**How to Be *Practically* Christian:**

**Covenant Discipleship Groups in Church and Community**

**Great Plains Annual Conference Workshop 2018**

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**Welcome and Introduction:**

In the words of St. Anselm to St. Augustine when they met on the road to the Council of Nicaea: “Hi.”

**Three Numbers:**

(slide 1) 700, 82,000, 220,000. Remember these. We’ll get back to them.

**The Practicality of our Wesleyan Tradition:**

I thought about calling this workshop (slide 2) “Honey, I Shrunk the Church!” because that’s really what we’re going to talk about: About how the true “method of Methodism” has always been about **small** gatherings of people who desire to be faithful Christ-followers (what John Wesley called those with “a desire to flee from the wrath to come”) and who are willing to hold one another accountable for it. But then I decided that Bishop Saenz might not like that title since getting smaller is not his idea of a good time! So, I went with this one instead: (slide 3) “How to Be ***Practically*** Christian”—in hopes that it might keep me from experiencing involuntary early retirement!

Now, by “practically” Christian I don’t mean “almost” Christian, as in: “Say, I sure do like those Methodists who moved in next door—they’re real nice people—why they’re practically Christians!” Or, as in Wesley’s sermon titled “The Almost Christian” where he recounts the story of King Agrippa saying to the Apostle Paul: ***“Almost*** thou persuadest me to be a Christian (Acts 26.28). Wesley’s point, of course, being that it is much preferable to be “altogether, a Christian” than “almost” one. But that’s another workshop.

No, by “practically” Christian I mean being Christian in routine daily living. In the normal, everyday practice of a disciplined, methodical life—just like Mr. Wesley and his followers did. Remember, we’re not called Methodists because we follow the teachings of Saint Methodius, the 9th century Byzantine theologian who, along with his brother, became missionaries to the Slavs (Ah, God bless Wikipedia!). No, we’re called Methodists because Jack and Chuck Wesley (slide 4)—that’s Jack on the left, Chuck on the right—were bullied by the cool kids at Oxford for their methodical way of ordering their daily routines around a simple rule of life—**and** because they looked like your grandma on a bad hair day. So, from the very beginning, we Wesleyans have been known for our **practicality**—the routine PRACTICING of our faith. And if there’s one thing that Bishop Robert Schnase has taught us all (slide 5 with his books on it)—it’s practice, practice, practice that makes us effective in our lives and ministry.

**Practice, Practice, Practice!**

So, we’ve always been a practical and a practicing bunch. (slide 6—Cartoon: How do I get to Carnegie Hall? Practice!)

But what is it we are so practical about? What **are** traditional Methodist PRACTICES?

Well, you already know. There are three of them. Very simple, as Bishop Ruben Job has said. Who remembers what they are? (slide 7)

* Do no harm.
* Do good.
* Stay in love with God. (Wesley: “Attend to all the ordinances of God.”)

The *Three Simple Rules of a Wesleyan Way of Living*. And I think we’d all agree that it doesn’t get much simpler than that.

But simple doesn’t mean easy, does it? Being a Christian disciple in the Wesleyan way (or any other way for that matter) has never been without both its rewards and its requirements. Now, the rewards are apparent: (slide 8)

* Forgiveness
* Restored relationship
* Reconciliation with God

And the requirements are equally apparent: (slide 9)

* A radical commitment to Jesus of Nazareth.
* Accepting his lifestyle and following his teachings.
* Taking seriously what Jesus had to say about the kingdom of God—and patterning our lives as if that reign of hope and joy, peace and love is already present on earth as in heaven.
* And most appropriate to our point today, putting all of that into practice within the daily routine of living.

So, the Wesleyan way of living is always a balancing act—between reward and requirement.

Wesley liked to use the story of the prodigal son to illustrate this balance:

He said when the prodigal son “came to his senses” and headed for home, he experienced two things:

1) He got his old room back—and with a steak dinner to boot; and

2) He was given a list of household chores to do and some family behaviors that were expected.

(slide 10) He considered it “salvation with responsibility”—as simple as that! But far from easy. (David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, p. 35-6)

**The Goal of Christian Discipleship:**

So……being a disciple in the Wesleyan sense is both reward and requirement—AND—is much more than just flipping a switch and deciding to follow Jesus. Oh, it may start with that—that Aldersgate experience moment when a conversion of sorts occurs and holy heartburn kicks in. But that’s just the beginning. Wesley saw salvation as a moving, dynamic way of living. One that is leading us to a definite goal.

So, what is that goal? Where is this Wesleyan way of “practical” discipleship, “responsible” salvation taking us? Well, I’m glad you asked.

Turn to your smart neighbors and answer the question: (slide 11—What is the goal of the Christian life?)

(slide 12) Richard Foster, the author of Celebration of Discipline, one of the most helpful and accessible books on Christian formation and spiritual growth that I have ever found, says (slide 13) “the goal of the Christian life is to be like Jesus.” For those of you who like things complicated, I wish I could make it more so. But I can’t. The goal of the Christian life is to be like Jesus. The ***imitatio Christi***, if a little Latin helps at all (aren’t you impressed?)

Foster says that God has placed that achievable goal before us. And God is intent on our reaching that goal.

So, what does that look like? If we are to “be like Jesus”, (slide 14) what is Jesus like? Talk to your smart neighbors.

**What is Jesus Like?**

* Loving
* Non-judgmental
* Forgiving
* Accepting
* Merciful
* Fully and perfectly reflective of God’s nature
* Living and behaving as if the kingdom of God is present right here and now. (By the way, both Jesus and John Wesley would say that if you want to know what that looks like, just read and re-read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6, 7).

Here’s Foster again: Being like Jesus means: (slide 15)

“To be formed, conformed, transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus.”

(slide 16) Sanctification is the biblical and Wesleyan term for it. We don’t use it that often, but that’s what it is. And let me warn you, if you go to a party and someone asks you what you’re into these days, and you say “sanctification”—you’ll spend the rest of the evening alone. But that is the goal of the Christian life.

**The Problem of Christian Discipleship:**

But there is a problem with our progress toward that goal—what do you suppose it is? It’s hard to do. It doesn’t really come naturally to us. It just is not in our spiritual and practical DNA to want to be like Jesus.

Now, before you get all depressed and start feeling GULITY—what the great American theologian, Erma Bombeck, once called “the gift that goes on giving”—let’s look at the reason WHY Christlikeness does not come more naturally to us than it does. And to discover the reason for that, all we have to do is remember back to where it all started:

(slide 17--Let’s do the Wayne’s World flashback sound.)

Once upon a time, there was a man and a woman, and they lived in a beautiful garden—remember? And God said to them, “You can eat anything you want in this beautiful garden, except….” Well, and you remember the rest: (slides 18-21—cartoons)

And here we are today.

Now, when John Calvin, one of the great Protestant Reformers of the 16th century remembered back to the Garden, he remembered that old Catholic doctrine known as (slide 22) “Total Depravity”. It taught that, because of Adam and Eve’s original sin, not only did humanity lose the perfect relationship we had with God, we also lost any hint of the divine nature within us. In other words, anything good in us has been totally obliterated, and we are completely separated from God.

But Wesley remembered things differently. While he accepted the notion of a “depraved” human nature, he did not believe in “total depravity”, but rather in a (slide 23) “limited depravity”. That the divine nature within us was “diseased”, yes, but not fully “destroyed”. You hear the difference? And as a result, he maintained that it was possible for God to heal the “diseased” part of human nature, and thereby re-animate the goodness within it. He called it:

(slide 24) “Replacing the devilish mind that is within us with the mind that is in Christ Jesus.”

And that’s why we’re Methodists and not Presbyterians.

So, Wesley believed in the possibility of a transformed human nature.

**A Theology of Grace: (slide 25)**

OK. So, the next thing he had to hammer out—theologically speaking—was: Just **how** does this transformation take place? Is it all a work of God? Or is there human effort involved as well?

Well, as with nearly all things in our great Methodist tradition, Wesley found a middle way.

He determined that human beings DO have a part to play in their own salvation (Watson p. 34). That we have the capacity to (slide 26) “cooperate” with God in healing that broken relationship. Now, you theologians present will remember that this is what caused many of the Calvinists to brand Wesley as a Pelagian—someone who believes that salvation is by good works. But Wesley rejected that heretical label by fully embracing the doctrine of *prima gratia*—the primacy of grace—but rejecting the Calvinist notion of “**irresistible** grace.” He said that God’s grace is VERY resistible indeed—we do it all the time! But we can COOPERATE with it in some very important ways.

So, God’s grace is primary—central—to Wesley’s very practical theology. And, of course, we all know what grace is, right? Well…maybe it’s time to talk to your smart neighbors again. (slide 27) What is grace. And how do we “cooperate” with it?

(slide 28) Grace: “Unmerited favor,” yes—that’s the classical Wesleyan definition. But grace is also power. The POWER to move ever closer to the goal of the Christian life: To be like Jesus. But that power is dependent on our cooperating with God. How do we do that?

**The Means of Grace: (slide 29)**

Wesley taught—as did his parents and others within the tradition of the Anglican Church—that God’s gracious power comes to us through the “Means of Grace”: (slide 30) Those channels which God has established through the organized, institutional Church by which God’s gracious blessings are given to God’s people. **They are how we cooperate with God!!!**

Now, what are the means of grace?

Well, Christian tradition varies on the definitive list—Catholics have theirs, Lutherans theirs, and we Methodists have ours. But generally speaking there are about a dozen or so practices that the church has recognized since ancient times as being central to experiential Christianity. DISCIPLINED ACTS—that’s what they are—which we perform—and which in one form or another all of the devotional masters have affirmed as necessary to faithful discipleship—are those things which the church generally considers the “means of grace”. What are some of these? I’ll spot you the first one—with an example: Prayer (Video of Greer praying—slide 31)

(Foster’s list—slides 32-35)

* Prayer
* Meditation
* Fasting
* Study
* Simplicity
* Solitude
* Submission
* Service
* Confession
* Worship
* Guidance
* Celebration

Again, it’s not an exhaustive list, but it contains those acts of devotion and worship, compassion and mercy which have been practiced by sincere people over the centuries. And I don’t mean just by monks and clerics and ascetics and spiritual giants. But by ordinary people who have jobs and care for children and wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, Richard Foster says that if the disciplines “are to have any transforming effect at all, it must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life: in our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our neighbors and friends.” (Foster, Celebration of Discipline, p. 1)

Being PRACTICALLY Christian, right? That’s what we’re talking about. I look at that list and I think: “I can do some of those things! Not perfectly, but I can participate in some very real, concrete ways to put myself before God, and invite God to work in my life.” I like that.

In fact, I have always loved Foster’s very practical definition of a spiritual discipline—look at this:

(slide 36) A spiritual discipline is “doing what we can do with our body, mind and spirit in order to receive from God the power and resources we need to do what we **cannot** do in our own strength.”

Think of the list again—what are those things we **can** do: Pray, worship, meditate, read scripture, etc.

And what are some things we **can’t** do? Forgive, love our enemies, turn the other cheek, love my neighbor as much as I love myself.

Listen to Foster again:

(slide 37)

“We undertake things we **can** do in order to receive power from God to do what we **cannot** do. That is what a spiritual discipline is.”

So, they are fundamental to spiritual growth and Christian formation. In fact, I would go so far as to say that without the faithful, consistent practice of the spiritual disciplines, our access to God’s means of grace is severely limited, and God’s ability to transform us into maturing disciples greatly reduced.

**Practice, Practice, Practice! (slide 38)**

Ok. So, if that’s true—then why are we often so lax in our practice? Well, pure and simple, it’s hard to do. Consistent practice is hard to do.

Any world-class athletes here? Former Olympians? Any weight-lifters, Rubik’s cube champions, Tidily-wink aficionados, or Spelling Bee winners?

How did you get so darn good? Practice, right?

I love music. I consider musicians magical. But they’re really not. What are they? They are ordinary people who are dedicated and committed to their art. Right?

Whenever I go to a concert I will say to my wife—“Do you know the only difference between me and that world-class musician on stage?” And as she has done for over forty years, she smiles and says, “No, what?” And I say, “Years and years of practice.” And that’s true.

Now, there are undoubtedly other differences as well. But I guarantee you, the big difference is practice—or, in my case, the lack thereof.

Think of someone who is truly outstanding in their field—athlete, musician, writer, designer, composer, etc. How did they get there? Practice!

You all know Alan Francis? You don’t? Well Alan Francis is the world horseshoe champion. You need to get out more! Alan Francis has a 90.5 % accuracy rating by the American Association of Horseshoe Throwers, or something. How? Say it with me: Practice! Practice! Practice!

I love this quote: (slide 39)

“Talent is overrated. We all start pretty ordinary. You become extraordinary through the transformational process of practice.” (Matthew Syed, Bounce: Mozart, Federer, Picasso, Beckham and the Science of Success).

He says, “all of the people who have clocked up the necessary hours of practice have become world-class. Studies show that through practice you build new neuro-connections—quite literally, the anatomy of the brain changes over time. This is true for the naturally talented and the untalented as well.” Isn’t that amazing?

So, how do we get more consistent in our **practice** of spiritual disciplines? One word—and if this is all you take away from today, then it’s been worth it: **(slide 40)** Accountability! Say it with me: Accountability. The true Method of Methodism!

**Accountability is Key**

You see, Wesley understood something fundamental about human nature. He understood—long before AA and NA and Weight Watchers and waaaay before the advent of any type of group therapy—that we desperately need **each other** if we’re gonna’ stay on track. So, he began this whole Methodist movement by dividing people into small group for the purpose of support…and REPORT. What I call “the pat on the back” (atta girl, ,atta boy) and “the hand in the back” (keep going, keep going.) He formed the Holy Club with his brother Chuck back at Oxford. He later established Band societies and Class Meetings with other like-minded people. **HE REQUIRED THOSE EARLIEST METHODISTS TO MEET ON A REGULAR BASIS AND REPORT ON HOW THEY WERE DOING IN THEIR CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP!** The word was what? **ACCOUNTABILITY**!

**The How To of Salvation:**

And these groups of early Methodists became the “How To” of salvation (Watson p. 38). They represented the organizational genius of JW. And boy, was he organized!

Some of you remember how in those early days, in order to be considered a good Methodist you had to have a ticket. A ticket that said you were a part of a Methodist small group. (slide 41 ticket) And each time you’d go to a meeting, you’d get your ticket punched or marked or signed. And if a person missed too many meetings, or proved lax in their performance of spiritual discipline, or forgot to bring their offering one too many times—they’d lose their ticket! In fact, on one of his visits to a village to check the records and inspect the class tickets, Mr. Wesley found six hundred valid tickets upon his arrival. Guess how many there were when he left? Three hundred! Apparently if a Methodist wasn’t being a Methodist then they were no longer a Methodist! (Honey, I shrunk the church!) Try to explain that on Tables 1 and 2…)

But the point was accountability—to each other, and through each other, to God. It is simply based on the common sense notion that “if you know that you have to give an account to someone each week for something you know you should be doing, then there is a much better chance that you will do it.” (Watson, p. 110)

And that’s exactly what Covenant Discipleship Groups are, plain and simple. They are accountability groups.

They’re not:

* encounter groups.
* Bible study groups.
* prayer groups.
* growth groups.
* spiritual formation groups.
* advocacy groups.
* service groups.
* care or share groups.

Now, all of those are good things. And all of these aspects of Christian discipleship and community will feature in covenant discipleship groups over and over again. But none of them is the purpose of the weekly covenant group meetings. What is it??

(slide 42) ACCOUNTABILITY. Nothing more and nothing less.

**Covenant Discipleship Groups In Action:**

So, let’s shift over from the theology of accountable discipleship to the practice of it. What can you reasonably expect to happen to see happen if you respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and choose to become part of a covenant discipleship group?

Well, in a nutshell, you can expect to become more consistent, more reliable—in a word, more seasoned—in your Christian discipleship. That’s the promise of grace. That it will invade our lives in new ways. It’s also the threat of grace, by the way! When we make ourselves accountable for the means through which grace can flow, flow it will—and in ways for which we are not always ready. (Watson, p. 165)

More specifically, you can expect three things to happen: (slide 43)

1. You will become more aware of God’s grace in your life.

2. You will find new ways of serving God and your neighbor in the world.

3. You will find your understanding of God’s will in your life greatly enhanced.

Not a bad return on investment.

**Some FAQs: (Watson, p. 105f) (slides 44-46)**

Some other questions people usually ask about Covenant Discipleship:

* How large or small are the groups?

Answer: 2-7. Why? To get through the weekly meetings in an hour.

* What is the average or optimum size of a group?

Answer: 5-6—for two reasons: 1. Room to grow; and 2. Good group dynamic even if someone is missing.

* These are “task-oriented” groups by nature. So, what is the task?

Answer: To watch over each other in love.

* What is the end or goal of the group’s work?

Answer: To develop consistency and maturity in our walk with Christ. To become more like Jesus.

* What is the top priority for members of CDGs?

Answer: BE THERE! This is the most important part of the covenant that guides the group—that we agree to meet weekly. Why? Because there is no accountability without attendance—without the regular check in.

**The Covenant: (slide 47)**

Now, who are we accountable to and what are we accountable for?

Well, we are accountable to each other, and, through each other, to God. And the way we measure our accountability is by means of a Covenant. The covenant is a statement of intent which expresses the resolve of the members to carry out certain agreed-upon disciplines and tasks. So, once a Covenant Discipleship group has formed and the members have agreed on a day and time to meet, the first task is to write the covenant.

The covenant has three essential sections: (slide 48)

1. A preamble which states the nature and purpose of the covenant.
2. Clauses covering the particular acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion that everyone in the group is willing and able to do. (Usually no more than 10 for the sake of time—1 hour).
3. A conclusion which reaffirms the nature and purpose of the covenant as the intention of the group to shape their lives according to the covenant and in dependence upon God’s grace.

**An Example of a Covenant:** (slide 49)

**A Covenant of Discipleship**

**(Preamble)**

Knowing that Jesus Christ died that I might have eternal life, I herewith pledge myself to be his disciple, witnessing to his saving grace, and seeking to follow his teachings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I faithfully pledge my time, my skills, my resources, and my strength, to search out God’s will for me, and to obey.

(slide 50)

**(Clauses)**

**Acts of Compassion**

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

I will obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit to serve God and my neighbor.

(slide 51)

**Acts of Justice**

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

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

(slide 52)

**Acts of Worship**

I will worship each Sunday, unless prevented.

I will receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion each week.

(slide 53)

**Acts of Devotion**

I will read and study the scriptures each day.

I will spend 30 minutes/day devoting myself to God through prayer, personal study and other devotional acts.

(slide 54)

**Conclusion**

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

Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Signed:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Notice three important things about the Covenant:

1) The preamble and the conclusion ground the entire thing in God’s grace and remind the group that it is only by God’s power that they can keep the covenant;

2) All the clauses in a covenant must be possible and doable in the routine of everyday living. Remember, God’s grace reaches people right where they are, and calls men and women, boys and girls to respond within the routines of daily living. This follows the principle of discipleship [found] in the early Methodist class meeting, doesn’t it? Wesley and his crew were not monks or ascetics or cloistered off from the wider world. Our tradition has never been one to withdraw from the world either permanently or temporarily in order to be in communion with God. Rather, Wesley believed that true discipleship comes in “learning how not to resist the gracious initiatives of the Holy Spirit in the immediacy of the world.” (p. 117-18) Ours is a worldly discipleship, not a sheltered, esoteric one.

3) And finally, the covenant is a good balance between the personal and the social aspects of discipleship. Personal acts of compassion and devotion are inseparable from acts of social justice and community worship. Our Wesleyan tradition teaches that both are necessary in the Christian life.

**Signed, Sealed, and Delivered**

When the group has written and agreed upon its covenant, each member is given a copy—paper or electronic. All members sign and date it. And from that point on the completed covenant is brought to every meeting and the rotating leaders use it as the agenda.

**One More FAQ**: Does the covenant ever change? Yes. When? When a new member joins. And as the group matures. And maturing is what it’s all about!

**A Conversation with Some CDG Practitioners:**

Susan Mercer, Director of Wesley KU and Bruce Emmert, KC DS

There is CD for children and youth. Sprouts at Fort Scott First.

**Adding Accountability to Already Existing Groups in the Church:**

Most churches have many, many small groups—from Sunday school classes to weight loss groups to yoga and sewing and ministry teams—each and every one doing lots of good things. What if each group added…an accountability factor? A way of encouraging and challenging each other to follow Christ. Each time they meet they could spend a few minutes asking each other: (slide 55)

* Are you attending worship regularly?
* Are you reading your Bible devotedly?
* Are you praying daily?
* And are you reproducing the love of Jesus in the world consistently?

It would be a way to introduce the idea of accountability. And who knows where it might lead?

**Experimenting with CDGs in the Community: (slide 56-57)**

And this can be done in the community as well. Experiment with:

--Forming a group at the coffee shop

--Organizing a group after Kiwanis or Rotary

--Create an online group around Pinterest or Facebook

--Talk with school leaders about a group after school that might focus on anti-bullying or student isolation issues (and use that as a pathway into a discipleship group)

--Local jail or prison

--Community colleges

Be creative! Experiment! We’re beginning to talk about “Fresh Expressions” of Christian community these days. Well, Covenant Groups are the oldest fresh expression there is! And don’t be afraid to fail! Remember, in ministry failure is an option! Just fail forward—which means learn from it and try again! Disciples are waiting to be made.

**Concluding Thoughts:**

In fact, that is the underlying assertion of Watson’s book: (slide 58)

“Many Christians today are ready to make a disciplined commitment to their discipleship. They reject the option of lukewarm religion, which demands little of the believer and offers all sorts of personal benefits the church was never meant to provide…” (p. 61)

I think that’s true. I also believe that’s what Bishop Robert Schnase means by the term (slide 59) “Intentional Faith Development.” **INTENTIONAL** Faith Development—you hear the word? A reminder that we are to take a step beyond what’s normal, beyond what’s expected—and put our back into it. It’s hard work. But it’s easier when we’re doing it together.

And “together” is the key. There is not a book, a letter, a chapter, a verse in all the New Testament that does not encourage the followers of Jesus to learn, grow, teach, and mature in their faith. And nearly all emphasize the importance of the community in this endeavor. We need each other, don’t we? “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” We learn and grow and teach and mature in **community**, so that we can discover Christ’s presence, power, and support in **others**. (Watson, p. 64)

**Practical First Steps in Introducing CDG to the Local Church: (slides 60-62)**

* Start by recruiting a team to study the books and serve as a pilot CDG (and guides for the formation of new groups).
* Select an invitation Sunday—Invite the entire church as part of worship.
* Ask for a commitment—This is a critical growth point in the Christian life.
* Those who respond to the invitation move to Fellowship Hall to decide who will be in what group (based entirely on the time of the week that works best).
* Schedule the inaugural meeting.
* Go for it!

Important! The pastor must be fully supportive and integrally involved in the entire process.

**Two main resources:**

1. (slide 63) *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability* by David Lowes Watson

2. (slide 64) *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* by Richard J. Foster

**Almost Final Notes:**

If I could start my own church I’d focus on three things:

1. Meaningful worship

2. Community building

3. Discipleship Groups focused on mutual accountability

Or, if I could do it all over again, I’d be a tent-maker. And I’d do a house church that was a CDG and grow from there.

Or, if I was in a little church that was clearly dying, I’d make it a covenant group and invite the Holy Spirit to resurrect us to a new form of life.

What would you do?

**A Final Note:**

Remember those numbers we started with? (slide 65) **700—82,000—220,000**

**(slide 66)**

* The first is the number of clergy in GP (700)
* The second is the number in what we call Average Worship Attendance—those faithful layfolk who worship together on any given Sunday in our conference (82,000)
* And the third is the number of members we have in the Great Plains (220,000)

So, of those three numbers representing those three groups, who has the greatest potential to make the largest impact on our mission? (slide 67)

THE LAITY! As the Towers-Watson Study from about ten years ago discovered, the strongest driver of congregational vitality is SPIRITUALLY MATURE LAITY!

Another word for that is: Disciples of Jesus Christ. Not church members. Not names on a roll. But DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST.

And how do you make a disciple of Jesus Christ?

(show CDG slide 68 in silence).

**Examples of covenants:**

A Covenant of Discipleship

(Preamble) Having accepted God’s gift of grace, we desire to grow in Christian faith. As we “watch over each other in love” we will encourage one another to become more Christ-like. To reflect God’s love, compassion, and justice and to follow Christ’s teachings, we agree to the following covenant:

(Clauses)

Acts of Compassion:

I will practice the ministry of hospitality by not allowing a stranger, newcomer, or sojourner I meet to go unnoticed.

I will affirm my faith by performing an act of compassion during the week. As often as possible these acts will be anonymous.

As a ministry of grace, I will be intentional in identifying individuals who need to be listened to--especially those who rub me the wrong way.

Act of Justice:

We will organize and lead our church in ministry to, for and with young adults--particularly students at the Community College.

Act of Worship:

I will attend worship service weekly and participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion when offered.

Act of Devotion:

I will read the Bible and pray daily, and report in some specifics to my group on my study/prayer experience.

General Act of Discipleship:

Each week a member of the group will suggest a “challenge clause” for the group to attempt--under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Personal Covenant Clauses:

(Conclusion)

We are not alone. Thanks be to God! Let’s get on with the business of Christian discipleship.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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A Covenant of Discipleship:

We are disciples of Jesus Christ. God intends to save us from sin and for lives of love to God and neighbor. God has called us, and the Spirit has empowered us to be witnesses of God’s kingdom and to grow in holiness all the days of our lives. We commit ourselves to use our time, skills, resources and strength to love and serve God, neighbor and creation, trusting God’s power through these means to make us holy.

**Acts of Compassion**

* I will actively seek out ways to show compassion and care for all people and all of God’s creation.

**Acts of Justice**

* I will witness for justice, inclusiveness, and equality, and encourage forgiveness always and reconciliation wherever possible.
* I will actively support a movement for world peace with justice, and will communicate regularly with my elected representatives on these issues.

**Acts of Devotion**

* I will spend time daily in reading scripture and offering prayer, including praying for enemies, and include the members of our covenant discipleship group in our daily prayers*.*
* I will care for my body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

**Acts of Worship**

* I will faithfully join in corporate worship each week unless prevented.
* I will offer my resources faithfully to support the work of God’s kingdom, beginning with the local church with which I am affiliated, with the tithe as my guide. *Resources interpreted broadly to include money, time and talents.*

Open my eyes to your presence, O God,   
that I may see the sorrows and joys of your creatures.   
Open my ears to your will, O God,   
that I may have the strength to keep this covenant.   
Open my heart and my hands in mercy, O God,   
that I may receive mercy when I fail. Amen.

**Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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A Covenant of Discipleship

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, who integrity and confidentiality we will uphold in all that we share. With God’s grace and their help, we make our covenant.

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

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

I will obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit to serve God and my neighbor.

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

I will worship each Sunday, unless prevented.

I will receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion each week.

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

I will read and study the Scriptures each day.

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

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

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

Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Signed:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\* The use of the personal ***I*** or the collective ***We*** is entirely at the discretion of each group.

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A Covenant of Discipleship

Knowing that Jesus Christ died that I might have eternal life, I herewith pledge myself to be his disciple, witnessing to his saving grace, and seeking to follow his teachings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I faithfully pledge my time, my skills, my resources, and my strength, to search out God’s will for me, and to obey.

**Acts of Compassion**

* I will prayerfully care for my body and for the world in which I live.
* I will invite and/or distribute bulletins/literature to those who are in need of a church home/community.

**Acts of Justice**

* When I am aware of injustice to others, I will not remain silent.
* I will support the food pantry mission.
* I will spend time each month to further the cause of the disadvantaged in my community.
* We will provide encouragement and tools to assist others in their educational goals.

**Acts of Devotion**

* I will read and study the scriptures each day.
* I will spend 30 minutes/day devoting myself to God through prayer, personal study and other acts.

**Acts of Worship**

* I will be faithful in attendance and participate in worship each Sunday including alter prayer.
* I will support the church financially to the best of my ability.
* I will receive Holy Communion each month.

 I will try to live each day in the knowledge that God’s spirit is within me and available to me.

Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Signed:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Covenant Discipleship Groups: An Introduction**

A Covenant Discipleship group is 5-7 persons who meet together for one hour each week to hold one another mutually accountable for their discipleship. Groups tend to form based on the day and time people are available for a weekly meeting.

There are no rules about the composition of groups. Many groups are composed of women and men together. Some are all men. Some are all women.

Groups are usually composed of people from the same congregation. But, particularly in the case of a multiple church charge or circuit, a group may comprise people from several congregations.

The purpose of the weekly meetings is mutual accountability and support for discipleship. The group is guided by a covenant they write, shaped by the General Rule of Discipleship:

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

The covenant serves as the agenda for the weekly meeting. It keeps the focus of conversation on discipleship; what each member of the group has done, or not done, during the past week to follow the teachings of Jesus in their daily lives.

**Weekly Compass Heading**

Covenant Discipleship groups are where Christians “watch over one another in love” by giving each other a weekly compass heading. If you have ever used a compass you know that, when used with a map, a compass will point in the direction you need to travel in order to reach your destination. Occasionally, life and the world put obstacles and choices in our way that cause us to get off course. This is why it’s important to frequently check our map and compass so that we can get back on course and make progress towards our destination.

The goal of discipleship is to become fully the human beings God created us to be, in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. Our map is the Scriptures which contain the teachings of Jesus Christ, summarized by him in Mark 12:30-31

*… you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. … you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Our compass is the General Rule of Discipleship. The mutual accountability and support that happens in the weekly meeting of a Covenant Discipleship group provides the regular compass headings that help us to make the course corrections need to keep us on the way of Jesus that leads to our desired destination.

**Task-Oriented Gatherings**

Covenant Discipleship groups are task-oriented gatherings whose task is to help each other become better disciples. Members are responsible for one another. Covenant Discipleship groups are one way congregations help their members to keep the “new commandment” Jesus gave to his disciples in John 13:34-35

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

One of the ways Christians love one another is by helping one another to become the persons God created us to be; by helping one another to become more dependable witness to and workers with Jesus Christ in the world.

**Forming Leaders in Discipleship**

Covenant Discipleship groups are trustworthy and effective means of identifying and nurturing leaders in discipleship for mission and ministry. It’s important to understand that the mission of Covenant Discipleship groups is to develop leaders in discipleship who help the church to faithfully live out its mission with Christ in the world. While individuals certainly receive great blessing when they participate in CD groups, those blessings are secondary to the main purpose of building up the body of Christ for participation in God’s mission for the world.

Congregations that take seriously their mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” need dependable leaders in discipleship. They are women and men who are intentional about their vocation of following Jesus Christ in the world. As members of Covenant Discipleship groups they form holy habits that open their hearts and minds to grace. Their habitual encounters with grace forms them into persons whose natural response to the world is love. They are leaders in discipleship because others see in them and the way they live and serve in the world embodiments of Christ’s love.

**Forming Dependable Disciples**

The weekly Covenant Discipleship group meeting is not where your discipleship happens, but it’s where you make sure that it happens the rest of hours of the week. The mutual accountability and support you receive in your CD group keeps you mindful of what you need to do as a follower of the way of Jesus Christ. The weekly sharing that happens in the group helps you to be intentional about doing the things Jesus taught his disciples: prayer, worship, the Lord’s Supper, reading and studying the Bible, doing no harm, and doing good to everyone. Over time these basic practices of discipleship become habits that transform your character into a reflection of Jesus Christ.

Dependable disciples are the people who lead churches in their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

**Covenant Discipleship Groups Are NOT...**

* Bible Study Groups
* Prayer Groups
* Encounter Groups
* Cell Groups
* Sharing Groups
* Neighborhood Groups
* Service Groups
* Advocacy Groups
* Growth Groups
* Outreach Groups
* Caring Groups

The dynamic of Covenant Discipleship groups is mutual accountability and support for discipleship. Group members certainly read and study the Bible. But when the group meets the conversation is focused on discipleship, with the group’s covenant serving as the agenda. Many groups open their weekly meetings by reading a passage of Scripture and with prayer. But Bible reading and prayer are not the primary purpose of the meetings. Rather, they are more likely to happen in the lives of group members because of the weekly group meeting.

Congregations need a variety of small groups that meet people where they are and help them to grow and mature in faith, hope, and love. Covenant Discipleship groups provide mutual accountability and support for discipleship in a way that forms persons as leaders in discipleship. Some may serve as leaders for Bible study, prayer, cell, service and other types of small groups that serve as part of the congregation’s disciple-making system.

**The Covenant Discipleship Group Meeting**

**The Leader Facilitates**

The weekly meeting is a process of question and answer gives the leader a directive role. The leader offers a brief prayer and the group reads the covenant preamble in unison. The leader begins by giving his or her account of how she or he did with the first clause, or group of related clauses (acts of compassion, acts of justice, acts of worship, or acts of devotion). The leader then turns to another group member and asks, “How did you do with this (these) clause (clauses). After the person has finished hiving his or her account of that part of the covenant, the leader may go to the next person or he or she may ask a question to get the person to say more about their experience with that part of the covenant that week.

The leader determines gives each person an opportunity to give their account of how they did with each part of the covenant. He or she must also keep track of the time and make sure the group does not run over time too much. He or she also manages the time so that no one in the group monopolizes the time. It’s important to keep everyone focused on mutual accountability and support for discipleship in light of the covenant written by the group.

**No Permanent Leader**

Leadership of Covenant Discipleship groups is shared by the group. Members take turn each week. This way the task of leading week to week does not fall on the shoulders of one person. Shared leadership also helps members develop leadership skills.

If any group member does not feel ready to lead the group, that’s okay. Let them pass when it is their turn to lead. In time they will learn by observing their peers as they lead. In time they will take their turn with the others.

Finally, the last order of business of each meeting is determine who will lead the next meeting. Some groups set up a regular rotation of members. Others select weekly leaders from week to week. Either way is okay as long as everyone knows who is leading the next meeting.

**Begin with prayer. Then go through the Covenant.**

Leading a Covenant Discipleship group meeting is simple and straightforward. The leader opens the meeting with prayer. This may be a simple extemporaneous prayer or it may be a prayer from a book (*The United Methodist Hymnal, The Book of Common Prayer, Praying in the Wesleyan Spirit: 52 Prayers for Today* by Paul Chilcote are good resources for prayers.). The leader may include with the opening prayer reading a brief passage of Scripture. Some groups use *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions* from the Upper Room.

Following the opening prayer, many groups read the Covenant preamble aloud in unison. Some groups read the entire covenant together. The unison reading centers the group in the business at hand and physically reminds them of the covenant, which is the meeting agenda.

The leader then walks the group through the covenant. This may be done several ways. The preferred way is to deal with each clause, one at a time. The leader always begins by giving his or her account of a clause and then inviting others to give their accounts in turn. This process is repeated until all the clauses have been covered.

The order in which the clauses are covered is up to the leader. Some like to start at the top of the page and work their way down to the bottom. Others may like to be more random and take the group through the covenant in no particular order. As long as the entire covenant is covered each week, the order is not really important.

**One Hour Meetings**

The group member leading any given meeting must always keep her or his eye on the clock. Meetings must begin and end on time. One hour. No more. No less. This means the leader is responsible for keeping the conversation focused on the covenant. It also means that the leader must help guide the conversation in such a way that each member has time to give an account of each part of the covenant within the allotted hour. More talkative group members need to be given gentle reminders to be brief in giving their account of each part of the covenant so that everyone will have time to participate within the hour.

Try to leave the last five minutes of the meeting free for members to briefly share prayer concerns. Then the leader concludes the time with a brief prayer, blessing and dismissal.

Be certain that everyone knows who will lead the next meeting before anyone leaves the room at the end of each meeting.

**Covenant Is The Agenda**

This means that the focus of conversation during the one-hour meeting is discipleship. In particular, the practices the group has agreed to incorporate in to their life together and individually contained in the clauses of the covenant. The leader in any given week needs to be mindful of this important dynamic. Occasionally the group will get distracted a comment or begin discussing recent events in the morning news or recent gossip in the church. When this happens the leader needs to gently intervene and bring the group back to the purpose of the meeting: mutual accountability for discipleship shaped by the covenant written by the group shaped by the General Rule of Discipleship. The covenant is the agenda. Limiting conversation to the agenda will help to maintain focus and keep the meeting to its agreed upon one hour time limit.

**Develop an Atmosphere Of Trust & Sharing**

Over time, as the group meets faithfully week after week, an atmosphere of trust and sharing will develop. This trust and willingness to share develops and grows when meeting leaders faithfully keep the weekly conversation focused on the discipleship contained in the covenant (the meeting agenda) and regularly begin and end each meeting on time. Trust is built when the discipline of accountability and support for discipleship is routinely maintained.

Confidentiality is also essential to build trust and sharing within the group. The group needs to agree from the beginning to keep confidence with one another. This means that all that is said in the group stays in the group. Nothing that is said in the group meeting may be mentioned to anyone else, ever. No group member should ever hear something he or she said during a meeting outside the context of the group. Confidentiality within the Covenant Discipleship group helps to build trust and deepens the level of accountability and sharing.

**Catechesis: Question and Answer**

“The most important reason for the sharing of leadership is that the format of the group meeting is what the early church called *catechesis*, a process of questions and answers. In other words, the distinctive dynamic of covenant discipleship is a dialogue between the leader and each member of the group. This is how the primitive Christian community taught its new members and its children: the *catechist* was the questioner, and the learners were called *catechumens.* To this day in a number of denominations, learning one’s *catechism* is still the first step toward being accepted into full church membership.

“Of course, cont content of the catechesis in covenant discipleship groups is practical rather than doctrinal. But the method is the same, and it is a good one. It means that important aspects of Christian discipleship are first of all agreed and written into the covenant. Then the leader appointed for the week voices them and asks each member to do likewise. In this way the axioms of living a Christian life are written, heard, and spoken.

“A good illustration of this dynamic is what happens in an airplane cockpit before takeoff. There is a basic checklist—so basic that most pilots prior know it backwards. Yet the routine is established. However well they know these basics, the pilots go through them, one by one. They read them out to each other, they physically check that each control is properly set, and they say out loud that they have made the check. The procedure is rudimentary yet very necessary, for human error is always a real possibility.

“How much more, then, should Christians do the same for their discipleship. After all, serving Jesus Christ in the world is the most responsible duty assigned to human beings in this world. It surely merits meticulous checking, for human error is an ever-present possibility” – from *Covenant Discipleship* by David Lowes Watson (pages 145-6).

**Recommended Resources**

*Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* by David Lowes Watson is an essential resource for congregational leaders and Covenant Discipleship group members. The first half of the book is a brief review of the theological, biblical, and historic foundations for CD groups. Part Two is a practical guide for organizing a Covenant Discipleship group, writing a covenant of discipleship, leading a weekly meeting, and answering common questions and objections. Ideally, everyone in a CD group should have a copy of this book. They will find it to be a practical and useful resource.

*Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* by David Lowes Watson is written for pastors and other congregational leaders. Watson describes the nature of the congregation and how Covenant Discipleship fits into a disciple-making system. This book is an essential resource because it provides the step-by-step process for introducing Covenant Discipleship to a congregation and the process for supporting and sustaining the ministry over time. This is a good book for Church Councils and pastors to read and study together.

Both books are available from Cokesbury and at Amazon.com.

We’re all familiar with AA and NA and other similar 12-step programs. What is step one in each of them? The admission (we would call it a confession) that we can’t do it alone. It goes something like this:

“We admit that we are powerless over alcohol—that our lives have become unmanageable.”

Well, accountable discipleship begins with a very similar step one: The admission that we’ve tried it on our own long enough; and we’re now ready to surrender to God’s gracious initiatives in our lives.