

The Pastor and Covenant Discipleship

James T. Reuteler

The Participation of the Pastor

The pastor's involvement in a Covenant Discipleship group is essential. This participation demonstrates to the whole congregation the importance of CD groups. Members of the congregation begin to see CD groups as a foundational ministry of the church. They realize that it is worthy of their support and involvement.

If the pastor does not take the lead, most members find it much easier to serve on a committee conducting business-as-usual rather than participating in a CD group and witnessing to Jesus Christ in the world.

The Central Importance of Covenant Discipleship

John Wesley called the class meeting the *sinew* (connective tissue) of Methodism.¹ One of the reasons given for the demise of the class meeting is: "We have become a Church." Methodism began as a renewal movement within the Church of England. If we have become a church, then we need the class meeting more than ever.

Sometimes it helps to see this need in another tradition. One of the Roman Catholic theologians that influenced me was Juan Luis Segundo. When he wrote about renewing the Roman Catholic Church in South America, he sounded to me very much like an early

One way the pastor can lead is to regularly conclude his/her sermon with an invitation to join a Covenant Discipleship group. This does not mean people will always respond, but by making this invitation, the pastor emphasizes the central importance of Covenant Discipleship to the church's mission and ministry.

Methodist. Segundo placed a great deal of emphasis on the nature of the church as a community. He admitted that it was badly in need of renewal,² and made three suggestions for restoring community to the church:

1. The church must become a "base community."

The primary trait of a base community is that it constitutes a group. A group is "composed of a restricted number of people who have relationships with each other."

2. Base communities become "gospel creators" rather than "gospel consumers." Segundo explained the difference: A group, because of its size, must confront, debate, and transform what it receives. A large group can simply listen to the gospel reading. A small group of people must discuss it together, reflect on it, compare it with real life, and see what import a gospel passage has for their own concrete existence as individuals, families, and members of a society.³ Community is jeopardized when people become "gospel consumers" (passive objects). It is encouraged where people become "gospel creators" (thinking subjects).

3. Two words seem to be an indispensable part of any Christian community: sharing and giving. The Christian community must be one of mutual aid where people practice the dimensions of real encounter and love; but it must also become a self-giving community that exercises service to the rest of humanity. "If a community did not have this goal that transcends itself, it would rapidly run down." Thus a true Christian church is a base community in which the gospel is creatively read and re-expressed in liturgy and life.⁴

What Segundo said about the base community is what the Class Meeting and its modern counterpart, the Covenant Discipleship group, are all about. It helps to hear this truth expressed through another tradition. Covenant discipleship is not a peripheral ministry the pastor can watch from a distance. Not only must the pastor participate, he/she must lead the congregation away from "gospel consumption" into "gospel creation." We must move away from the model of conducting business-as-usual to forming disciples through small groups.

Restoring the Invitation to Discipleship

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Covenant Discipleship to the church's mission and ministry. Such an invitation lies squarely within the Wesleyan tradition. Research done by Thomas Albin (dean of the Upper Room Chapel) on the spiritual lives of 555 early British Methodists shows the following:

1. According to their own testimony, only one-fourth experienced new birth in the context of preaching.
2. Three-fourths needed the nurture of the society, classes, and bands, and spent an average of 2.3 years in this nurturing process before experiencing what they themselves identified as new birth.

The Class Leaders and fellow class members were the primary influences. Because of this valuable truth, Methodist preaching ended, not with an *altar call* and a count of the number of conversions, but with an announcement of where the local Methodist society met and an invitation to join a Class Meeting.⁵ This is the inescapable responsibility of the pastor today. The pastor must lead by participating in a Covenant Discipleship group and inviting others to participate.

Covenant Discipleship is not a peripheral ministry of the church. It is a foundational ministry. If it does not exist in some form, it is the pastor's responsibility to initiate it and to participate in it. This is one task that cannot be delegated.

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- 1 David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998), p. 53.
- 2 Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, John Drury, Trans. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974), p. 81.
- 3 Segundo, *The Sacraments Today*, John Drury, Trans. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974), p. 32.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 34 and 39-40.
- 5 Theodore Runyan, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), p. 115.



CFAD Online

The Council for Accountable Discipleship has a new website:

<http://ozark.hendrix.edu/CFAD/>

Along with information about the Council, the site includes links to the

General Board of Discipleship's

Small Group Ministry pages and a list

of Accountable Discipleship Groups (Covenant Discipleship, Class Leaders, Sprouts and Branches) throughout the U.S. You can easily add your church's groups to the list and learn about other groups in your area. Contact David Sutherland (sutherlandd@hendrix.edu) to share comments or questions.

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You and your church can help the global ministry of covenant discipleship grow by donating to the CFAD Watson Endowment. With your help, the Endowment will:

- Subsidize regional training workshops;
- Create a covenant discipleship network of congregations;
- Develop resources for promoting/teaching Christian formation through mutual accountability and support;
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Your tax-deductible gift of \$50, \$100, \$500, \$1000, or more will provide continuing support for forming faithful disciples of Jesus Christ through mutual accountability and support. Make your check payable to General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) and send it to Steve Manskar, General Board of Discipleship, PO Box 340003, Nashville, TN 37203-0003.