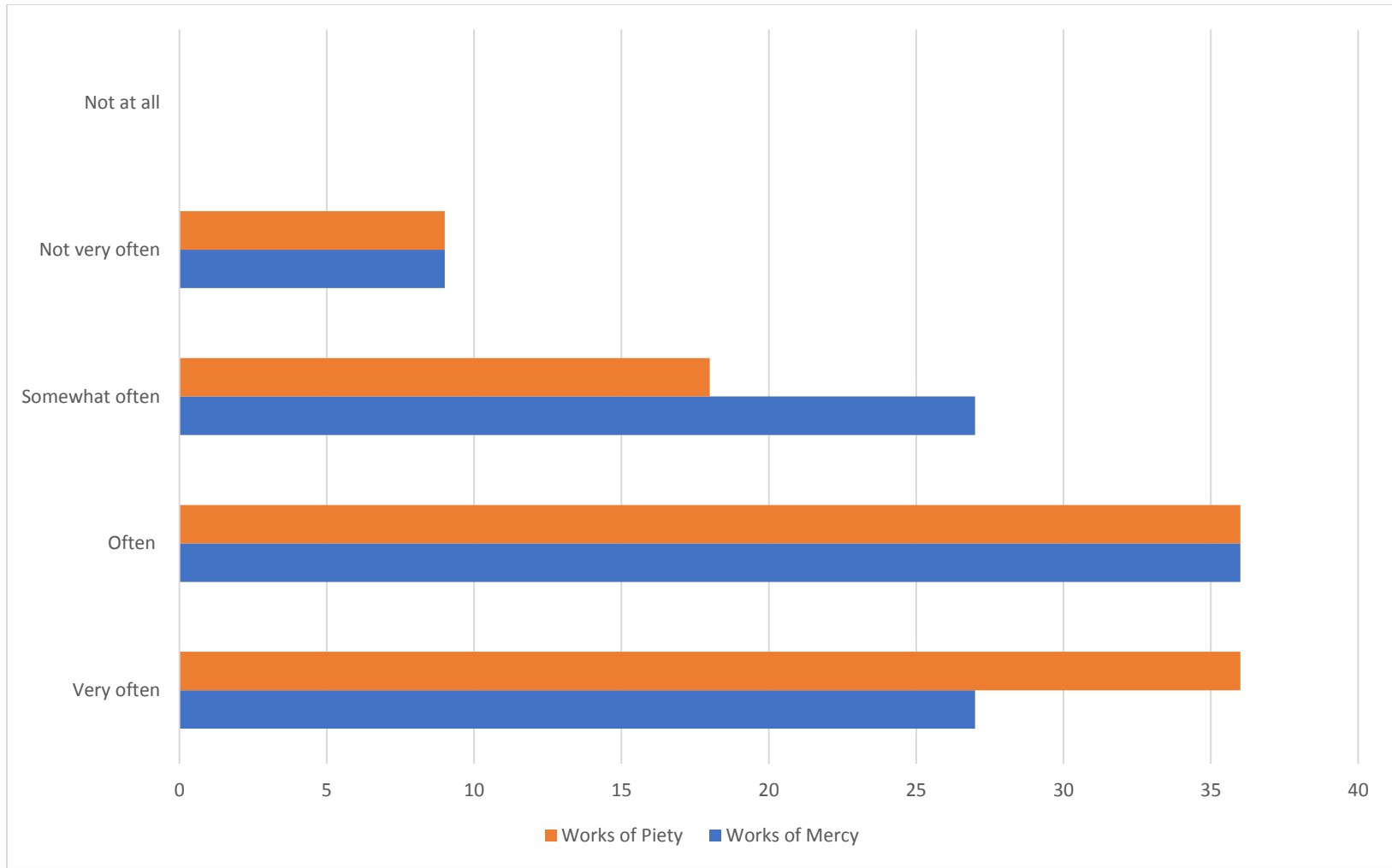


Figure 12: How often do the members practice works of mercy and works of piety?

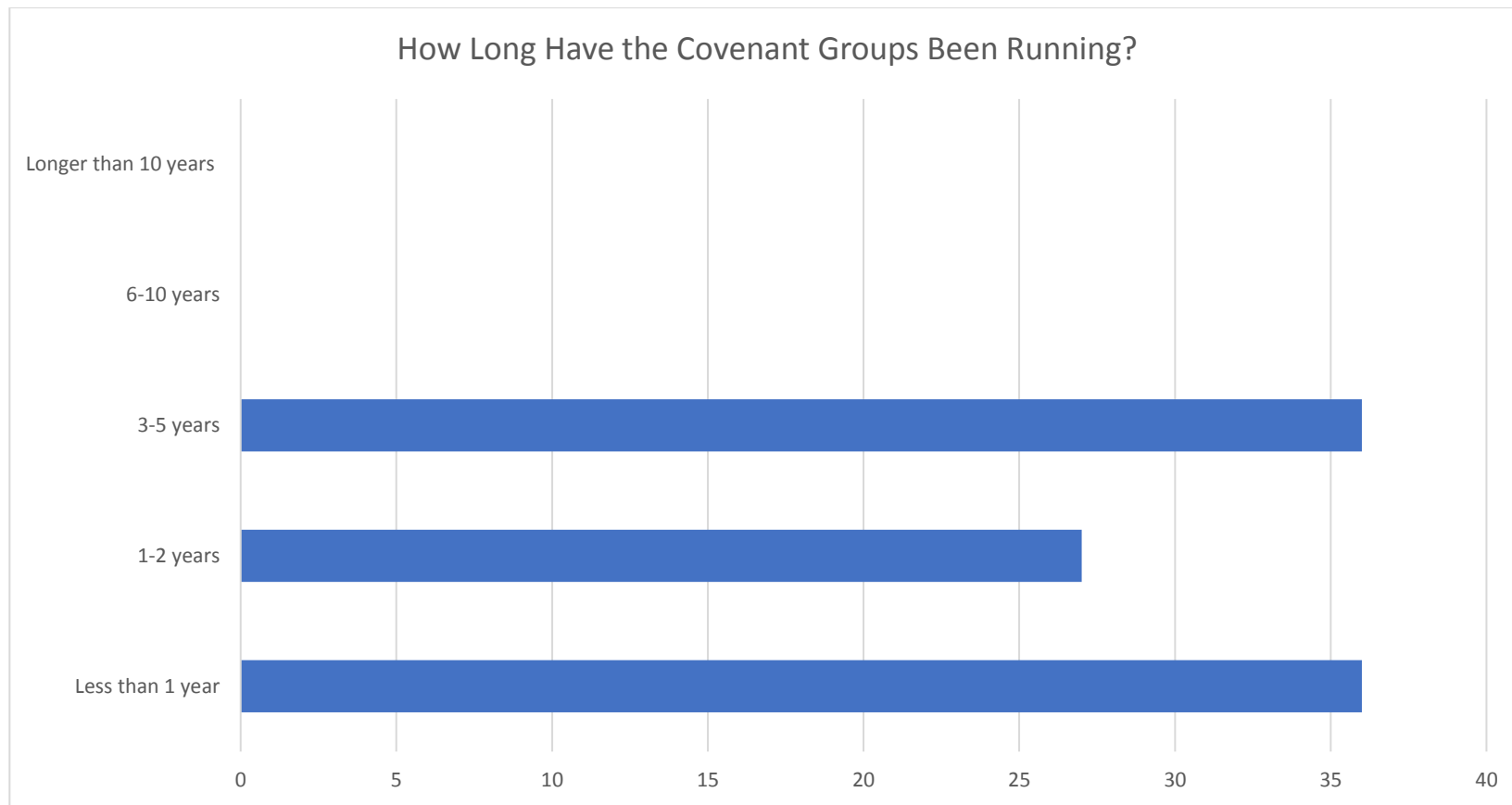


Figure 13: The Respondents Answered That Their Covenant Groups Have Run Less Than 5 Years.

6. The Class Meeting

“He [Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”¹

Mark 8: 34-38

When Jesus called his disciples, he did not begin by speaking about the benefits of becoming his disciples. Rather, his calling was clear: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”² Contemporary churches tend to take the opposite approach. For example, when churches deal with membership, they “emphasize the benefits of membership and downplay the cost of discipleship”³ in order to attract more members. “This is a direct inversion of the invitation to discipleship given by Jesus, who allowed people unwilling to pay the price to simply walk away.”⁴ Today, people prefer prosperity theology, and the churches consequently compromise about the cost of discipleship. This has a harmful effect. “When [the church] exists only to build itself as an institution,”⁵ it fails.

¹ Mark 8:34–38 NRSV.

² Mark 1:17 NRSV.

³ James T. Reuteler, *The Class Meeting: Christian Discipleship Today* (Aurora, CO: Covenant Bible Studies, 2013), 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ James D. Anderson and Ezra Earl Jones, *The Management of Ministry: Leadership, Purpose, Structure, Community* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 131.

James D. Anderson and Ezra Earl Jones “make clear that the purpose of the church is different from that of other community groups or organizations.”⁶ For example, social clubs and political parties are formed to accomplish their individual desires. The church, however, exists to actualize God’s vision. “As the church they have no product to sell or cause to support. God is the actor; they have only to be [God’s] people.”⁷ If God is the lead actor in the drama of salvation, the primary task of the church is to accept people where they are and to relate them to God so that they may truly be God’s people. We should never be confused about how we should live in the world as the disciples of Jesus when God is the lead actor in our salvation. Therefore, our ministry does not need to seek forms or programs for its own sake, rather the church shapes its ministry by seeking to fulfill its primary task.

If God is the lead actor in our salvation, the churches should focus on the gospel rather than any other interest. The gospel has the power to change people. In 1 Corinthians, Paul explains that only God makes seeds grow. “I [Paul] planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”⁸ Paul who planted and Apollos who watered had one purpose, that is to be God’s people. Likewise, we plant and water in order to make disciples of Jesus. This means that contemporary churches need a transformational leadership that can make true disciples of Jesus Christ. In contrast to a transformational leadership, a transactional leadership seeks to maintain institutions or organizations.

⁶ David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publish, 2002), 119.

⁷ Anderson and Jones, *The Management of Ministry*, 133.

⁸ 1Corinthians 3:6 NRSV.

Consequently, David Watson claims that class leaders ought to exercise a transformational leadership so that the classes will make disciples of Jesus.⁹

Transactional leadership is responsible for meeting the needs of church members, and for the institutional maintenance of the church. Transformational leadership is responsible for keeping church members focused on the vision of the gospel and the obligations of their discipleship.¹⁰

It is important to distinguish these two different modes of leadership. The early Methodist church sought to strike a balance between transformational and transactional leadership. For example,

Class leaders focused on forming disciples and stewards focused on the care of temporal things. We have our equivalence of stewards in our committee structure, which does a fairly good job of administrating the church, but we have nothing like the class leaders who kept Methodism focused on forming disciples, even though we claim that our primary mission is “to make disciples for the transformation of the world.”¹¹

Consequently, if the United Methodist Church is committed to making true disciples of Jesus, it should work to restore the class system. The church already has plenty of transactional leaders who know how to transact business, but we have few transformational leaders and have lost knowledge of how to make disciples of Jesus.

6.1. Covenant Discipleship Groups and the Class Meetings

The members of Covenant Discipleship groups seek God’s grace by practicing their own covenants and holding one another accountable for their discipleship. Through Covenant Discipleship groups, they learned how to make disciples, which is the mission of the United Methodist Church. In addition, Covenant groups reestablished both

⁹ Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples*, 119-120.

¹⁰ Ibid., 120–121.

¹¹ Reuteler, *The Class Meeting*, 20.

accountability and transformational leadership. According to the outcomes of the Covenant Discipleship groups' survey, church leaders strongly agree with the growth of relationship among the members of Covenant groups.¹² This result shows that the participants hold one another accountable and watch over one another in love.

Accountability and love go hand in hand.

As Watson defines the class meetings, "these meetings were regarded by Wesley as the 'sinews' of the Methodist movement, the means by which members 'watch over one another in love.'"¹³ Also, he explains that "members were required to give an account to one another of their discipleship and thereby to sustain each other in their witness."¹⁴ Accountability and love work together.

Covenant Discipleship groups also help churches to form transformational small groups. Covenant Discipleship groups, however, have shown some limitations. For example, participants in Covenant Discipleship groups focus on discussing their success or struggles for their covenants. In Covenant Discipleship groups, a major activity is to give an account of how participants have kept the covenants¹⁵ in the past week. Each

¹² All respondents agreed that Covenant groups strengthened the members' relationships with one another. The respondents were asked the question: "Do you agree or disagree that through the Covenant group experience, members' relationship with other believers become stronger?" The options are: "Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; and Strongly disagree." About 73 percent of the respondents said, "Strongly agree," and about 27 percent of them said, "Somewhat agree."

¹³ Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵ Individual groups create a "covenant," which is a customized list of General Rules. The covenant must contain only those clauses that every member is willing to accept as a guiding principle of his or her discipleship. These clauses reflect the teachings of Jesus as summarized in the General Rule of Discipleship, as well as the balance between acts of mercy and acts of piety. Gayle Turner Watson, *Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups*, 39.

Covenant Discipleship group writes its own covenant to reflect the General Rules. The fact that the Covenant Discipleship groups mainly deal with the practice of the covenant makes them different from the early class meetings.

In the early class meetings, participants also spoke about how they had kept General Rules in the past week, but it was not a major activity in classes. Rather, the major activity of the early classes was answering the questions that were listed in the General Rules itself and to talk about one's experience of God, namely how one's soul prospers. The General Rules are consisted of three principles. The United Societies in London were founded by people who were "deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption."¹⁶ As the United Societies grew, people wanted to join the societies who would "continue to evidence their desire of salvation, *First*, By doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind – especially that which is most generally practiced.... *Secondly*, By doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power.... *Thirdly*, By attending upon all the ordinances of God. Such are: The public worship of God..."¹⁷

The early class meetings dealt with the state of members' souls. The leader had the responsibility to do three things. "First, to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor; second, to inquire how their souls prosper; third, to advise,

¹⁶ Wesley, "General Rules and Rules of the Band Societies," in *The Works of Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) 67–76, here 69.

¹⁷ Wesley, "General Rules and Rules of the Band Societies" in *The Works of Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) 67–76, here 70–73.

reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion many require.”¹⁸ Here we see that the primary activity of the classes was conversation about the state of each person’s life with God. Kevin Watson points out that “the class meeting is valuable because participating in a group that asks you weekly how you are doing in your relationship with God is one of the most effective ways you can plan to stay focused on your growth as a follower of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹

Ultimately, given how the Covenant Discipleship group is designed, the participants in the Covenant Discipleship groups will not necessarily even be asked about how they are doing in their relationship with God. The participants in the Covenant Discipleship groups could possibly do all the things in their own covenant, but nevertheless show no apparent growth in their love and knowledge of God, or even fail to have someone ask them about this vital aspect of their life. Below is a sample Covenant. (See Figure 14.)

¹⁸ Wesley, “General Rules and Rules of the Band Societies,” in *The Works of Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) 67–76, here 70.

¹⁹ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 13.

Sample Covenant²⁰

Preamble

In gratitude for the grace of Jesus Christ, in whose death we have died and, in whose resurrection,, we have found new life, we pledge to be his disciples. We recognize that our time and talents are gifts from God, and we will use them to search out God's will for us and to obey. We will do our best not to compromise the will of God for human goals. We will serve both God and God's creation earnestly and lovingly. We respect and accept fully all group members, whose integrity and confidentiality we will uphold in all that we share. With God's grace and their help, we make our covenant.

Clauses

Acts of compassion

I will spend four hours each month helping the poor people in my community.

Acts of Justice

When I am aware of injustice to others, I will not remain silent.

Acts of Devotion

I will pray each day, privately and with family or friends.

I will read and study the Scriptures each day.

I will prayerfully care for my body and for the world in which I live.

I will return to Christ the first tenth of all I receive.

Acts of Worship

I will worship each Sunday, unless prevented.

I will heed the warnings of the Holy Spirit not to sin against God and my neighbor.

Conclusion

I hereby make my commitment, trusting in the grace of God to give me the will and the strength to keep this covenant.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Figure 14: Sample Covenant

²⁰ Gayle Turner Watson, *Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups*, 75.

In line with the goals of the covenant, the class meeting focuses on three things.

First, it held people accountable to keeping the General Rules. Second, the class meeting was a place where Methodists were encouraged to give weekly to the relief of the poor. Third, and most central to the time spent in the weekly meeting, it was a place where every Methodist answered the question, “How is it with your soul?”²¹

6.2. The Disciple Bible Study Groups and the Class Meeting

The Disciple Bible study group focuses on studying the Bible and applying lessons to its members’ life. Significantly, the subject of the Disciple Bible study is the Bible rather than our individual lives. Participants spend most of time discussing the selected passages of Scripture. They also deal with the “major characteristics of the disciple of Jesus Christ and emphasize the practice of discipleship,”²² but the Disciple Bible study is not the place where they share their lives together. Rather, they talk about how to “practice discipleship in a specific way and decide as a group how to proceed.”²³ They miss “the idea that the Christian life is a journey of growth in grace, or sanctification.”²⁴ They are not accountable for the growth of their lives with God, with neighbors, and the world.

Wesley wanted people to “come to know Jesus Christ and learn how to give every part of their lives to loving and serving Christ”²⁵ through the class meeting. The early class meeting was to watch over one another in love. People shared their testimony to their experience of God in the past week, and God seems to have used this, as the

²¹ Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 25.

²² *Disciple: Becoming Disciples through Bible Study*, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴ Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

testimony of others was contagious. As a result, by participating the class meeting, people experienced conversion and spiritual growth.

6.3. The Three Types of Contemporary Small Groups

In contemporary churches, Sunday school classes are the most typical form of small groups. Many churches hold Sunday school on Sunday morning prior to worship service. Few churches run Covenant Discipleship groups or Disciple Bible study groups. For some time, Sunday school attendance had increased exponentially. However, as churches have declined, the attendance of Sunday school has also decreased. Now Sunday school seems to have no power to change Christian's lives.

Kevin Watson distinguishes among three kinds of contemporary small groups: affinity groups, information-driven groups, and transformation-driven groups. Affinity groups are organized around common passions, interests, or hobbies. For example, these groups include a cooking club, a bowling league, or a book club. The second type, information-driven groups, are familiar to many people. "These groups are focused on conveying information and are organized by a common curriculum."²⁶ Sunday school is representative of this type. These groups also include Bible studies and studies of any other book or curriculum. The third type of small groups are transformation-driven groups, which focus on changed lives and group members' experience of God. "These small groups are organized around a common desire to support one another in their efforts to become increasingly faithful Christians who are growing in love of God and

²⁶ Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 5.

neighbors.”²⁷ These groups include accountability groups, fellowship groups, cell groups, class meetings, and house churches. Watson insists that the type of “transformation-driven” are most effective at making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Since Christians are meant to be disciples of Jesus Christ, their life is defined by living in Christ, not about knowing the right things. Thus, the Wesleyan class meeting provides a format that helps people to grow in their faith in Christ together through fellowship, not just studying information.²⁸ Because “information-driven” groups focus on delivering knowledge, they are less valuable for Christian discipleship. What contemporary Christians need are transformed lives, not biblical knowledge. Watson states that “people do not learn how to follow Jesus by reading books about following Jesus.”²⁹ Rather, people can experience God and grow in faith through their fellowship.

6.4. The Importance of Fellowship

One of the key features of modern society is its “exclusive humanism.” Taylor defined exclusive humanism as an understanding of life without reference to a transcendent reality. Thus, religion becomes optional. The Christ-centered way of Covenant Discipleship groups provides a way to overcome exclusive humanism. As the previous chapter argued, Covenant Discipleship groups help to center people on Jesus Christ. If we live in a “Christ-centered” way in our daily life, we will grow in faith and holiness.

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Ibid., 8–9.

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

However, “I” alone cannot sustain a “Christ-centered” life. Fellowship needs to be followed. Jesus promises that “for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Since a Covenant group and a class meeting have composed of more than two people, they can be called as fellowship. We need fellowship to talk about how things are going in their lives as followers of Jesus Christ, to support each other and to encourage each other to grow in grace. Fellowship is the means of grace and plays an important role for the spiritual growth.

6.4.1 Fellowship as the Means of Grace

John Wesley understood Christian fellowship as means of grace and emphasized fellowship as a crucial means of pursuing holiness. Indeed, Jesus himself spoke about fellowship several times. But before dealing in more detail with fellowship as means of grace, we will examine the concept of means of grace.

6.4.2 The Means of Grace

Andrew Thompson explains that “God has given us certain channels through which we can receive grace. They are the means of grace.”³⁰ John Wesley called the means of grace “outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God and appointed for this end – to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”³¹ Recognizing that God chooses to convey his grace through our day-to-day practices, Thompson identifies three main categories of the

³⁰ Thompson, *The Means of Grace*, 16.

³¹ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” in *the Works of John Wesley volume 1: Sermons 1-33*, edited by Albert C. Outlet (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 376-397, here 381.

means of grace: instituted means of grace, prudential means of grace, and general means of grace.

The sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion were instituted by Jesus directly and clearly, so people recognize the sacraments as instituted means of grace. Other instituted means of grace include prayer, fasting, fellowship, and searching the scripture. We learn all of these means from Jesus.

The second category, the prudential means of grace, includes the class meeting, band meeting, and the arts of holy living. We learn these means from our context. In other words, “we use the biblical witness in conjunction with our practical wisdom to figure out what they [means] look like in our own context.”³²

Finally, the general means of grace relate to our inward spiritual intention. For some people, the two means of grace (instituted and prudential) are insufficient for producing fruits like love, joy, peace, kindness, or meekness. Also, they give some people no spiritual benefit. For example, a person may sit through a sermon, watching the preacher the whole time, while their mind is on what they will eat for lunch that day.

With no inward sense of intention, God’s grace will never reach me. For grace to really have an impact on us, we must be open to it. And for the means God has provided to act as channels for that grace, we have to have a desire to meet God in those means! That is Wesley’s point by saying that we can use all of the instituted and prudential means in a way that makes them useless.³³

Wesley used the term “general means of grace” just once in his writings. In the annual conference Minutes of 1745, he mentioned general means of grace in response to

³² Thompson, *The Means of Grace*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 125.

the question: How should we wait for the fulfilling of this promise [of entire sanctification]?

In universal obedience; in keeping all the commandments; in denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily. These are the general means which God hath ordained for our receiving his sanctifying grace. The particular are prayer, searching the Scripture, communicating, and fasting.³⁴

Wesley distinguished general means of grace from “particular” (instituted) means of grace. Wesley first mentioned general means of grace, and then enumerated instituted means. On his understanding, general means of grace focus on the inward dispositions of the heart. Given Wesley’s belief that the mind will ultimately rule all of one’s outer actions, he insisted that the general means of grace serve as the foundation for all other means of grace. In addition, Wesley’s favored phrase “holiness of heart and life” implied that the inner mind led to outer actions. He never reversed the order of those two. For example, Wesley never spoke of “holiness of life and heart.”³⁵ Wesley thought that “if the right kind of inward intention is guiding our use of all the practices that make up the instituted and prudential means of grace, then we’ll experience them not as deeds but as gifts of God for our salvation.”³⁶

However, our inner attitude always opposes God’s will because we are sinful. We will never achieve the holy habit in our lives only by performing the instituted and prudential means of grace. Instead, we should perform the instituted and prudential

³⁴ John Wesley, “MS Minutes: Bristol Conference, August 1745”, in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 10: The Methodist Societies the Minutes of Conference*. edited by Henry D. Rack, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011). 147-167, here 155.

³⁵ Thompson, *The Means of Grace*, 127–128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

means of grace alongside the general means of grace. The effectiveness of prayer, for example, one of the instituted means of grace, requires that our mind be aware of God's presence, and then that we live our life in response to the grace in every moment.

The means of grace offer the pattern of life by which people might walk in the ways of God. Thus, the means of grace help them achieve true spiritual growth.

Thompson identifies three essential components of real discipleship: community, discipline, and transformation. Community is essential for true discipleship because none of us can go it alone. Jesus called twelve disciples together instead of just one. Accordingly, the church stuck together after Jesus's resurrection rather than splitting up. We also need discipline, just as athletes need dedication and practice to achieve great things. But true discipleship also requires the experience of transformation. We cannot transform ourselves, but we experience transformation by God's grace. Indeed, "God promises us that we will be transformed when we live faithful lives over time."³⁷

6.4.3. Fellowship as the Instituted Means of Grace

The biblical story from Genesis to Revelation emphasizes that we are meant to be together. God created Adam alone, but soon afterwards gave him Eve because it was not good to be alone. (Gen. 2:18) The Bible is the story of God's relationship with his people. Initially, God had a relationship with Israel. After Jesus came to the earth, he had a relationship with twelve disciples. After Jesus's resurrection, he formed the church. The word church itself means "assembly."³⁸ The Acts of the Apostles offers us a model of

³⁷ Ibid., xviii.

³⁸ Ibid., 86.

fellowship as a means of grace. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). The early Christians understood that their fellowship was a part of who they were. As the bible portrays it, fellowship is no small thing.

John Wesley understood the word fellowship as a technical term. In ordinary usage, the word "fellowship" simply refers to people gathering in one place and spending time in one another's company. In contrast, Wesley understood the term "fellowship" as a specific assembly for a common purpose, the spiritual growth of those assembled. In addition, they watch over one another in love in fellowship or conference. Wesley sometimes used the word "conference" instead of "fellowship."

For Wesley, the idea of conference is rooted in the verb to confer. Christian conference in this sense is about believers coming together to focus on their faith: to pray, to share their experience of God, to seek advice and to offer counsel, and even to confess their sins and ask for forgiveness.³⁹

David Watson defines fellowship or conference as mutual accountability. In order to sustain closer relationship with God, people need companions who will help them grow in faith. Drawing on Wesley's emphasis on "watching over one another in love," Watson has sought to reclaim the practice in contemporary churches. He sees mutual accountability as crucial for Christians truly changing their lives. However, the fact that so many Methodists today attempt to follow Jesus in isolation from others reveals a serious disconnection from the riches of the Wesleyan heritage.

³⁹ Ibid., 90.

6.4.4. Social Holiness

Wesley's theology emphasized the need for fellowship (accountability) in the journey of our faith. Indeed, he insisted, we are required to encourage and nurture each other in faith. Wesley wrote:

Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy solitaires' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.⁴⁰

This is the one passage where Wesley uses the phrase "social holiness," a term that has so often been misused in contemporary Methodism.

The phrase is often used incorrectly as a synonym for social justice (working to make the world a more fair and righteous place). This misuse also distinguishes personal holiness from social holiness, which is a significant misunderstanding of Wesley's thought. For Wesley, social holiness referred to the environments, like the band meeting, where we grow in holiness. Holiness is necessarily social because we need each other to grow in love for God and neighbor.⁴¹

Here Wesley emphasizes learning to love God and others within the community of faith. By sharing our experiences with others, we come to love God better. By confessing our sins to one another, we grow in holiness. The key point is that mutual accountability is crucial for the path towards entire sanctification.

6.5. Class Meetings as Mutual Accountability Groups

The members of classes attempt to grow in deeper relationship with God and others by asking a simple powerful question, "How is it with your soul?" While David

⁴⁰ John Wesley, "Prefaces to Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739, 1740, 1742)", in *the Works of John Wesley volume 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*. Edited by Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 32-53, here, 39.

⁴¹ Kevin and Scott, *The Band Meeting*, 86.

Watson has sought to reclaim Wesley's class meeting, Kevin Watson has specifically applied the class meeting to the context of the contemporary church. In his book *The Class Meeting*, Kevin Watson introduced the class meeting to contemporary churches.

6.5.1 Wesley's Understanding of Salvation

Before discussing Watson's recovery of the class meeting, we should examine the Wesleyan theology of salvation, given the intimate link between the function of the class and Wesleyan soteriology. The early Methodists did not believe the work of the Holy Spirit ended with one's justification. Rather, it continued until one had been brought to "entire sanctification."⁴² John Wesley understood salvation not as a one-time event, but as an ongoing process. In addition, in his statement of the "main doctrines" of Methodists, Wesley described the process of salvation as coming to live in God's house. "Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three: repentance, faith, and holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third is religion itself."⁴³

The first stage of living in God's house is to step onto the porch. This entails repenting of sin. "In fact, the basic requirement for joining early Methodism was 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.'"⁴⁴ When people seek salvation from their sins, this typically follows a recognition of the power sin has over them. Thus, repenting of one's sins involves "a recognition of the reality of the grip of

⁴² Thomas, "Heart Religion," in *The Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, 39.

⁴³ John Wesley, "The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained" (1738), in *The Works of John Wesley volume 9: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, edited by Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 160–237, here 227.

⁴⁴ Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 38.

sin on one's life and a decision to turn away from sin and turn toward God."⁴⁵ Today, however, salvation from sin seems unnecessary to many people. This attitude presents a serious challenge to today's church leaders.

The next step is to stand at the door of God's house. When people move from the porch to the door, they will recognize that God has done everything in Christ needed for forgiveness of their sins and reconciliation to God. In traditional theological terms, this is justification. When a person recognizes the reality of sin and turns to Christ, they are fully forgiven. At this point, they also enter into a new relationship with God, and are adopted as God's own children. They have faith and confidence in their forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

The next step is to cross the threshold of God's house. The people taking this step have experienced forgiveness of their past sins by God. This experience may lead to transformation and a fresh start or new birth. "Wesley described justification as 'that great work which God does for us, in forgiving our sins.' And he described the new birth as 'the great work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature.'"⁴⁶ Yet being forgiven of past sins and entering into God's house is not the end of this process. It is only the beginning.

The final step is to move one's life entirely into God's house. This is the process of sanctification. While justification refers to the forgiveness of one's sins, sanctification refers to holiness or becoming Christlike. In order to dwell in God's house, we should

⁴⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 43.

keep doing sanctification through our lifetime. The process of sanctification is an ongoing process. As a result, people who want to dwell in God's house need holiness. For Wesley, "holy living was the goal of the Christian life."⁴⁷ In addition, the scripture way of salvation is a process of growth, development, and maturation in faith, hope and love. It is a way of living that draws us closer to Christ and conforms our lives to Christ's life. Wesley believed that the class meeting helped Christians grow in holiness, which is why he emphasized it so strongly.

6.5.2 Accountability and Wesley's Understanding of Salvation

John Wesley understood salvation as on-going process, so he emphasized entire sanctification. In order to dwell in the God's house, that is sanctification, we should continue to check our spiritual status. However, it is hard to accomplish by oneself, so accompany needs to watch over another in love. By doing so, we together become mature in Lord. Ultimately, the class helps the members to keep remaining in the God's house through accountability.

6.5.3 The Benefit of Class Meeting through the Question "How is Your Soul?"

Kevin Watson states that the purpose of the contemporary class meeting—like its eighteenth-century predecessor—is to transform lives and encourage people in their walk with Christ. Various small groups in today's churches, such as Bible study and Sunday School, are "focused on conveying information and are organized by a common curriculum."⁴⁸ We might call these information-driven small groups. However, they

⁴⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

tend not to change people or make disciples of Jesus that will transform the world.⁴⁹ In contrast, the purpose of Wesley's class meeting is not to deliver biblical knowledge, but to foster growth in holiness. Thus, we might categorize the class meeting—along with the band meeting and the accountability group—as a transformation-driven small group. Such groups are necessary for today's churches because what they need most is not more biblical knowledge, but true discipleship of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, a Disciple Bible study group is a possible method to make disciples of Jesus Christ, but the group have limitations: First, the groups have come and gone episodically, based on interest and the curriculum. Second, Disciple Bible study groups focus on sharing insights or understandings of the Bible, rather than the members' living experience in the presence of the risen Christ. The members may not be interested in each other's spiritual states.

A Covenant Discipleship group is a mutual accountability group and is effective in their spiritual growth. Also, the Covenant group helps to change the locus of authority from self to Christ. By being accountable for supporting the member's Christian life, the groups make people live out the way "Christ-centered." Although I pointed out that the distinction between the Class and the Covenant group is not asked to members the question "How is your soul?", the Covenant group attempts to reinterpret unfamiliar religious ethos into language and memories of today. The question "How is it with your soul?" might bewilder people who hear it for the first

⁴⁹ The United Methodist Church's mission is "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

time, or even cause them to panic. Perhaps, influenced by secularism, people fail to think about their relationship with God, with one another, and with the world. A religious ethos is foreign to many in modern society, and it is hard to transform the collective memories of human beings because for so long they religious vocabulary and ideas have been foreign.

According to Sung-Boo Yang's dissertation, *The Preacher as a Steward of Local Collective Memories*, a preacher is responsible for reconstructing the religious language and ethos, so that audiences can grasp theological concepts in their language and collective memories.⁵⁰ He gives an example. In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul is concerned with transforming his readers, or more precisely, their collective memory, by re-membering his sufferings in line with the self-sacrifice of the cross, an interpretive category, language and ethos opposed to the honor and shame code of the Greco-Roman culture.⁵¹ He paraphrases Scott Cormode:

In postmodernity, it is all the more significant that preaching shapes the local reservoir of meanings around the memory of Jesus, given that people without tradition are so well along a secular, consumeristic path, and fail to think about the spiritual implications of a situation, unless alternative theological categories and identities leap immediately to mind.⁵²

Yang concludes that when traditional religious ethos is reinterpreted into our collective memories, we will grasp theological and religious subjects. Likewise, because

⁵⁰ Sung-Boo Yang, *The Preacher as a Steward of Local Collective Memories* (Duke Divinity School Dissertation Doctor of Ministry, 2018), 93.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵² Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 48.

of the influence of secularism, we have largely lost the language for speaking of a living, breathing relationship with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Only when we live out the ongoing religious life that is reinterpreted into our collective memories, will we experience the presence of the risen Christ in our lives. Then, the experience concretizes our identity and transforms not only our thoughts but also our lives. Kevin Vanhoozer said,

The church is thus not only the ‘people of the book’ but also ‘the [lived] interpretation of the book. [it is called] to represent the gospel not only by seeking literally to duplicate past scenes but rather by continuing to follow Jesus into the present in ways that are both faithful and creative.’⁵³

By attempting to reconstruct our deconstructed religious ethos by performing their own covenants, which reinterpret the greatest commandments (loving God and neighbors) into General Rules, Covenant discipleship groups help people to experience the presence of Christ in their lives. We can see evidence of this from the Covenant Discipleship group survey. All respondents agreed that through the Covenant group experience, members’ relationship with God become stronger.⁵⁴ I myself have seen that

⁵³ Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2014), 2–3.

⁵⁴ The respondents were asked the question: “Do you agree or disagree that through the Covenant group experience, members’ relationship with God become stronger?” The options are: “Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; and Strongly disagree.” About 82 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that Covenant groups strengthened the relationship with God. About 18 percent of them somewhat agreed with the statement. This result differs somewhat from the result of the survey about Disciple Bible study groups. In the survey about Disciple Bible study groups, the respondents were asked the same question: “Do you agree or disagree that through the Covenant group experience, members’ relationship with God become stronger?” The options are the same. About 60 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that through Disciple Bible study, the members’ relationship with God becomes stronger. About 30 percent of them somewhat agreed with the statement. However, about 10 percent of them strongly disagreed.

Covenant Discipleship groups play a role in restoring the language for speaking of a living, breathing relationship with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

However, they mainly discuss whether the members practice their own covenants which are based on General Rules even with supporting the experience of God's presence in our lives, they miss the important question "How is your soul?" By asking the question, people can constantly support their spiritual status and help to become mature in the Lord. As a result, the United Methodist Church needs to not only experience God's presence in our lives, but also continue to support our spiritual status as well.

7. Conclusion

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:11–13

Recently, the population of Christians has declined, and more and more people have become less religious. Many churches have attempted to overcome the difficulties, but the decline of religion seems to continue for a while longer. It is hard for us who live in modern society to believe in God. At the heart of Charles Taylor’s book, *A Secular Age* lies a related question: Why is it so much harder for us who live in modern society to believe in God as compared with the people who lived in the 1500s? His argument is important for church leaders. Many statistics show that the number of less-religious people has gradually increased along with the population of the people who consider themselves as religiously unaffiliated. Those described as religiously unaffiliated have left traditional churches. They rather practice diffuse spirituality and consider themselves to be “spiritual but not religious.” Taylor claims that the exclusive humanism has allowed people to become less religious. More and more people find their deepest meaning from immanent sources. In short, because the locus of the authority moves into one’s self, it is hard for contemporary people to believe in God.

The early Methodists experienced the presence of the risen Christ through Wesleyan class, band, and societies. These small groups also led the Methodist

movement in England. The people gathered together in small groups to talk about how things were going in their lives as followers of Jesus Christ, to support each other and to encourage each other to grow in grace. These groups were like accountability groups, which are a key source of spiritual growth and discipleship.

Wesley introduced many disciplines to help Christians receive grace. These disciplines include Holy Communion, baptism, prayer, worship, meditating, classes, bands, and other similar practices. When we practice these disciplines over and over, we eventually become like Christ by God's grace. It is, however, difficult to have entrenched such habits of walking with God in everyday life since our nature is always opposed to God's will. Therefore, Wesley insisted that general means of grace, which are attitude and habits that bring us into presence of God, should serve as the foundation for all other means of grace. Only once our attitude has been transformed will other means of grace be effective. The general means of grace involve denying one's self and taking up one's cross. In order to properly deny ourselves and take up our cross, we need the loving care of others watching over us, in the form of mutual accountability. For contemporary church leaders, an accountability group may be the most effective way to solve the difficulties confronting us.

Jesus named the two greatest commandments: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.²¹⁰ In the 1700s, John Wesley restated these

²¹⁰ Matthew 22:35-39 "and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a

commandments as General Rules: do no harm, do good, and attend upon all the ordinances of God. Perhaps it was hard for Englishmen who lived in 1700s to grasp the greatest commandments because the people who lived in Jesus' days had different collective memories from England in the 1700s. Therefore, in order to grasp the theology of Jesus' day, we need to reinterpret the local collective memories in Jesus' days in terms of our own collective memories. In addition, we need to live out our reinterpreted collective memories everyday life, and then we will experience the presence of the risen Christ. That experience also becomes our identity and transforms not only our lives but also our thoughts.

The Covenant Discipleship group, which David Watson introduced, has somewhat helped contemporary churches build up their collective memories by observing covenants together. A Disciple Bible study group is also an effective way to change one's locus of authority from the self to a transcendent source, namely the Word of God. However, these two small groups share in common a limitation. They are accountable for supporting discipleship but remain unwilling to foster conversation about deep matters such as relationship with God, with one another, and with the world. On the other hand, a class meeting deals with the question "How is it with your soul?" By sharing our spiritual status and being accountable for the growth of the relationship, our faith will grow, and then we will be mature in the Lord. Saint Paul

second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbors as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (NRSV)

said, "The gifts [God] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."²¹¹

²¹¹ Ephesians 4:11–13 NRSV.

Appendix 1.

Covenant Group Questionnaire

0. How many members do you have in your Covenant group?

1. How long have the Covenant groups been running?

- ① Less than 1 year
- ② 1-2 years
- ③ 3-5 years
- ④ 6-10 years
- ⑤ Longer than 10 years

2. If some of the Covenant groups end, what are the reasons? (If Covenant groups have not ended, please proceed to question 3.)

3. What percentage of your church members engage in the Covenant groups?

- ① 75%-100%
- ② 50%-74%
- ③ 25%-49%
- ④ 0%-24%

4. Covenant groups have been most effective in

Leading to church growth.

Leading to members' spiritual growth.

Leading members to serve their neighbors or local communities.

Leading members to grow in missions.

None

4.1. Describe how effective Covenant groups are in leading to church growth.

4.2. Describe how effective Covenant groups are in leading to members' spiritual growth.

4.3. Describe how effective Covenant groups are in leading members to serve their neighbors or local communities.

4.3. Describe how effective Covenant groups are in leading members to grow in mission.

5. Do you agree or disagree that through the Covenant group experience, members' relationships with God become stronger.

- ① Strongly Agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral

- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly Disagree

6. Do you agree or disagree that through the Covenant group experience, members' relationships with other believers become stronger.

- ① Strongly Agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly Disagree

7. Do you agree or disagree that through the Covenant group experience, members practice the way of centering on Christ.

- ① Strongly Agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly Disagree

8. How satisfied are the members with Covenant groups?

- ① Strongly satisfy
- ② Satisfy
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Dissatisfy
- ⑤ Strongly dissatisfy

9. Do participants lead other small groups (class meetings or Bible study)?

9.a. If so, what kind of small groups do they lead?

9.b. If so, how many of them lead other small groups?

(example: 3 members out of 10 members)

(Answer: ____ out of ____)

9.c. Among the numbers from 9.b., how many of them has led any other small groups BEFORE they participated in the Covenant group? (Answer: ____ out of ____)

10.1. In what types of meetings do the members engage (other meetings or mission work)?

10.2. How many members serve other meetings or mission work?

(example: 3 members out of 10 members)

(Answer: ____ out of ____)

10.3. Among the numbers from 10.b., how many of them have served other meetings or mission work BEFORE they participated in the Covenant group?

(Answer: ____ out of ____)

11. How many other small groups (class meetings, Bible study, or etc.), not counting Covenant groups, are there?

12. How often do they practice works of Mercy (social work, justice, and compassion) in everyday life?

- ① Very often
- ② Often
- ③ Somewhat often
- ④ Not very often
- ⑤ Not at all

12.a. Please explain in detail. _____

13. How often do they practice works of Piety (worship, devotion, mercy, and obedience) in everyday life?

- ① Very often
- ② Often
- ③ Somewhat often
- ④ Not very often
- ⑤ Not at all

13.a. Please explain in detail. _____

Appendix 2.

Q.10 – Do participants lead other small groups?

Q.10.A. – If so, what kind of small groups do they lead?

Q.10.B. – If so, how many of them lead other small groups?
(example: 3 members out of 10 members)

4 out of 7 (57%)

3 out of 16 (19%)

6 out of 10 (60%)

4 out of 12 (33%)

5 out of 8 (63%)

8 out of 30 (27%)

7 out of 10 (70%)

3 out of 7 (43%)

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Biography

I was born in South Korea on November 17th, 1979. I was ordained as an elder from the Korean Methodist Church in 2015. Now I serve as a lead pastor at Brosville United Methodist Church in the Virginia Conference. I graduated from Mokwon University with a bachelor's degree in theology on February 2014. I graduated from Methodist Theological University with a Master of Theology's degree on February 2016. I graduated from Candler School of Theology with a Master of Divinity's degree on May 2011. I graduated from Boston School of Theology with a Master of Sacred Theology's degree on May 2012. I also graduated from Duke Divinity School with a Doctor of Ministry's degree on May 12th, 2018.