

CDQ

COVENANT DISCIPLESHIP QUARTERLY

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

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Restoring the Method to Methodism

James T. Reuteler

The United Methodist Church attracted me through a small group that called itself TNT, Twenty Not Thirty. The members of the group not only formed the core of a Sunday school class, but met every Thursday evening to nurture and encourage one another in their discipleship. Although their Thursday evening meetings were not called "class meetings" or covenant discipleship groups, they functioned as such. When I first joined the group, I was 23, about the same age as John Wesley when he decided no longer to be "half a Christian." Within three months I experienced an assurance of faith that not only involved me in a local congregation, but moved me eventually into the pastoral ministry.



A couple of years ago I read David Lowes Watson's book, *Covenant Discipleship*, and was reminded of that Thursday evening group that caused me to take Christian discipleship seriously. After reading Watson's book, I asked fifteen people at Covenant United Methodist Church to form three groups to study it. And I participated in one of them. After we finished our eight-week study, I asked for volunteers from the groups to tell the congregation about the impact the study had on them. What they shared was truly inspiring.

I asked our Administrative Council for permission to spend the summer visiting CD groups in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—sixteen in all. I observed how they functioned while people were busy with summer activities and vacations. The summer did take its toll; a number of the groups met with only two or three

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people present. I was amazed that they met at all, and I came away believing that covenant discipleship was indeed a way of putting the method back into Methodism.

While I was on the road visiting CD groups, I had time to do some serious reading. I decided to read David Lowes Watson's *Forming Disciples and Class Leaders*, Albert Outler's *John Wesley*, Ted Runyon's *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, Kenneth

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Kinghorn's *The Heritage of American Methodism*, and *The Story of Methodism* by Luccock and Hutchinson. I focused specifically on the religious societies, the holy club, and the class meetings. I became convinced that we have removed the method from Methodism. Watson calls us to restore the method to Methodism. I agree.

As fall came on, I asked our three groups to function as pilot groups, which they did. We all met together early in September, then began holding one another accountable and watching over one another in love. One group meets an hour a week. The other two groups meet every other week. It took us 2-4 sessions to create our covenants. The members of one of the groups included in their covenant the reading of the same Scriptures in their daily devotions. Their purpose was to be able to apply what they had read in their devotions to the acts of worship, compassion, and justice. Some of the first letters we read in our devotions included Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, James, the Letters of Peter, and the Letters of John and Jude. This exercise is not intended as a Bible study, but as a way to apply Scripture to the General Rule and its various components—an idea that seems to be working.

As our groups began functioning as CD groups, I took the time to attend the celebration and workshop on covenant discipleship at Duke University. I then took three members from our groups to southern Indiana for a one-day workshop with David Watson. The timing was perfect, as we had already read the literature and gained experience with the concept.

As the New Year began, I asked one of the group members to witness to the congregation on the first Sunday, after which I invited the congregation to commit themselves either to joining a group or praying for the groups. On Thursday evening of the following week, I asked the members of the three groups to be present to greet those who had committed themselves to joining a group. Several persons joined the three groups. We have a ways to go, but we are doing our best to restore the method to Methodism.

James T. Reuteler was pastor of Covenant United Methodist Church in Fond du Lac, WI, at the time of writing this article. His article, "Discipleship Covenants with Youth," appeared in the Summer 2001 CDQ. He has since retired and reports that the CD groups at Covenant are continuing under the new pastor. He now lives in Littleton, CO, and is looking for ways to work with CD groups.