

# Discipleship Covenants with Youth

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A member of Covenant United Methodist Church came to me one day to tell me something he saw at a neighboring church: a display of the faith statements of their confirmation class. We too asked our confirmation class to make faith statements, but we did not display them. As I thought about this suggestion, it occurred to me that the church that displayed these confirmation faith statements was a confessional church. It made sense to have their confirmation class make faith statements and display them for all the congregation to see. They were very much alike and none of them strayed from the congregation's confession of faith.

About the same time I was part of a small group studying David Lowes Watson's book, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*. It occurred to me that what was needed was not a simple statement of belief, but a discipleship covenant of intent. Instead of asking our youth to make faith statements, I asked them to make discipleship covenants. Using the clauses from David Sutherland's book, *Together in Love: Covenant Discipleship with Youth* (Discipleship Resources), I asked each young person to make a personal covenant. After all the youth created their covenants, I organized the youth into four groups, each with an adult leader. Each group created a discipleship covenant. Finally, I asked all four groups to make a group covenant. The youth entered their individual and group covenants into computers, printed them, then laminated them.

We did the above at the end of the confirmation year, which means that the groups didn't have time to operate as covenant discipleship groups. This year we have decided to make covenant discipleship an integral part of our confirmation program. From September through December we formed our groups, with an adult meeting with each group. The adults took turns leading the class sessions each Wednesday evening. We studied four sessions on who Jesus is; four sessions on the Holy Spirit, Spiritual Fruit, and Spiritual Gifts; and four sessions on finding our ministries within the body of Christ, the church.

In January we created covenants and began to meet as covenant discipleship groups. Both in the twelve class sessions and in the covenant groups, we have interacted with youth. In two of the sessions, a panel of members of our adult covenant groups described how they became Christians, found their ministries with the church, and now continue them in accountable discipleship. The youth were invited to ask questions of the panel members. We were all surprised at the maturity and depth of their questions and how easy it was for them to dialogue with adults.

As a way of celebrating the creation of the group covenants, we had a special service of Holy Communion where the youth dedicated their covenants to the Lord. For the rest of the year, they will meet weekly for an hour in their groups to experience the method of Methodism and to hold one another accountable in love.

In addition to the classes on Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church, we include field trips to places such as a Jewish synagogue, churches of other denominations, and the local community soup kitchen, Loaves and Fishes. For the past seven years, we have also taken our youth on mission workcamps to discover what it means to express compassion and to sensitize ourselves to justice issues. Whether this will be more effective than the old ways remains to be seen, but, most important, we hope to teach a balanced method of fulfilling Christian discipleship.

In the past we taught twelve sessions on The United Methodist Church (history, beliefs, organization, practices). Now, we have decided to let the youth experience the genius of our Wesleyan heritage. Wesley called the Class Meetings the genius or sinew (muscle) of Methodism. By giving the youth an opportunity to experience covenant discipleship groups, we are helping them experience the method in Methodism, which is far more important than a mere study of our history.

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