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Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Robert L. Bruce

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The Class Meeting: Does Experiential Spiritual Formation Create Inviting Disciples?

By

Robert L. Bruce  
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

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Kevin M. Watson, PhD  
Project Consultant

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Jennifer R. Ayres, PhD  
Director of DMin Program

Candler School of Theology,  
Emory University

## **Abstract**

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This project seeks to discover if a modern adaptation of the Wesleyan class meeting will produce changes in thinking and behavior, especially in the willingness of the disciple to invite others into the community. Class meetings are experiential, transformational disciple formation as opposed to informational formation such as Bible Study or Sunday School. Disciples meet to share their lived experiences of God and as John Wesley commented “watch over one another in love.” Indeed, the results from the research do indicate the class meetings produce changes in behavior and thinking. These results should help a Pastor decide if class meetings would be effective in his/her context.

The Class Meeting: Does Experiential Spiritual Formation Create Inviting Disciples?

By

Robert L. Bruce  
Georgia State University, B.S., 1978  
Candler School of Theology, MDiv, 2007

Project Consultant: Kevin M. Watson, PhD

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## Introduction

The church is built upon invitation. It did not spring from Jesus' head like Athena from Zeus. It was formed by Jesus' followers inviting others to follow Jesus. In The Gospel of John 1:35-42 we read how the first disciples were invited by Jesus to "come and see." An unnamed disciple (maybe John?) and Andrew follow Jesus after John the Baptist's proclamation of Jesus as the Lamb of God. Jesus turns and invites them to come and see. The next day he invites Philip to come and see, and Philip invites Nathaniel to come and see. In the meantime, Andrew invites his brother Simon.

Thus, the first community to surround Jesus was formed by invitation. When they said yes to the invitation, Jesus continued to invite them into a deeper relationship. For John, conversion is not just about knowledge, it is about experiencing Jesus personally.<sup>1</sup> They lived with, learned from, and experienced Jesus on a personal level. Their faith grew experientially. The 12, led by Jesus, was the original "small group." Jesus' teaching certainly played a role in their transformation, but the experience of living with Jesus in community and then encountering the risen Christ produced the transformation. Indeed, Rabbis<sup>2</sup> knew that their halakah was<sup>3</sup> better caught than taught. They knew, as Jesus did, that the best learning was experiential in a community. It was relationship that was formed in community and continued to be formed in

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<sup>1</sup> Gary M. Burge, John, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars disagree on the use of the title Rabbi. Although there are recorded uses of the title before 70CE, calling Jesus a Rabbi is a bit anachronistic. However, Jesus' behavior in training his disciples is similar to the rabbinic movement after 70CE.

<sup>3</sup> Jewish rabbinic law, lit. "going [on the way]." Rabbinic law can derive directly from the Torah, can be interpreted from the Bible, or can be passed down in the rabbinic community as "Oral Law." Thus, Jesus' halakah was his interpretation of Torah. Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob, ed. "Halakah." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009

community. One result of this experience is that followers invited others to follow.

John Wesley believed the class meetings to be essential to forming community.

Likewise, if you would avoid schism, observe every rule of the Society, and of the Bands, for conscience' sake. Never omit meeting your Class or Band; never absent yourself from any public meeting. These are the very sinews of our Society; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community. As one saith, 'That part of our economy, the private weekly meetings for prayer, examination, and particular exhortation, has been the greatest means of deepening and confirming every blessing that was received by the word preached, and of diffusing it to others, who could not attend the public ministry; whereas, without this religious connexion and intercourse, the most ardent attempts, by mere preaching, have proved of no lasting use.'<sup>4</sup>

Wesley clearly says it is not preaching that produces community and disciples, it occurs in experiential groups: bands and classes. The gospel is better caught than taught. Indeed, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues along these same lines in *Life Together* that a church cannot exist without community and inviting others into the community. "Help must come from the outside; and it has come and comes daily and anew in the Word of Jesus Christ, bringing us redemption, righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. But God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others."<sup>5</sup> Further, "At the same time, this also clarifies that the goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation."<sup>6</sup> This would be for Christians in the community and inviting others into the fellowship. Thus, churches should be creating communities of invitation not just existing as preaching houses.

We just saw how this idea of disciples who invite goes back to Jesus himself and formed the

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition., vol. 11 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 433.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

church. However, the decline we are seeing in the American church would indicate, for the most part, that churches are not creating disciples that invite. The result has been declining, inwardly focused churches. The lack of creating disciples who invite has produced a church that has lost connections to her community. This problem of inwardly focused churches is old news. There are many books identifying this problem, supporting the argument that the outwardly focused, mission driven church is the solution. This outward focus, however, is not limited to just social justice activities. In addition to social justice activities, churches should practice a culture of invitation<sup>7</sup> or what United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase identifies as a characteristic of a fruitful disciple: Radical Hospitality.<sup>8</sup> Radical hospitality is defined as “out of genuine love for Christ and for others, [disciples] take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the Body of Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

From the beginning, our churches were meant to be communities of invitation. But, how can churches produce disciples that invite? One of those solutions is small groups, in particular John Wesley’s class meeting. Many believe that Wesley’s small groups contributed as much or more to the growth of the Methodist movement as Wesley’s preaching. As we can see above, Wesley believed this as well. Kevin Watson writes, “A strong case can be made that the Class Meeting was the single most important factor to the growth of early Methodism and the retention of converts within Methodism.”<sup>10</sup> These groups were not informational but transformational groups “focused on helping people come to know Jesus Christ and learn how to give every part of their lives to loving and serving Christ.”<sup>11</sup> These groups were not Bible studies or Sunday School

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<sup>7</sup> James Emery White, “Why You’re Not Reaching the Unchurched,” *Outreach Magazine*, August 12, 2015, accessed July 30, 2017, <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/5093-why-you-re-not-reaching-the-unchurched.html>

<sup>8</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2010), 17-24, Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting* (Nashville: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

(informational groups); they were groups that met weekly to share their experiences of God in their lives (transformational groups) and were experientially focused. Of course, part of serving Christ is to invite others to “come and see.” Could it be this experiential focus in the Class Meeting that motivated people to invite others to come and see? Some of the early numbers of the church seem to indicate this. “The Methodist Episcopal Church grew from a few thousand members to 2.5 million. But as Methodism began to distance itself from the Class Meeting, its growth also began to decrease and then stop, and finally decline.”<sup>12</sup>

We know that the bands and classes contributed greatly to the rapid growth of the Methodist movement. It stands to reason that these groups were producing disciples that offered invitation for others to “come and see.” David Lowes Watson writes “As the early Methodists took up this task [the working out of their salvation see appendix A] and became living witnesses to their faith, church order and doctrine became less important [according to John Wesley who is quoted here] than reaching out to ‘the tanners in Cornwall, the keelmen in Newcastle, the colliers in Kingswood and Staffordshire, the drunkards, the swearers, the Sabbath-breakers of Moorfield, and the harlots of Drury Lane.’”<sup>13</sup> This is truly the task of the church of invitation as it works out its salvation: to reach out to all, not excluding anyone, and inviting them to come and see.

Steve Manskar writes of his own personal experience while at Wesley Theological Seminary in how these groups can create community. “Another thing Covenant Discipleship groups do . . . is to help in the building of community. As people grow closer to God they grow closer to one another. As people grow in their love for God, for one another, and for the neighbor, Christian community is built, nurtured and strengthened.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Watson., 31.

<sup>13</sup> David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship Living in God's Household* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship



This research seeks to learn if Wesleyan small groups create disciples that invite others to come and see. If so, a change in the disciple's thinking and behavior can be observed, reported, and analyzed. I believe this information would be valuable to a Pastor who may be considering establishing Wesleyan based small groups in her church. Indeed, the reader will see that the research has indicated that in our case Wesleyan Small groups, designed after the Class meeting, produced disciples that invite. Specific evidence has been discovered that demonstrates these groups are truly transformative and do change behavior and thinking in the characteristic of inviting others to come and see.

### **The Setting**

McEver Road United Methodist Church is located in a solidly middle-class suburb of the Atlanta metropolitan area. It would be considered a small to medium sized church, worshipping 160 in two services on Sunday. Demographically we are mostly white and Latino, which does reflect our neighborhood, although we are whiter than the neighborhood census. For a Methodist church, McEver is young with an average age of 52 years old. Although we are not as ethnically diverse as we should be, we are generationally diverse. Our oldest member is 94 and we have a number of infants. Theologically we would be classified as centrist.

The church is only 47 years old. It was formed in 1972 from the merger of two small churches that were closing. McEver enjoyed steady growth, peaking at 225 in worship in the mid 1990's. For many reasons, especially the last recession, the church began to decline and 8 years ago bottomed out at 100 people in worship.

When I arrived 8 years ago, I instituted a plan to turn the church from a program-based church to a mission focused church. This was a culture change in how we formed disciples, how we

worshipped, our language, and our values. This change in culture resulted in growth spiritually, financially, and in membership. Today we have outgrown the facility. We are selling it, moving, and building a new building.

Like many churches in decline, McEver had turned all focus inward to survival and lost its connectedness to the community. Our new mission focus re-engaged us with the community. However, we were still struggling with some inward focused “hangover” problems from the declining years. What I thought were left-over problems from the worship wars of 3 years before I arrived was just the presenting problem.

### **The Presenting Problem Is Not The Problem**

From initial research it was discovered that what appeared to be the old problem of worship wars was really grieving over the loss of community. Because the church had two different types of services in two different locations on campus, this created a “me versus them” mentality since attendees from the two services seldom mixed. Many blamed this on the attitude of the people in the other service. However, the research indicated this feeling of fragmentation was a symptom of a larger problem: the loss of community in our area due to suburbanization: high transience of residents, rapid growth, consumerism, suburbanization, and political polarization<sup>15</sup> or what we could term a consumerist culture.

In the book *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, the authors decry our consumerist culture of “what’s in it for me.” They argue that we need to move from being consumers to citizens. Consumerists connect through associations rather than

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<sup>15</sup> This idea is based on many interviews with congregants, local politicians, local historians and journalists. It is interesting that local politicians and journalists noted that churches were not doing a good job of building the community. In fact, the Oakwood (where the church is located) city manager commented that the two biggest churches (one a huge multi-site mega church complete with celebrity pastor) had become “self-contained entities.”

community. Associations create connections outside the family or neighborhood. Citizens, on the other hand, find connection in family and neighborhoods. The consumerist has a scarcity mentality, believing the acquisition of more brings wholeness, and the citizen has an abundance mentality and believes wholeness is found not in things but people.<sup>16</sup> Changing this kind of thinking is a large undertaking in which the scope is too large for the requirements of this project. So, it was narrowed down to invitation. Connections are first created by offering invitations, and churches should be communities of invitation. If we are not creating connections, then most likely we are not producing disciples that invite.

Many of the congregants longed for the connectedness of community in the world outside the church and were hoping they could find it in the church<sup>17</sup>, but did not. The church was not producing community and those who were hoping for it were grieving its loss. Obviously, McEver was not doing a good job of inviting and neither were the other churches around it, especially the larger ones with more resources. How can we produce churches that create community both inside and outside their walls? My first thought, and still what I think is the best answer, is to change the culture of the church from a consumerist mindset: “what’s in it for me” to a mission model: “how am I called to serve”?

One of McEver’s values and marks of being a disciple is to practice “radical hospitality.”<sup>18</sup> A disciple that practices radical hospitality<sup>19</sup> invites all to be connected to the fellowship. This is

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<sup>16</sup> John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2010) 13-15.

<sup>17</sup> Since, I have undertaken many actions to produce this connectedness within in the church; too numerous to go into here. I am happy to say that the “we versus them” mentality has been eradicated.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2010), 17-24, Kindle. The other four marks are: extravagant generosity, passionate worship, risk taking mission and service, and intentional faith development.

<sup>19</sup> For our purposes we will define radical hospitality as “the desire to invite and welcome all into our fellowship no matter their gender, race, income, sexual orientation, marital status, or age.” This is how it is described in our church publications and web site.

exactly what Jesus did as we discussed in the introduction. This is not merely welcoming people when they walk through the doors of the church. This is intentionally going into the world into “associations” such as places of employment, schools, nursing homes, etc., and creating connections between people and people to the church.

The question then becomes: what is the first step in changing people’s thinking from a consumerist mindset to a servant mindset? Once again McKnight and Block state “Social science research has demonstrated that the most effective means of changing behavior is local small groups,” and they recognize 12-step groups like Alcoholics Anonymous are effective in changing behaviors.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, Jesus created the first small group when he invited John and James and the others to “come and see.” It was in this small group that Jesus was experienced before and after his resurrection. So now that we have discussed the problem and spoken for a moment that small groups may be the best solution to changing thinking and behavior, let’s turn our attention to Christian small groups and why John Wesley’s class meeting was selected as a possible solution.

### **The Proposed Solution: Wesleyan Class Meetings**

#### *Small Groups in The Tradition*

The small group began with Jesus’ call to come and see and to follow him. His disciples came to live with him, learn to live like him, and to be prepared for the time when they would carry his message into the world. This was not done by studying Torah (informational), this was accomplished in real time as the disciples ate with, walked with, lived with, talked with, listened to, and *experienced* Jesus first hand. After the resurrection they experienced Jesus through the

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<sup>20</sup> John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2010) 19.

Holy Spirit as they continued to meet together and deliver his message. From the beginning, growth in Jesus was a matter of the heart (transformational). In John, Jesus says, “As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”<sup>21</sup>

In Acts and the letters, we are painted a picture of a church that met in houses, worshipped, prayed, grew in faith together, and looked after the welfare of the poor and each other. We can see this in the conversion of Paul, who is brought into the community by Ananias and is certainly sustained by the community in his new faith. Paul’s conversion is not one to right doctrine, but it is a heartfelt conversion to Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to plant new house churches among the gentiles, and from his letters we get the picture of communities struggling together to live out the faith they have received, oftentimes in difficult circumstances.

Paul reminds the Philippians that they are to work out their salvation in fear and trembling. In Romans, Corinthians and Ephesians, he provides the metaphor “body” for the church, where each member is given gifts for the edification of the community. This is a community of believers experiencing the resurrected living Christ in their lives and working out their salvation in “fear and trembling.” All of this is done in community. Wayne Meeks writes,

“One cannot read far in the letters of Paul and his disciples without discovering that it was concern about the internal life of the Christian groups in each city that prompted most of the correspondence. The Letters also reveal that those groups enjoyed an unusual degree of intimacy, high levels of interaction among members, and a very strong sense of internal cohesion and of distinction both from outsiders and from the world.”<sup>22</sup>

Traditionally this type of small group is a transformational group, a matter of heart as opposed to informational, a matter of the intellect.

A transformational group is all about changed thinking, changed behavior and changed lives. Kevin Watson expresses this best when he writes, “These groups are primarily focused on living

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<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Jn 7:38.

<sup>22</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1983) 75.

and not on learning. They are focused on being made new by the grace of God, not only on receiving new ideas about God.”<sup>23</sup> If we are talking about changing thinking as well as behavior, just receiving information will not create this. We must come and see to go and do.

In his letter to the Romans chapters 12 and 13, Paul stresses that life in Christ produces an inner transformation or a growing in holiness. However, he lays the basis for this holiness in Romans 10:5-11 (NRSV): “Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.”<sup>6</sup> But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your **heart**, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down)<sup>7</sup> “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).<sup>8</sup> But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your **heart**” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);<sup>9</sup> because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your **heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.<sup>10</sup> For one believes with the **heart** and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” (Emphasis mine)

This is not an intellectual affirmation to a doctrine (information), this is a matter of change inside the heart through faith. “With his repeated use of the word “heart,” Paul stresses an inner transformation, a thorough embracing of Jesus as the one who brings peace and not hostility.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, this idea of faith formation occurring in the heart through small group participation has been in the tradition from the beginning. This matter of the heart helps us to skip forward to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, John Wesley, and the birth of the Class Meeting.

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<sup>23</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting* (Nashville: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Reta Halteman Finger, *Roman House Churches for Today: A Practical Guide for Small Groups*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 118.

*The Class Meeting*<sup>25</sup>

We have discussed that from the tradition, faith formation is a matter of the heart (transformation) not necessarily the head (information). Wesley, too, knew that disciples were made by changed hearts. In “Advice to the People Called Methodist” he writes

By Methodists I mean a people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God. They place religion in a uniform resemblance of its great object, in a steady imitation of him they worship, in all Christ’s imitable perfections, more particularly in justice, mercy, and truth, or universal love filling the heart and governing the life.<sup>26</sup>

What exactly did Wesley mean by heart? He used the word heart in a number of metaphorical senses. One of these was to see the heart as the seat of “tempers.” In the 18<sup>th</sup> century sense of the word Wesley meant “where temper referred to any endearing character disposition.”<sup>27</sup> Wesley believed that “these tempers can be focused and strengthened into enduring dispositions.”<sup>28</sup> These tempers were not infused by God instantaneously, but it is God’s regenerating grace that accomplishes this<sup>29</sup> and one must respond to this grace. One of the means a believer serious about heart religion has to respond to this grace is “to live within the rhythms of less common means like class meetings... .<sup>30</sup> In other words, class meetings affect the change in thinking and behavior that should produce disciples who invite, along with the other marks of a disciple.

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<sup>25</sup> Much has been written about the class meeting and you will find many of these books listed in the bibliography. My purpose here is to provide information that would help one to decide if the use of Class Meetings in their context can be effective. My belief is that the class meeting will work in any context, but the reader can be the judge of this.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Wesley Chilcote, ed., *John & Charles Wesley: Selections from Their Writings and Hymns—Annotated & Explained*, SkyLight Illuminations Series (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2011), 165.

<sup>27</sup> Randy L. Maddox, “A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley’s Heart Religion,” in *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow press, Inc., 2001), 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

David Lowes Watson writes that the class meeting “was an instrument of planned behavioral change through which interpersonal relationships can be effected and sustained.”<sup>31</sup> It was in the class meeting that a Methodist grew in love of God and neighbor and looked over each other in love.

There is a caveat here: class meetings are not the magic pill of discipleship. Wesley believed we must employ all the “means of grace” to grow as disciples. These means are attending worship, receiving the eucharist, prayer (corporate and private), fasting and searching the scripture. A full discipleship method would be “blueprinted”<sup>32</sup> in Wesley’s General Rules. It was the “General Rules” that identified the expected fruits of a disciple. Simply put they are do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God. Those in the class meetings looked over one another in love, helping each other along the way in following Christ, and the general rules were “the blueprint.”

Thus, we can see that Wesley’s class meetings were the sustaining instrument of behavioral change in the Methodist movement. Wesley saw the importance of these small groups so much so that attendance was mandatory. In fact, if one missed enough meetings they were not allowed to attend for a period of time. There were expectations of commitment that came with being a Methodist.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, trying to make any church related activity mandatory would be seen as domineering. Many churches that have tried to implement a mandatory small group strategy have seen them fail (McEver Road included). This is part of the problem with today’s declining church—commitment on the part of the disciple. Church attendance is declining, membership has lost all meaning, and an investment in discipleship has become confused with personal

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<sup>31</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 1985) 132.

<sup>32</sup> For more on a “blueprint” of spiritual development see Kevin Watson’s book *A Blueprint for Discipleship*.



development<sup>33</sup> rather than spiritual formation. Will the class meeting small group method still work? Let's now turn our attention to the implementation of a class meeting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Implementation*

We have already established that the process Jesus used to create community was by invitation. This invitation to come and see produced the first small group of 12 disciples. Wesley implemented a similar method in the class meetings. We have discussed in general how the class meetings were avenues of transformation, but it would be prudent to take a look at how Wesley implemented these groups before we turn to how they were implemented at McEver Road UMC.

The idea for class meetings came about serendipitously when Wesley was talking “with several of the Society in Bristol concerning the means of paying debts there.”<sup>34</sup> In a nutshell the class meeting came about by putting 11 society members with a leader so that a penny a week per person could be collected to retire the debt. This leader would call on 11 society members who lived close by. In the process of this collection, the leaders reported back to Wesley that some were not living “as he ought.”<sup>35</sup> In Wesley’s “Plain Account of Methodists,” he says he called them leaders and classes and asked the leaders to make inquiry into the behaviors of those whom he visited weekly. Soon it became unwieldy for the leaders to keep visiting in homes, so they began to meet together. Wesley describes these meetings “an hour or two spent in labor or love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving.”<sup>36</sup> They began to share their faith, hold each other accountable, share their burdens and care for each other. “They grew up into him in all things which is the head even Christ, from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and

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<sup>33</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock 1985) 148-149.

<sup>34</sup> John Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” in John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 9:260.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:261.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:262.

compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the Measure of every part increased unto the edifying itself in love.”<sup>37</sup> (Please see Appendix A for a short discussion of the organization of the Methodist societies and small group spiritual formation.)

### *Spiritual Formation at McEver Road United Methodist Church*

Earlier the statement was made that class meetings are not a “magic pill” for spiritual formation. Class meetings are but one element in forming disciples. McEver Road does have a strategic discipleship process. (See Appendix B.) It would be prudent to examine this process as well. If a church body is considering employing class meeting small groups, it should be part of a strategy or plan of spiritual formation.

It is interesting that churches often seek to have a written mission statement. In reality this is unnecessary because our mission is given to us by Jesus in several places in scripture,<sup>38</sup> the most obvious being the great commission in Matthew 28:16-20. What Jesus does not do is give us a plan of how to do this. He left it up to each community, as his partner, to figure out how to create a vision of this process. The vision at McEver Road UMC is “Loving Christ. Loving People. Helping People Love Christ.” Simply put, this is inviting (helping people love Christ), growing (loving Christ), and serving (loving people). It is essentially come and see, go and do. Below is an outline of the McEver process:

1. When one expresses the desire to join the church we’ll say, these are the commitments, but take these classes first, which are classes 1 & 2
  1. Methodism 101
  2. 5 fruits classes

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>38</sup> You will also find reference to the church’s mission: and this list is not exhaustive.

2. Then one must:
  1. Join a Sunday School class and/or Bible study
  2. Join a small group (class meeting)
  3. Pick an area to serve in the community
  4. Pick an area to serve in the church
3. Additional classes offered on 5 fruits
  1. Passionate Worship/Intentional Faith Development
  2. Prayer/Spiritual Disciplines/Worship
    1. Richard Foster Celebration of Discipline
    2. Louie Giglio Worship as a Lifestyle
  3. Risk Taking Mission and Service
  4. Generosity
  5. Radical Hospitality

When you join McEver Road UMC you commit to:

1. Practice Passionate Worship: You commit to be at worship at least 3 times a month including when on vacation!
2. Radical Hospitality: You commit to be inclusive and inviting beyond the walls of the church as well as welcoming within the walls of the church.
3. Intentional Faith Development: You commit to attend Methodism 101 and The 5 Practices Class, select a Sunday School class for regular attendance (3 times a month), and participate in a Wesleyan Growth Group. You also commit to have a daily time with God.

4. Risk Taking Mission and Service: You commit to participate regularly in one of our outreach ministries and to go on a mission trip (health permitting) once a year. You commit to serving within the walls of the church.
5. Extravagant Generosity: You commit to be a proportional giver. You do not "tip" God, but give of your first fruits on a percentage basis, working toward tithing: 10%.

No one is going to walk around behind you, peering over your shoulder to see if you are practicing your vows. However, in the Wesleyan Growth Group there will be a time for sharing about your journey with God.

The "Wesleyan Growth Group" is the class meeting. With the success we have had with the two "experimental groups" for this project, congregants will be encouraged to "come and see" what a growth group is like.

If you examine the above closely you will see the influence of Wesley's means of grace and his General Rules.

### **Implementation**

Although we had what we believed to be a well-conceived discipleship process, it was informationally based. This came to my attention after reading Kevin Watson's book *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*. Watson states that we don't learn to follow Jesus by reading books about him but by following him.<sup>39</sup> Even better he writes, "information driven small groups that do not lead to a changed life are no more valuable for Christian discipleship than a weather report that does not impact the clothes you wear."<sup>40</sup> It became obvious that our spiritual formation was a mile wide and an inch deep. We dearly needed

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<sup>39</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting* (Nashville: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 15.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

transformation-based experiential small groups that didn't thrive on content but on changed lives.<sup>41</sup> If experiential spiritual formation matures disciples, it makes sense that it would produce disciples that practice radical hospitality, that is, willing to invite others to come and see. It is obvious from the literature that Wesley's class meetings did in fact contribute greatly to the growth of the Methodist movement, even more so than Wesley's preaching. The growth of Methodism and the class meeting outlived Wesley, and American Methodism by 1850 comprised 34.2 percent of Christians in the United States." This was not only due to the preaching but the fact that every Methodist was expected to participate in a class meeting. "A strong case can be made that the class meeting was the single most important factor to the growth of early Methodism." If this is the case, then it also stands to reason that the participants in these small groups were inviting others to join them, thereby creating community.<sup>42</sup> Wesley's organizational genius brought together a very fragmented English society. Of course, the cause for fragmentation in the early part of the industrial revolution is different from what has caused it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but bringing people together in community is timeless. Certainly, we can't employ the class meeting *exactly* like Wesley, but the concept of "watching over each other in love" and inquiring into the status of each other's soul still resonates.

With Kevin Watson's book in hand I approached 5 couples in addition to my wife and me to reach a total of 12. I purposely involved different generations and people I knew to be in different places along the path of their spiritual journeys. We read the book separately<sup>43</sup> then met at the parsonage. One couple dropped out from the beginning. The others decided to give this a

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6-7

<sup>42</sup> David Lowes Watson in *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* makes the argument the message of love brought to the fragmented and forgotten classes gave them identity in God and human relationships and this was experienced in the class meeting. (Pages 131-132.)

<sup>43</sup> I highly recommend this book as the place to start these small groups. It is well written, well researched, and passionate. There are other books, but this one is by far the best.

try. This was June 2017 and I had no idea that this would be my Doctoral project. I did tell them later on when I decided to make this my project what I was doing.

Earlier I called this an experiment, and it was. We had many false starts when it came to small groups. There were several reasons for this. Among them were:

1. No goal or expected outcome for the group. Like anything else, if you don't understand what the end looks like it is hard to start. What I mean is that if you want to travel from Atlanta to Miami by car you need a destination and a map. We provided neither. We really did not understand why we were doing this; therefore, we had no idea what the outcome would be. We decided that a lot of successful churches had small groups, so we needed to have them too.
2. We tried to divide folks up by neighborhood and then tell them which group to attend. This didn't work because people felt they were being pressured.
3. We tried to create the groups by special interests, quilting for women, motorcycles for men; that didn't work either. That's nothing but fellowship, and nothing is wrong with fellowship, but most people who are passionate about their special interests are already involved in groups outside of the church.

Watson's book created a blueprint, both theologically and practically. From this book we could establish why we were forming these groups and what they were supposed to accomplish. The group I invited was hungry for an experience that would lead them into a deeper relationship with God that they were not receiving in their prayer groups, Sunday Schools, or Bible study. From Watson's book they had a clear understanding that information did not lead to transformation; only Christ in community can do that.

We decided we would meet once a month to share our experiences with God during the

preceding weeks. After 2 meetings the participants asked for 2 meetings a month. We will discuss why when we get to result and analysis, but let's now turn our attention to the structure of the meeting.

Example 1: at first the structure of the meeting looked like this:

1. A time of fellowship with dessert and coffee.
2. An opening centering prayer by one of the participants.
3. The leader would then facilitate discussion around the question: "How is it with your soul?"
4. The group would conclude with intercessory prayer or prayer need for group participants.

Example 2: by January of 2018 the meeting looked like this:

1. Fellowship
2. Prayer (illumination)
3. General Rules
  - a. Do no harm, avoiding evil of every kind
  - b. By doing good
  - c. Attending upon the ordinance of God
    - i. Worship
    - ii. Hearing the word proclaimed
    - iii. Communion
    - iv. Prayer
    - v. Searching the Scripture
    - vi. Fasting
    - vii. Reflection
4. How is your Spiritual life?
5. Where have you seen God at work in your life?
6. How have you felt God's presence in your life?
7. Where are you seeking guidance from the Lord?
8. What of God have I passed on to others?

## 9. Intercession

Example 3: the meeting outline was further refined in November of 2018:

1. Fellowship
2. Prayer for Illumination
3. Group Lectio Divina based on the daily office gospel for the day
4. The question (based on the Daily Examen)
  - a. How is your Spiritual life?
  - b. Where have you seen God at work in your life?
  - c. How have you felt God's presence in your life?
  - d. Where are you seeking guidance from the Lord?
  - e. What did I receive from God this week?
  - f. What of God have I passed on to others?

## 5. Intercession

We found the literal method passed down from Wesley of conducting a class meeting to be archaic. What exactly does it mean "how is it with your soul?" Like with any group, especially one where the sharing can get quite personal, there was some awkwardness in the first several meetings. It wasn't so much that this new intimacy was the problem, but the question itself was awkward. Once we switched to the questions in example two which came from the book *How Is it With Your Soul*<sup>44</sup> by Debra Stringer, things improved. However, the Daily Examen questions really brought deep thoughtful answers as to the condition of the participant's soul.

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<sup>44</sup> This was about the only thing in this publication I found helpful. The books that we found the most useful were both by Kevin Watson: *The Class Meeting* and *A Blueprint for Discipleship*.



We also found that even though we had a fellowship time to help people calm their minds after hectic days at work, there was still a period of time at the beginning of the meeting when people had to adjust. Thus, we started using group lectio divina at the start of the meeting which helped to center us. We did try some other methods of centering, but lectio has been the best.

You'll also notice we reviewed the General Rules for a while (Example 2). This also became cumbersome and a chore. We do a good job of making sure our congregants know the 5 marks of a disciple. We review them often in worship; frankly, it just became redundant with no meaning, so it was dropped.

After we had been meeting for about 8 months, the younger couples wanted to start another group. We made a list of about 20 other young couples to invite. This group has been successful as well. They follow the same format we arrived at (Example 3). With younger couples with both spouse working, children in day care, and infants, the consistency is a problem. Also, childcare is an issue. This group has dealt with as many as 7 kids, including one infant. They pay one of our nursery workers to come to the home that hosts the meeting, but it can cause a distraction.<sup>45</sup> We have not figured out how to deal with this effectively... yet.

Now that we have seen what the implementation looked like, let's examine the results. Did experiential faith formation create disciples that practiced radical hospitality?

### **Method, Results, and Analysis**

Data was gathered by ethnography, interview, and survey. I mentioned earlier that I did not start the first group with the idea that it would be my doctoral project. When I realized that it was going to be, I obtained permission to use group members' answers to interview and survey

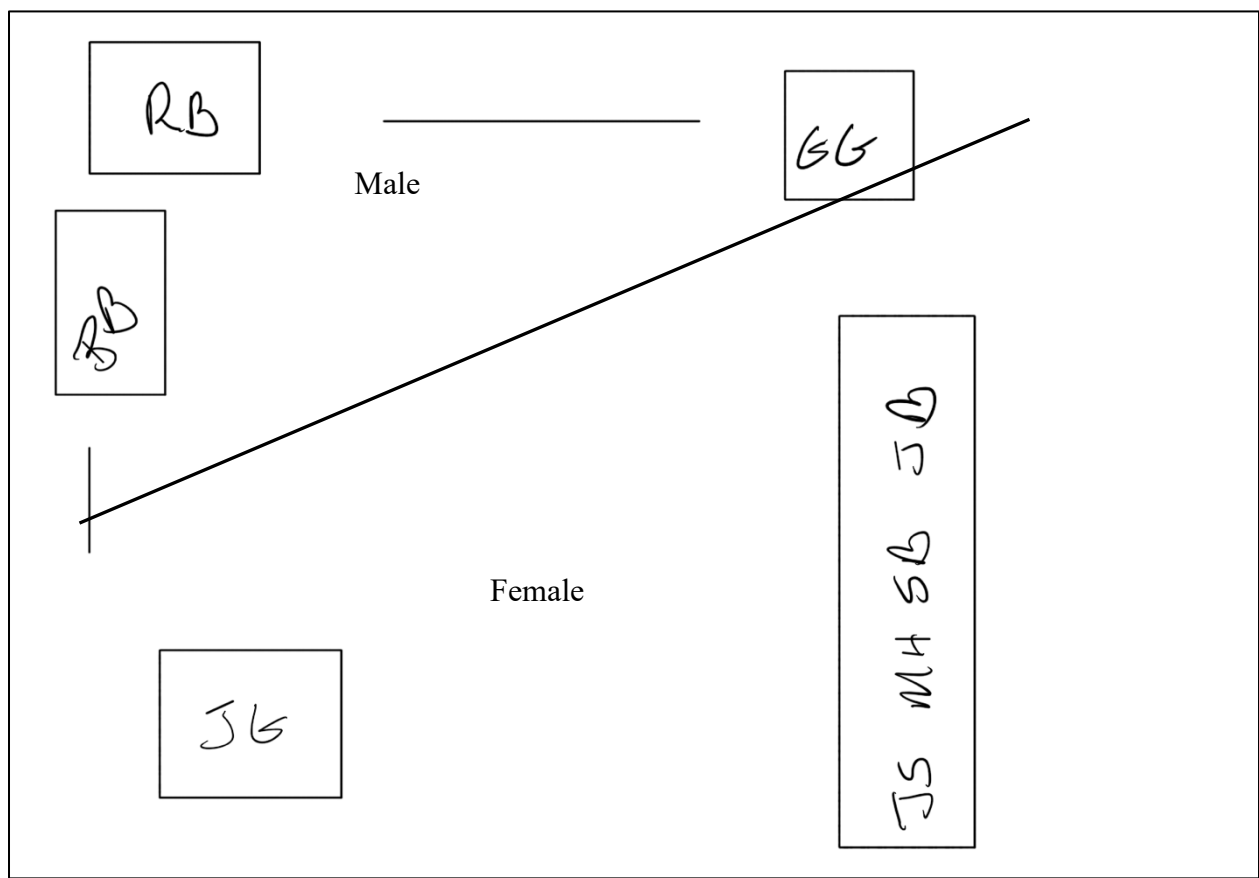
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<sup>45</sup> We did try having the parents drop off the kids at the church nursery. Logistically this did not work. Having to pick the kids up at day care, get the family fed, and get to the meeting, the extra step of dropping the children off just did not work.

questions. I did not take ethnographic notes during the meetings. I felt this would be intrusive to our meetings. I made my notes immediately after our meetings.

The dynamic of the group was interesting to observe. The first meeting was somewhat awkward. People were unsure of sharing even though everyone knew each other previously. The seating arrangements were, and remain, males on one side and females on the other. Each person identified with a certain place to sit and it has not varied! However, after meeting for 18 months we have grown very close and have grown even more intimate in our relationships. We have truly learned to watch over each other in love.

Here's one of the seating charts I drew from my notes. This was a night when we were missing some of the men, otherwise they would have all been to the top of the line.



I also questioned whether it was wise to have the pastor leading a group. I surveyed the group

about this, and the indication was unanimous that this was a positive not a negative, especially since this was the first group. I told them that from this first group, if the group was successful, they would have the opportunity to start their own groups. Most felt the example of my leadership was one they would need to emulate. I do believe the answers I received to be honest and without reservation since the surveys were anonymous. As I mentioned, we did have another group come out of this one about 8 months into meeting.

I also asked them what they believed to make a mature disciple. The answers were not consistent. Some just said being open to God's call. Others were more specific, "Generosity out of response to God's grace, realizing that everything is His. Brotherly Love lived out in actions to all people - acting out faith, not just talking about it. Having conscious contact with God, through prayer (talking to God) and by listening. Faithfulness to His church universal, His people and His will."<sup>46</sup> Other answers were somewhat simplistic like "selflessness, devotion, worship."

The question, "Has group interaction made it any easier for you to invite others into the life of the church or attend this group? Produced these answers (a sample):

- Yes, I want to share with others.
- Not really.
- Maybe- I am more open to sharing what we do in group and sharing about it with others.
- Yes, it is easier to explain the love of God through the people that love God and show it towards you.

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<sup>46</sup> I found these various answers interesting. We have spent eight years talking about the signs of a mature disciple: "Loving Christ. Loving People and Helping People Love Christ." Our vision is always repeated congregationally following the benediction as a response. Further I preach a series every year on our 5 marks: radical hospitality, extravagant generosity, passionate worship, intentional faith development and risk-taking mission and service. These things do take time as we will see in further discussion of the results.

- I don't think I had an issue about inviting people to church before. I feel about the same way as before the group started. (Reality is we have a lot of guests at McEver; the number one reason they come is our location. The last reason is invitation.)

Finally, the answers to this question (This is important as you will see.): Has participation in this group increased your desire to participate in mission activities, local or otherwise? The answers were different but basically, the answer was yes it has. A few said I was already serving in this manner and will continue.

My results were that no, the class meeting did not create disciples with the desire to invite. Let me put that another way, they may have said it helped with wanting to invite but their actions did not follow their words.<sup>47</sup> There could be several reasons for this, but this is conjecture and would require further research. See below:

- I do not believe that 18 months is a long enough time to have changed thinking produce changed behavior. More research is needed. I do believe them when they said their thinking had changed, even though their actions did not indicate it. As we move forward it will be interesting to see what happens.
- There may be some latent prejudice<sup>48</sup> against sharing their faith. I never called invitation faith sharing. Nor did I say that this change in behavior was a goal to the group. The goal to the group was spiritual formation, and that goal is being realized (as

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<sup>47</sup> With one exception. The youngest member of our group, a young mother, 34 years old, invited a young lady from her work that has a myriad of problems in her life and negativity towards the church. She did become a regular member for about 3 meetings. She assisted with our VBS, and we could see that she was warming to the idea of connecting with our community. She then lost her job and moved away. By the way, this young mom is also the one that is our second-class leader! She leads the younger age group.

<sup>48</sup> In this regard I would refer you to studies by Harvard Psychology Professor Mahzarin Banaji about latent racism and other prejudices. This prejudice may result from bad experiences from others trying to share their faith with them, i.e., “Do you know for sure you’re going to be with God in heaven?” or “Are you saved?” It is possible that they are not aware of the prejudices against faith sharing that may hold them back. The term itself makes many mainline Christians uncomfortable because of the stereotypical images just mentioned.

we will see). Spiritual formation is a journey. Referring back to Wesley's understanding of salvation, salvation is an ongoing process of being perfected in love.

Did I see evidences of this? Oh yes!

- It very well could be that they do not know how to invite without seeming like a stereotypical Christian. Pushy, judgmental, and just trying to notch their "salvation gun." Some training in how to invite out of love and not judgment might help. I know I had several conversations with the young mom and how to approach her coworker.

However, changed thinking and behavior occurred in other areas. Participants said their private devotional life became richer or that they never had a private time of prayer and study and now they did. Several said they became more conscious of God in their day to day life. Several said they were open to the accountability<sup>49</sup> that was in the group. One person wrote in this regard, "I'm more aware of where I am in my walk. More aware when I'm not doing the things I should, so that I know when to make changes." If I had to categorize the biggest change it would be what this person wrote, "I have been able to look deeper into my own personal relationship with God." One person commented that the group had brought them to a deeper understanding of the eucharist!

I can say with all certainty that this Wesleyan class meeting truly helped people to work out their salvation in fear and trembling, or better yet, become perfected in love. Other than the behavioral change mentioned above, their commitment to serving was the greatest behavioral change I witnessed. This group played a pivotal role in helping host a Trunk or Treat that

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<sup>49</sup> Accountability was never emphasized as a group goal. However, as the group grew more intimate, more struggles were shared. How to deal with a dishonest coworker and sinful thoughts associated with that. Trying to connect with a child born out of wedlock and the shame and guilt associated with the pregnancy and drug use resulting in giving up the child. Dealing with ungrateful parents and the thoughts associated with that. How to deal with a friend in an abusive marriage. Most of this accountability centered on thoughts, not behaviors.

produced an attendance of over one thousand! This group was also instrumental in organizing a Fresh Expression<sup>50</sup> called Love on Tap in a local craft brewery. This particular Fresh Expression has become a model for the North Georgia Conference.

I mentioned earlier that Kevin Watson's books are a great place to start. However, don't try to organize your class meeting exactly the way it's recommended. I say this because every church context is different. I wouldn't even suggest you try to emulate the group I am describing here. In fact, in our two groups, the group dynamics, especially age, are much different. The groups are little churches within churches<sup>51</sup> with their own organic structure and one must take this into account. The goal is spiritual formation, watching over each other in love as the believers move down the path of sanctification and perfection in Christian love.

I recently conducted a survey after 18 months in the group experience. The questions I asked were:

1. How has the group strengthened your relationship with the Lord?
2. Is there a facet of your life that by participating in this group you have changed your thinking, behavior or both?
3. How has participation in this group changed your life?
4. After participating in this group for 18 months do you feel more comfortable sharing your faith?
5. Has participation in this group increased your desire to invite someone to a church event, including this group? Why? Why Not?

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<sup>50</sup> A fresh expression is a new form of church for those not connected to any church and probably do not want to be connected to a traditional church setting. They take shape outside of the walls of the church in places where people in our community are already gathering, in our case a local craft beer brewery.

<sup>51</sup> See David Watson Lowe's book *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. His argument is that class meetings are "ecclesiola in ecclesia."

I think the person below is representative of the group's answers:

1. I've learned more about the Bible readings we discussed and more ways the Lord has worked in other people's lives. Because of this I pray more daily and depend on God more to help me. I also make a conscious effort to thank him more often too.

2. I now pray more daily and thank God more frequently for my daily blessings. I also volunteer more in our church outreach activities.

3. I am now much more comfortable sharing my religious views and my thoughts in small group settings and in one on one situations. Now I'm not afraid to share my prayer concerns and joys in a large group.

4. Yes, definitely. In our small group I found out that even though we have different upbringings, parental support and life experiences, that we all love people, love Christ and want to help others love Christ too.<sup>52</sup> I know that God has helped them get through life's struggles. Now I am not afraid to share my faith.

5. Yes. Now I feel very comfortable asking people to attend church services, church suppers, small group meetings and community outreach activities. Since all of the individuals in our small group are involved in various outreach missions, I know I can get out of my "comfort zone" and help more in our church outreach opportunities too. Since being in our small group, I more frequently ask people I know and people I meet to visit our church so they can get to know all the loving and supportive people who share God's love.

It was mentioned earlier that Wesley came upon the class meeting in a serendipitous way. Although the numerical behavioral results were not obtained, there was the other result of spiritual maturity seen above. This is a magnificent result that wasn't what was looked for but is

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<sup>52</sup> There it is, our vision of how we make disciples. It takes time but cultures can be changed!

nonetheless very important. In his book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, John Paul Lederach writes about serendipity as an important part of building peace in a community. He writes, “The more I wanted to intentionally produce a particular result, the more elusive it seemed to be; the more I let go and discovered the unexpected opening along the way, at the side of the journey, the more progress was made.”<sup>53</sup> The point is this: the class meeting is full of serendipity. The Holy Spirit will take the class where it needs to go; don't get in the way and progress toward perfection in love will happen in unexpected ways. I find it interesting that John Wesley discovered the class meeting in a serendipitous way and, at least in our case, the serendipity continues.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In the class meeting, one encounters God in the meeting and in the lives of others. Through sanctifying grace, we become more and more Christ-like in our love. In other words, class meetings are for Christian formation, not just information.<sup>54</sup> I read somewhere years ago that Wesley understood salvation this way: “I am saved. I need to be saved. I shall always need to be saved.” A class meeting is imperative in one growing in their faith experientially. One can see from the survey answers that these participants are growing in their faith and becoming perfected in love.

However, it cannot be emphasized enough that this is no magic pill to spiritual formation. A church needs a plan of how to make disciples. If a church only employs class meetings for spiritual formation it will not hurt, but the growth might not be as great as it could be. Kevin

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<sup>53</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115.115

<sup>54</sup> This is not to say that informational discipleship should be abandoned. Bible Study and such programs are means of grace as well; experiential and informational should be balanced. In our case it was not.



Watson's Book *A Blueprint for Discipleship* is a good place to start, and David Lowes Watson's book *Covenant Discipleship* is another. Remember to begin with the end in mind. What are the fruits of a disciple? What does a maturing follower of Christ look and act like? Robert Schnase's book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* second edition helps in this regard. If you are a Methodist congregation, the "General Rules" are another good blueprint, as Kevin Watson suggests.

For my context, with the adaptations we made, I can say without a doubt, based upon the research, that class meetings do change thinking and will change behavior. The class meetings produced the connections we were looking for to build community within the church and outside the church (Trunk or Treat and Love on Tap). Class meetings certainly help churches become places of invitation, even if that means an invitation to the community rather than to individuals. You need both and it appears those individual invitations take a little longer to develop<sup>55</sup>.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

"Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace. Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. Well, then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world's standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin. Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood of God but omits Christ as the living Son. There is trust in God, but no following of Christ. He wants to follow but feels obliged to insist on his own terms to the level of human understanding. The disciple places himself at the Master's disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms. But then discipleship is no longer discipleship, but a program of our own to be arranged to suit ourselves, and to be judged in accordance with the standards of rational ethic."<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, Wesley said of the Methodists, "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists

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<sup>55</sup> Why that is would be an interesting behavior to research.

<sup>56</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Simon and Shuster, 1959), 61.

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.”<sup>57</sup> Discipleship or discipline, as Wesley comments, is costly. Bonhoeffer famously said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”<sup>58</sup> Discipleship is not easy. That is why Jesus says

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. <sup>59</sup>

We need the help of each other in community to pay the price of discipleship. We are created to be in community by the God in three persons. God is community. We are created to be in community with God and with each other. The Greek-speaking theologians, in their efforts to understand the idea of a three in one God, explained the trinity as a dance of love or perichoresis. Jürgen Moltmann explains: “The idea about perichoresis, the reciprocal indwelling, derives from the theology of the Greek fathers. The substantive means ‘whirl’ or ‘rotation’; the verb means a movement from one to another, passing round and going around, surrounding, embracing, enclosing.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, the Trinity is a community of self-giving love. The intimate union, mutual indwelling, or mutual interpenetration of the three members of the Trinity with each other. Or

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<sup>57</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition., vol. 13 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 258.

<sup>58</sup> Bonhoeffer, 89.

<sup>59</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Lk 14:28–33.

<sup>60</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!: God’s Future for Humanity and the Earth*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 152–153.

better in layman's terms: the three persons of the trinity are of one essence involved in a dance of self-giving love.

Churches should be communities involved in the dance of self-giving love. An invitation to come and see is an act of self-giving. Churches should be creating this kind of community in the neighborhoods they serve by being communities of invitation. It is in another dance of love that we can become communities of invitation, the Wesleyan class meeting. I am not so naïve as to the size of the sample being only one church. However, it is working for McEver Road UMC and I think the evidence suggests that it will work for others. At McEver Road UMC we did discover that Wesleyan class meetings can create the spiritual growth necessary for church members to invite others to come and see, creating connections between each other, neighbors and God: creating community.

## Appendix A

**Figure 2.2: Early Methodist Small-Group Structures and Settings for Spiritual Formation**

| <b>Characteristics</b>              | <b>Class Meeting</b>              | <b>Band Meeting</b>                  | <b>Select Society</b>               |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Community Defined                   | Rules                             | Rules                                | Rules                               |
| Essential Experience [and Theology] | Desire for God [Convincing Grace] | New Birth [Justifying Grace]         | Love of God [Sanctifying Grace]     |
| Formational Focus                   | Mind                              | Will                                 | Heart or Affection                  |
| Music                               | Beginning and end                 | Beginning and end                    | Beginning and end                   |
| Prayer                              | By leader                         | Everyone can pray                    | Everyone can pray                   |
| Noetic Focus                        | Finding the way                   | Overcoming sin                       | Love of Christ                      |
| Praxeological Context               | Outwardly obey the three rules    | Inwardly practice the means of grace | Live in love and obedience          |
| Affective Focus                     | Desire for God                    | Repentance and forgiveness           | Love of God and neighbor            |
| Meeting Place                       | Neighborhood                      | Anywhere                             | Anywhere                            |
| Gender and Marital Status           | All together                      | Gender and marital status specific   | All together                        |
| Number of Members                   | Twelve to thirty-six              | Four to eight                        | Six to sixty-five                   |
| Leadership                          | Appointed by the Wesleys          | Shared                               | Shared                              |
| Expected Response                   | Outward obedience                 | Growth in Christian discipleship     | Love, service, spiritual leadership |

On the previous page is the organization of Wesley societies into small groups<sup>61</sup>. One must express the desire to “flee the wrath to come to join the main group a society.” The person was then placed in a class meeting. As one matured in faith and grace upon grace, they were invited into the other groups with the select society being the most intense.

How do we compare to those class meetings? The desire for God and obeying the general rules are expected in our class meetings as well. Although we do not use the general rules per se, we do expect our congregants to demonstrate the 5 fruits of a disciple: radical hospitality, passionate worship, extravagant generosity, intentional faith development, and risk-taking mission and service. Our meetings are gender and generationally mixed. The groups are primarily married couples because we don't have that many singles. The groups are formed on invitation not neighborhood. In a culture that is based on foot transportation this would be necessary but not so much today. We also limit the number in the class to 12 and no less than 6. We feel this is modeled in the New Testament. Additionally, we meet in homes and find that 12 is a good number for the size of our homes. Leadership is appointed by the Pastor.

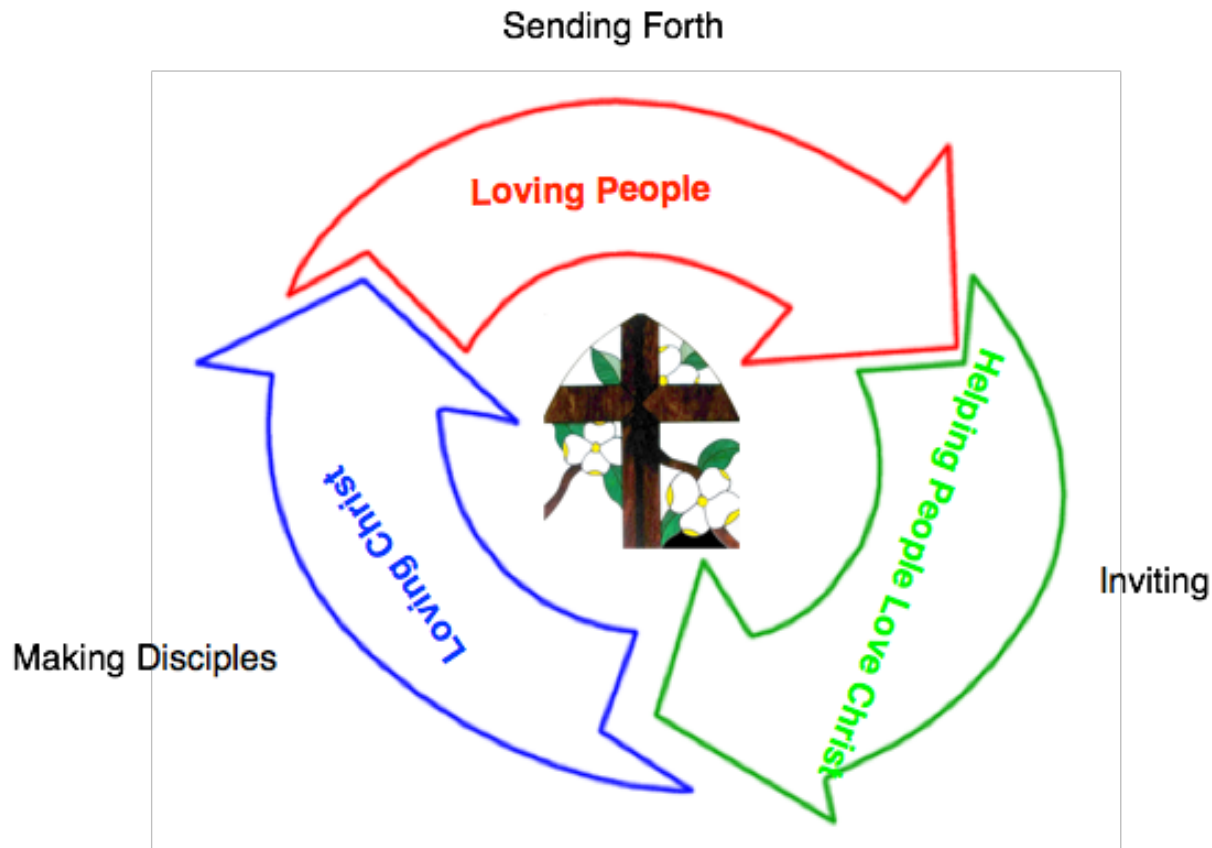
I believe our groups work on the mind, will and affections (Wesley's heart)! In fact, I would say that our work is primarily the heart.

Also, on the second line you can see how Wesley's soteriology was the foundation to his small group strategy.

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<sup>61</sup> Tom Alban, “Inwardly Persuaded”: religion of the heart in Early British Methodism,” in *Heart Religion” In the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001), 46.

## Appendix B



This graph represents our vision of how we make disciples. As mentioned in the body of this paper, class meetings are not a “magic pill” for faith formation. They need to be part of a program to grow disciples.

It is in the Loving Christ area that our spiritual formation takes place. Then our disciples are sent out to invite others to come and see. As the “invitees” come into the community and are connected in classes, worship, prayer groups, Bible studies, etc., they are then sent forth. Simply put the process is invite, grow, send.

It is important to know what fruits a disciple should exhibit. this was the purpose of Wesley’s General Rules. Our fruits are radical hospitality, passionate worship, extravagant generosity, intentional faith development, and risk-taking mission and service



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