

New Member/ New Disciple Orientation



#SEE ALL THE PEOPLE

“We cannot disciple people that we are not in relationship with. Discipleship begins with relationship.”

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This booklet is a companion piece to:

Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations

by Rev. Junius B. Dotson

Notes for Leaders

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God . . . – ACTS 20:28 (ESV¹)

The ultimate goal for this resource is not merely membership, but intentional discipleship. Broken into four sessions, this resource will cover *Our Wesleyan Heritage*, *Grace and Discipleship*, *Our Wesleyan Ways*, and *Living Out Discipleship*. This fourth session offers guiding questions to help you build a session that is specific to your ministry context. It includes questions such as: “What is the history of this church or ministry setting? Why and when did ministry begin here? What does it mean to be a disciple in this ministry setting? Who are the key leaders and what do they do? What are some specific ways that I can serve here?”

As the leader, please take some time to think through and create this session, inviting appropriate leaders to answer these questions with you, and offering more specifics for the new members/new disciples concerning your ministry context.

Items for leaders to think about are:

- How often will this orientation be offered?
- How will it be communicated to the congregation?
- Where will this orientation take place: church building, church leader’s home?
- Will refreshments be provided?
- Who are the key leaders within the church, such as the church council, trustees, SPRC, and others that you will want to invite?

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- Will you provide a booklet for each participant or encourage them to print it from the free pdf download on the Discipleship Ministries' website?
- Consider opening and closing in prayer, with special attention to prayer requests at the close of the session, encouraging all to pray for one another in between sessions.
- What will be desired next steps for these new disciples?
- How will you intentionally learn about the gifts of each participant and incorporate them into the life of your ministry setting?
- Will you connect them into a system of small groups once the orientation has been completed?
- Do they know who they can turn to for pastoral care?
- Do participants understand opportunities for giving and serving?
- Will they be able to identify ministry possibilities for their children and youth?

Please feel free to customize this resource to best serve your ministry setting.

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Introduction

Being a follower of Christ and part of The United Methodist Church is a gift and a privilege. There are more than twelve million United Methodists across the globe. Members of a United Methodist congregation, or people in other United Methodist ministry settings, are connected through shared ministries and institutional structures that continue the tradition of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This very resource, created by Discipleship Ministries (one of the boards and agencies of The United Methodist Church), was made possible by your church's and annual conference's generous contributions to *The World Service Fund*.² Thank you.

Through this *New Member/New Disciple Orientation*, you are invited to go deeper in your faith, to reflect on what it means to be a disciple, to consider what it means to be United Methodist, and what it means to put your faith into action, in service to your church and your community.

As you prepare to attend your first meeting, take some time to reflect on your journey seeking and following Jesus. Answer the following questions in preparation to share during the first session:

**What is your earliest memory of experiencing God's presence?
Share about when you first learned about Jesus.**

² Every church and annual conference contributes toward the greater church's ministries, enabling United Methodists to serve our connection, responding to disasters, missional needs, and assisting local churches and annual conferences.

What led you to this moment, as you sought to become a new member and disciple in this church?

What is your religious background (if any)? Did you grow up in the church? What church/denomination? How familiar are you with The United Methodist Church?

What do you like best about this church? How has it helped you grow as a disciple?

Session 1: Our Wesleyan Heritage

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 undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

– JOHN WESLEY (from ‘Thoughts Upon Methodism’)

When Wesley penned these words, he was expressing his fear that someday the people called Methodists might lose the power that was driving the Methodist movement; that Methodists might forget why the movement started in the first place; that we would forget what we believed and why we believed it; that we might lose the spirit behind all that we do and say.

So how did this movement start, and why was it so influential?

The Methodist movement traces its origins to John and Charles Wesley during the early eighteenth century. While studying at Oxford, John and Charles began meeting in a small group that was insultingly referred to as the “Bible moths,” “the holy club,” or “Methodists.” The brothers both became members and priests in the Church of England and briefly served as missionaries in Georgia. They went with the hope of sharing the gospel with the Native Americans in North America. They returned to England, spiritually discouraged, but ever growing in their understanding of discipleship and social holiness. It was in Georgia that John Wesley’s beliefs concerning the immorality of the slave trade began to develop, and it was on the return boat ride to England, which experienced frightening storms, where Wesley witnessed the faith of the Moravians, challenging his own sense of personal salvation and purpose. After this trip, on May 24, 1738, John experienced a new awakening of grace at a group meeting on Aldersgate Street in London.

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

(The Works of John Wesley, XVIII, 250)

Following this experience, Wesley began preaching with more emphasis on grace, and he began to preach to people who were outside the church—to those on the streets, in prisons; to miners, farmers, and others. Due in part to the need to raise funds for ministry and as a response to pastoral care, John began grouping people into small groups (bands, classes, and societies) where participants learned more about what it meant to be a disciple and to hold one another accountable for growth and application of their faith in all areas of their lives. One of the regular questions they would ask and share within the group was “How is it with your soul?” Wesley would later refer to these groups focusing on “holiness of heart and life” which he hoped would lead disciples toward societal transformation. Thus, the Methodist movement began!

And what an influential movement it was! As revolutions swept across the world during this time, England remained fairly stable. Many historians now agree that the stability experienced in England was in large part due to the Methodist movement. When other countries were struggling with the large discrepancies between those who have and those who have not, Methodism had begun to address the spiritual and physical health of all people. During this time, Methodists put their faith into action by clothing and feeding prisoners, educating poor children, offering medicine and food to the poor, helping to pay the debts of those in prison, organizing societies for the unemployed, and teaching about money management and general holy living. The Methodist movement and Wesley’s rule to “do all the good you can” significantly improved the lives of the poor in England, elevating many into the middle class. The Methodist movement also influenced the wealthy, encouraging them to do their part to improve the plight of all people. The morals expressed in the Methodist movement encouraged honesty in business and politics, and it was said that bribes and corruption throughout England decreased. What if we as disciples and Methodists renewed our focus on such ways of being?

What then is religion? It is happiness in God, or in the knowledge and love of God. It is 'faith working by love,' producing righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.

(The Works of the Rev. John Wesley edited by Thomas Jackson; XIII, 132)

Wesleyan Way of Life

United Methodists draw on John Wesley's guidance to the early Methodist class meetings as beneficial advice for faithful living today. Wesley gave the groups three overarching rules, referred to as the *Three General Rules*, to help participants be disciplined in Christian living. *The Three General Rules* are: Do no harm, Do good, and Attend to the ordinances of God.³ While those three rules were not intended to be rules as we might think of rules today, they remain helpful guidelines for living a disciplined Wesleyan way of life.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral⁴

For United Methodists, a thinking faith has always been linked with faith in action. This is vital as we seek to be faithful members and disciples of Christ. Four particular sources are often referred to by John Wesley: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason.

SCRIPTURE

Wesley held Scripture to be the most important for guiding our thinking and Christian practice. Wesley believed that because the Bible serves as the primary source of Christian knowledge and experience, God's ongoing work of redeeming the world shapes and becomes the overarching story of our lives. When we read Scripture, we read more than historical encounters with God. We encounter the God of history. We are invited to ask how these stories of old interact with our stories. How does the God that moved in particular ways in the past, still move in our lives today?

³ These are expanded in the next section under Means of Grace in Discipleship.

⁴ The phrase Wesleyan Quadrilateral, or Methodist Quadrilateral, was coined by twentieth-century American Methodist scholar Albert C. Outler. It is credited to John Wesley as a method for theological reflection.

TRADITION

Perhaps Christian tradition is best understood as family history. Much more than mere traditionalism, we believe God's Holy Spirit has been at work, inspiring humans since the beginning of time. As we are looking for direction into our own lives, we are invited through Christian tradition to re-read and reflect upon the contributions of those who have gone before us. Each generation faces new challenges and adds to the growing body of writings – the growing Christian tradition. We therefore value the tradition that has much to teach us in how we continue to encounter God's active presence seeking the redemption of the world today.

EXPERIENCE

As we continue to experience God's gracious presence in our lives, it also informs our beliefs and practice. Christian experience is not limited to our encounters with God, but is enhanced by experiences with other Christians, which helps us more fully understand the depth of God's love.

REASON

United Methodists believe in a thinking faith; we are not asked to leave our brains at the door as we enter discussions around faith and practice. Reason, thinking, or intellect, is a God-given gift. And although our reasoning is not perfect, reason aids us in understanding Scripture, tradition, and experience as we engage our faith in the community where we live.

* * * * *

Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength.

(United Methodist Hymnal, vii)

Wesleyan Way Through Music

Music has been a vital part of the Methodist movement from the beginning. John Wesley's brother, Charles, wrote thousands of hymns that taught Methodists to learn their faith as they sang it. More than

just good poetry, the hymns sung by the early Methodists were a way to express and teach Methodist theology.

Music has been a vital part of the Methodist movement from the beginning. John Wesley's brother, Charles, wrote thousands of hymns (including "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing") that taught Methodists to learn their faith as they sang it. That is why the Wesley's encouraged all persons to sing all the verses of the hymns. More than just good poetry, the hymns sung by the early Methodists were a way to express and teach Methodist doctrine and understanding of salvation (look up and reflect on the lyrics to And Can It Be as an example – UMH 363). Consider these instructions offered by John Wesley, included at the beginning of our United Methodist Hymnal:

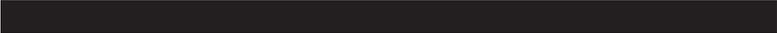
DIRECTIONS FOR SINGING

- I. Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.
- II. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.
- III. Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.
- IV. Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.
- V. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
- VI. Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leader voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawing way naturally steals on all who

are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

- VII. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.⁵

How often do we “sing spiritually . . . with an eye to God”? When was the last time you paid close attention to the words that you were singing and their meaning for your life? There is something powerful in singing a song well and with others in community that can move us beyond ourselves. Singing, with the intention suggested here, has the potential to move and shape our hearts and draw us closer to God. In the early 19th century, the Methodist produced numerous hymn books and were so notorious for their singing that they were referred to as the “shouting Methodist.” Music is still a vital part of worship and intentional discipleship in United Methodist congregations across our connection.



Take a Moment

1. What elements of our Methodist heritage speak to you?
2. What do you think about the Three General Rules? How would you articulate these rules for today?
3. What is your favorite hymn or praise song, and why? How does it shape your theology?
4. Use the Wesleyan Quadrilateral together in your group to look at a current topic of interest.

⁵ *United Methodist Hymnal*, VII.

Session 2: Grace & Discipleship

And at the same time that we are justified, yes, in that very moment, sanctification begins. In that instant we are 'born again,' 'born from above,' 'born of the Spirit.' There is a real as well as relative change. We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel the 'love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us,' producing love to all humankind, and more especially to the children of God, expelling the love of the world, the love of pleasure, of ease, of honor, of money; together with pride, anger, self-will, and every other evil disposition – in a word, a changing the 'earthly, sensual, devilish' mind into 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus.'

(John Wesley: Sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation"⁶)

Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love - love expelling sin and governing both the heart and life of a child of God. The Refiner's fire purges out all that is contrary to love...

(*The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* edited by Thomas Jackson; XII, 432)

Prevenient Grace

As United Methodists, we believe God is actively pursuing us, even before we are aware of who God is or what God is like. Scripture reveals to us that God's nature is love⁷ and that God desires to be in covenant relationship with us. More specifically, God is pursuing an abundant, life-giving, eternal relationship with each person. One of the places in Scripture that makes this clear is in Jesus' parable found in Luke 15, most often referred to as the parable of the prodigal son. Prodigal, meaning reckless, can be applied to all three

⁶ John Wesley, Sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (1765) I.4 (Works, 2:158).

⁷ 1 John 4:8, 16.

of the main characters in the story. The younger son is reckless with the inheritance he receives from his father. The father is also reckless in displaying his love for his son who has shamed the father (and the community) by asking for his inheritance before his father's death and then squandering it. We also see the father's love in watching for and greeting the son before anyone else. The father also displays a reckless love for the older son by leaving the party in an attempt to invite the older son to celebrate the young son, who was feared dead, but returned alive (what was lost is now found — Luke 15:32).

We call this understanding of grace, *prevenient grace*. "Prevenient" simply means, "that which comes before." Our salvation journey begins not with us, but with God. Much as we see in any healthy relationship, two parties must be active; there is usually one who initiates the relationship and one who responds. Prevenient grace helps us understand that it is God who initiates the relationship with us; and then awakened by God's grace, we are invited to respond.

Justifying Grace

Although the prodigal younger son upon his return prepares a confession to recite to his father (which he does not finish),⁸ it is ultimately the work of the reckless (prodigal) love of the father that restores the younger son. The father runs (which would have been a sign of indignity for a man of his status and age) to embrace the son. The father hugs and kisses the son as signs of reconciliation. The father restores the son by putting symbols of the father's household on him (ring, robe, and sandals).

This parable illustrates that being a Christian is ultimately about being restored by the grace of God.⁹ More than right beliefs or doing specific acts or having certain feelings, being justified before God rests on the secure promise of God's grace. This is not to suggest that our beliefs are unimportant (they are important!); or that our faith should not reveal itself in right actions (it should!); or that emotions are completely irrelevant (they can be misleading!). Through a saving

⁸ Luke 15.

⁹ See Ephesians 2:8-9.

relationship with the Triune God, we trust what God has done for us through his Son Jesus and that God's ongoing presence (Holy Spirit) empowers us to be faith-filled followers.

The word "justification" is probably more familiar to us than the word "prevenient." We might think of justified margins as a layout option for a document, or we might conceive of being justified in a belief or in regard to an action. When Abram trusted God, even though there was almost no indication that God's promise of an abundant inheritance would come to fruition, God *justified* Abram or counted him as righteous.¹⁰ In the work of justifying grace, God restores us into right relationship. When we experience justifying grace, we trust that God, through Jesus Christ, has forgiven our sins and that we can be freed from the guilt of sin. Having been freed and made right with God, no power on earth, or even death itself, can separate us from God's love.¹¹

Sanctifying Grace

Returning to our parable, we notice that when the father prods his older son to join the celebration, the father reminds him, "all that I have is yours." Our relationship with God is not merely transactional (I believe in God; God grants me ____). God desires that we walk in the fullness of love. This happens as we allow God's grace to lead us into deeper union with the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If justification is the work that God does for us, sanctification, also referred to as Christian perfection, is the work of God within us. However we understand our experience with justifying grace (occurring at a certain time or as a gradual realization), sanctification is the ongoing work of God as we grow deeper in our love for God and deeper in our love for our neighbors. One of the most distinctly Wesleyan ideas is that Christian perfection ought to be strived for in this life and can be attained. For those wary of seeing themselves on a journey toward Christian perfection, they might think of it more as a

¹⁰ Romans 4.

¹¹ Romans 8:38-39.

goal they are working toward. If you are not going on to perfection, what are you going on to? Discipleship then, is a lifelong journey of growing closer and closer to Christ by the grace of God. John Wesley's belief in attaining Christian perfection builds on such passages as Leviticus 11:45, where God commands the people, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" and Matthew 5:48 "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Wesley would often refer to the goal of the movement as moving our communities and our world toward *social holiness*: the full presence of God and the revealing and following of God's will in all areas of our lives.

Means of Grace

United Methodists understand grace to be more than God's unmerited favor. Grace is also God's power at work within us, increasing our capacity to love God and others. Thus, we encounter God's grace that grows into deeper discipleship through *holy habits* or *means of grace*.

Just as diet and exercise affect our physical and emotional health, so practicing the means of grace and other spiritual disciplines positively affects our spiritual lives. We can survive with poor diet and a lack of exercise, but we flourish when our diet is healthy and exercise is intentional. Just as implementing a schedule of regular exercise and healthy eating habits can be difficult, carving out intentional time for spiritual disciplines can be difficult. Yet, it is in these activities that we expect to encounter God, find nourishment for our souls, and grow closer to Christ.

Within small groups or class meetings, Methodists were encouraged to follow and practice Wesley's *Three General Rules* on a daily basis.

1. **Do no harm** by avoiding evil of every kind
2. **Do good** as often as you can to as many as you can (to their bodies and to their souls)
3. **Practice the means of grace** taught to the disciples by Jesus.

During small-group meetings, participants were invited to give an account of where they had succeeded and experienced the fruit

and growth of practicing the means of grace, and where they had struggled. These means of grace can be further categorized into two types: *works of mercy* (outward) and *works of piety* (inward).

MEANS OF GRACE

Works of Mercy

- Feeding the hungry
- Clothing the naked
- Caring for the sick
- Visiting those in prison
- Sheltering the homeless
- Welcoming the stranger
- Peacemaking
- Serving the common good

Works of Piety

- Public worship of God
- Reading of God's word
- Holy Communion
- Family and private prayer
- Searching the Scriptures
- Fasting or abstinence
- Christian conferencing

Exploring Some Means of Grace

COMMUNITY/HOSPITALITY

Christianity is not a solitary religion. As we grow in discipleship, we must be engaged in the community in a way that works for the common good. Church communities should be learning to live as welcoming communities that embody holiness in all relationships. Your presence and participation in the life of the community matters! As a follower of Jesus, you are called to live and grow, assisting others in their growth in community.

PRAYER

Prayer can be thought of in many ways. Prayer might be thought of as simply talking with God. Another definition of prayer is intentionally being in the presence of God (words are not always necessary). Another way to think of prayer has to do with breathing. Just as God has breathed in us (Genesis 2), when we pray, we are returning God's very breath back in gratitude to God. Prayer can take many forms. Often, our prayers are intercessions for others in need. At other times, our prayers are praises of joy for healing or release.

Prayers can be quick thoughts murmured under the breath — called breath prayers. Many find the use of prewritten prayers or the Psalms helpful to find the words that express thoughts and emotions. Some find it beneficial to repeat a phrase, such as "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner," to focus their scattered minds on the presence of God. Christians have also used images or beads to help them focus on God's gracious presence. There are many postures of prayer, and each can be helpful, depending on our emotional state — standing in boldness, kneeling in submissiveness, or lying prostrate in humility. Whichever form prayer takes, prayer by nature puts us in a posture to be changed by God's grace.

STUDYING SCRIPTURE

Reading Scripture devotionally and with others is a primary way to encounter God. We see throughout Scripture God's aim to reconcile the community of believers to reflect God's image in a way that glorifies God in the world. Scripture is much more than an ancient document. It is God's living Word that invites us into a drama where God is at work in the world and inviting us to play important roles in building the kingdom of God. So when we read Scripture, we not only learn about the mighty acts of God done for the people of God and particularly through Jesus Christ, we also learn about us. We learn about our nature and our potential as the people of God called to embody God's presence in the world. Disciples read Scripture not merely for information but for transformation. We read with others in our church community who can help guide us and challenge our interpretations to gain a larger perspective on God's Word and to transform our lives. As we have time, we should read along with Christians from generations past who can challenge our culturally limited ways of thinking. Ultimately, we read to be drawn into the story and begin to live out the story in all our relationships. Specifically, we search for God, the author of this story, as we read.

HOLY COMMUNION

While some United Methodist churches take Communion once a month, there is a trend of churches taking the Lord's Supper each week. We encourage this trend. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, encouraged frequent Communion. In addition, the traditional fourfold pattern of worship for each Sunday (Gathering,

Reading Scripture and Proclamation, Lord's Supper, Benediction) encourages weekly Communion. The tradition of taking Communion only monthly began at a time when the ordained pastor could visit the church only once a month as part of a circuit of churches. If we believe the Lord's Supper is a means of encountering God's grace, we should take it as often as possible. Holy Communion reminds us that Jesus has given us a pattern for discipleship. Just as Jesus' body (represented in the broken bread) is broken for the world, so the body of Christ (the church) is to be broken in its service to God and for the world.

FASTING

Fasting is probably the least practiced and most misunderstood of all the means of grace. Our first reaction to fasting is often negative. Perhaps we have seen fasting misused by those trying to gain attention or have had to fast for a less than desirable medical procedure. Fasting is mostly associated with fasting from food. While this can be a beneficial practice, people can fast from things other than food. We can fast from relationships that hurt us or activities (hobbies, television, social media, etc.) that make it difficult for us to grow in our love for God. When we fast, we place our full reliance that our relationship with God is the sole source of true abundance and satisfaction for our souls. Fasting reminds us that we serve the creator, not the created. Practicing a fast from time to time can be a valuable way to grow in our relationship with God. If you decide to take up a fast, be smart about it; do not rush headlong into a weeklong fast from food. If you decide to try a food fast, try skipping one meal, or eat vegetarian dishes only. The important part is not what you fast from or even how long you fast, but rather on putting yourself in the best posture to hear from God.¹²

SMALL GROUPS

Another part of Jesus' ministry was sharing fellowship with sinners and saints alike. Participating in holy conferencing, or what today we often refer to as small groups, is an especially Wesleyan means of grace. As we mentioned earlier, The Methodist movement grew as people joined class meetings where they received support for growth

¹² Matthew 6.

as disciples. In these small groups (along with bands and select societies), early Methodists experienced nurture and accountability for living Jesus' *Great Commandment* to love God and love neighbor as one's self. Still today, small groups are essential for growing as disciples. Small groups are places where we learn, are nurtured, and challenged. They also provide opportunities for participants to serve together in mission.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

We find several lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament. Romans 12:4-8 mentions prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, aid, and mercy. Ephesians 4:11-12 notes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. 1 Corinthians also adds wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. There are at least a few take-a-ways from these lists. We note that not every list is the same, which probably indicates that these lists are not meant to be exhaustive. There are probably other gifts that are not mentioned here, such as hospitality, joyfulness, and others. No one individual should expect to have all or even most of these gifts; however, we probably all have more than one gift. Our areas of giftedness are not meant for our own exploration, but are meant for building up the kingdom. One way to discern your spiritual gifts is to ask those who know you best.

Baptism as the Foundation for Discipleship

Although our relationship with God is personal in the sense that we are each pursued by God and each must respond to the grace that we've been given, our relationship with God is not a private affair. God invites us into community, specifically into the baptized people of God. When we are baptized, we (or our guardian) are proclaiming to the community that we have been claimed by God, and we promise to live as one of the baptized. As we noted earlier, God is the initiator of this relationship. At our baptism, God is the main actor. God claims us as sons and daughters. Our baptism and the vows we undertake at baptism become the foundation for our life as a disciple. Not only does the baptized person (or the guardian) take vows, so too does the congregation. The congregation vows to

nurture the baptized, provide an example of the Christian life, and take necessary steps to guide the baptized into "the way that leads to life".¹³ Being baptized Christians is foundational to who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ and to being members of a local United Methodist church. (*See more about Baptism in Session 3.*)

What Is a Disciple?

Before we go further, it would be helpful to have a specific definition of disciple. In essence, disciples are those who love God and love neighbor.¹⁴ We will highlight two more definitions. The first is known as 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".¹⁵ Another definition, used in *Developing an Intentional Discipleship System* by Junius Dotson is, "A disciple is one who knows Christ, is growing in Christ, and sharing Christ" (25). The main element of a definition of disciple includes an ongoing commitment to growth in following Jesus. Some definitions focus on specific behaviors (attending worship, serving the community, and so on), while others focus on attitudes and characteristics (faithful, Christlike, and so on).

Take a moment to discuss how your ministry setting understands what it means to be a disciple.

In your church or ministry setting, you may have a particular way of understanding discipleship and how you put faith into action. In *Developing an Intentional Discipleship System*, we offer some basic elements that we believe are important for disciples. We encourage churches to take these basic ideas, and make them true for their context, changing the language as needed. Here we share that every disciple should be growing in the following areas:

¹³ *United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 40.

¹⁴ Mark 12:30-31.

¹⁵ Paragraph 1117, *Book of Discipline*.

Characteristics of a Disciple

- A disciple **worships**,
- Is part of a **community**,
- Commits to **spiritual formation or practices**,
- Is **generous, and serves**,
- Is seeking to be **Christ-like**.

Exploring Our “Why” for Following Jesus and Making Disciples

When Jesus was ascending, he gave his disciples what has been termed *The Great Commission*, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."¹⁶ This is also where the mission statement for The United Methodist Church is derived, "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,"¹⁷ Another understanding of Matthew 28:19-20 is, "As you are going, form disciples." Through our relationships with others, Jesus invites us to invite and help form others in his teaching, inviting others into the fullness of God's grace and to follow Jesus.

What is your “why” for following Jesus?

What is your “why” for making (forming) disciples?

As Simon Sinek points out in his book, *Start with Why*, in order to do anything with intention, we begin with understanding the purpose or “why.” To intentionally grow as disciples and to intentionally invite others to become disciples necessitates that we are clear about “why” we are following Jesus.

¹⁶ Matthew 28:19-20.

¹⁷ *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, paragraph 120.



Take a Moment

1. Reflect together about what a disciple looks like in your ministry setting. What are the important characteristics of a disciple of Jesus Christ?
2. What *means of grace* speak to you?
3. What *means of grace* challenge you?
4. Pick one or two that you would like to try out and practice on a regular basis.
5. What difference has being a follower of Christ made in your life?

Session 3:

Our Wesleyan Ways

Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

– Colossians 2:6-7 (NASB)¹⁸

Baptism in The UMC

For United Methodists, baptism marks a milestone in our discipleship formation. *The United Methodist Hymnal* notes, "The Baptismal Covenant is God's word to us, proclaiming our adoption by grace, and our word to God promising our response of faith and love" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 32). In baptism, we are claimed by God, and we make vows in response to God's claim on our lives. In baptism, though we might not hear an audible voice as Jesus did at his baptism, God speaks words of acceptance over us as adopted children of God. For our participation in the baptismal covenant, we, or guardians on our behalf, vow or promise to faithfully serve God empowered by the Holy Spirit and the church. Similar to how Jesus' ministry began in earnest following his baptism, so, too, does baptism mark the beginning of our lives as beloved disciples. By virtue of our baptism, God has called us and God has empowered us to witness to God's kingdom in the world.¹⁹

¹⁸ Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

¹⁹ For more on United Methodist beliefs about baptism, see the free downloadable PDF resource for small-group study – *The Meaning of Baptism*, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-meaning-of-baptism-in-the-united-methodist-church>.

For more about infant baptism and preparing parents or guardians to bring their children for baptism, we recommend the affordable resource, *Baptism: Understanding God's Gift* by Sarah Webb Phillips and L. Edward Phillips (Discipleship Resources, 2013).

Our belief in God's prevenient and empowering grace is one reason United Methodists practice infant baptism. The practice of infant baptism dates back to the early church, as is noted in Acts 2:38-41; 16:15, 33. United Methodists join other denominations in recognizing that in baptism God is the primary actor and that we are all infants dependent upon God's love and grace. We also recognize that baptism takes place among the gathered faithful who promise to nurture the baptized in the faith and provide an example for life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Holy Communion in The UMC

For United Methodists, the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, is more than a remembrance of Jesus' Last Supper. The litany recited in *The United Methodist Hymnal* reminds us to give thanks for all that God has done for us, summons us to be mindful of God's presence in our lives today, and looks forward to the heavenly banquet that awaits when the kingdom comes in fullness. During Holy Communion, we encounter the living, grace-filled presence of the risen Christ. Thus, United Methodists practice an "open table," believing that the ultimate host of this table is the risen Christ. An open table means one need not be a member of the local congregation to partake in Communion. Rather, Holy Communion "is open to those who come to seek Christ's grace, who are moved by the Holy Spirit. The Table is open to any who honestly respond to the invitation as given in the ritual."²⁰

Another important theme within the experience of Holy Communion is reconciliation. The litany reminds us that before we come to the table, we are to be at peace with others in the community. Additionally, because of our experience of being reconciled with God, this meal propels us to engage our community and work for reconciliation in the world.

²⁰ *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*, by Gayle Carlton Felton (Discipleship Resources: Nashville 2005), p. 11.

Confirmation in The UMC

Confirmation (or the making firm of) is the intentional time for confirmands to personally respond and claim the promises made by parents or guardians at their baptism. During confirmation classes, the group will focus on the doctrines of the church and the Christian life. Confirmation, customarily offered for those who are in middle school, is open to all people seeking a closer relationship with God, those desiring to know more about church membership, and those wishing to become professing members of the church. During a confirmation, those baptized as infants profess their faith, receive the laying on of hands (to symbolize the empowerment of the Holy Spirit), and might also receive the sign of the cross on their forehead with oil.

Membership in The UMC

To officially be received as a member of a local United Methodist Church, candidates for membership will answer affirmatively the membership questions as listed in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Paragraph 217, p. 157), also located in the *United Methodist Hymnal*, "Baptismal Covenant" (pp. 34-38ff).

1. Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of your sin?
2. Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?
3. Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?
4. According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives?
5. As members of Christ's universal church, will you be loyal to the The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?

6. As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?

A few interesting points about membership:

- The first four questions for membership are also the baptismal vows.
- If a person coming forward for membership has never been baptized, that person should be baptized prior to or simultaneously as the service for membership.
- When a candidate for membership transfers from another Christian denomination, the first four questions are not asked again.
- Because as United Methodists we believe that baptism is the symbol of what God does in our lives (not what we do), United Methodist recognize all protestant and Catholic baptisms, and we do not re-baptize. Because we believe that baptism is a symbol of what God does, to re-baptize would be saying that God did not do God's work correctly the first time. We do on occasion offer reaffirmation of our baptismal vows, and in fact, whenever a disciple is received into membership or baptized, the congregation is invited to remember and renew their baptismal covenant.

Responding to God's Grace

As we see in these questions, we respond to God's grace by renouncing, rejecting, and repenting. When we affirm this vow, we are renouncing our small-minded and self-seeking ways and seeking to live in harmony with God's values. We are striving to align our values and virtues first and foremost with God's ways for living ("Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"²¹). This is no small vow. All other allegiances should become relativized to being a citizen of God's realm. Additionally, we are committing to reject all things that come against God's values. In rejecting self-

²¹ Matthew 6:10.

seeking and the values of rival powers, we are setting our internal compass to be trained and formed in ways that keep us faithful to God's ways.²²

In these membership vows, we also vow to repent from sin. Repentance is not merely a one-time act. More than feeling bad about things we have done or left undone, repentance is taking on a pattern of life where we surrender old self-seeking habits for habits that tune us to God's ways. Our response to renounce, reject, and repent requires a total shift in perspective.

Accepting God's liberating grace is at the heart of the second question. Because of the mighty acts of our heavenly Father in Jesus Christ, we can experience freedom or liberation from powers that separate us from God.²³ We resist evil, injustice, and oppression because of the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us.²⁴ Our resistance to these forces is not a passive activity. We are joining in God's work of reconciling the world, which is actively seeking to free people from the forces that bind them, so that they are freed to experience God's grace and love, and abundant life.



Take a Moment

1. When and where were you baptized? Who was there? Consider asking them about what they remember about that moment.
2. Which membership vow seems most confusing? Which vow do you have the most questions about?
3. When you are asked to participate in the life of the church by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness, which one is most difficult for you and why? How might you grow in this area? How might others assist you?

²² Matthew 6:33.

²³ 2 Corinthians 3:17.

²⁴ Acts 1:8.

Session 4: Living Out Discipleship

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'

– Matthew 9:35-38

This fourth session offers guiding questions to help you build a session that is specific to your ministry context.

What is the history of this church or ministry setting? Why and when did ministry begin here? (Consider including a timeline and gathering stories.)

What does it mean to be a disciple in this ministry setting?

What is the vision/purpose of this church?

Who are the key leaders and what do they do?

What are some specific ways that I can serve here?

What excites you about being part of this place of ministry?

For Further Study

- *A Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley's General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living* by Kevin M. Watson.
- *A Pocket Story of John Wesley* (Discipleship Resources).
- *The Radical Wesley* by Howard Snyder.
- *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* by Ken Collins.
- *The Class Meeting* by Kevin Watson (Seedbed Publishing, 2013).
- *Disciples Making Disciples: A Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups and Class Leaders* by Steve Manskar (Discipleship Resources, 2016).
- *Engaging Your Community: A Guide to Seeing All the People* by Junius Dotson (Discipleship Ministries).
- *Five Means of Grace: Experience God's Love the Wesleyan Way* by Elaine A. Heath (Abingdon Press, 2017).
- *I Belong to God! An Intergenerational Study of Baptism in the United Methodist Church* by Carolyn K. Tanner.
- *The Means of Grace: Traditioned Practice in Today's World* by Andrew C. Thompson.

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- *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville 2016).
- *Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations* by Junius Dotson (Discipleship Ministries).
- *Disciples Making Disciples: A Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups and Class Leaders* by Steve Manskar (Discipleship Resources, 2016).
- *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* by Gayle Carlton Felton (Discipleship Resources, 2014) — also includes John Wesley's sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion" and other resources.
- *The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church* by E. Byron Anderson (Discipleship Resources, 2016).
- *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* by Simon Sinek (Portfolio, 2009).
- *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville 1989).
- *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* edited by Thomas Jackson (Zondervan, 1872).



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

The United Methodist Church

This and many other See All The People resources are
available for download and purchase at:

<https://store.umcdiscipleship.org>

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