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Living Your Methodist Identity:
Recovering the Class Meeting for Disciple Building

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Abstract

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When one reads the New Testament, one reads of the importance of being a “disciple” of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls individuals to follow, to learn, and carry-on his mission into the world. The mission of the United Methodist Church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This mission was established from the beginning of the early Methodist Church. The Methodist Church established a form of small groups called “class meetings” for the purpose of making disciples. From the beginning, the class meetings were used to increase the members’ growth toward a “sanctified life,” and toward a deeper love for God and neighbor daily. In a time where apathy and disengagement with the church is common, the class meeting is an option for the contemporary United Methodist Church. An environment where individuals can be introduced to God, and grow in their faith. The church transforms the world not by adding members in attendance, but by making “disciples.”

Living Your Methodist Identity:
Recovering the Class Meeting for Disciple Building

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Introduction:

And Jesus said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” – Matthew 28: 16-18 (NSRV).¹

The command to “make disciples” has been the mantra of the church throughout the ages. Even today, the United Methodist Church (of which I am a part) has as its mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”² It can be understood that the call of making disciples is the purpose of the church. In 2007-2008, the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church wrote a 42-page report titled, *Discipleship: Dedicated Followers of Jesus Christ*. The report states: “The primary objective of the Church today as outlined by Jesus is for disciples of Jesus to develop other men and women into disciples. Discipleship should be at the forefront of our efforts. Everything we do, say and teach should be considered as we ask, “How will this help us make disciples?”³ These words are echoed in the Mississippi Conference.

How can the church best make disciples today? The answer is as varied as the composition of individual churches. Some believe the best method of making disciples is teaching students within the classroom. Others believe it happens best within a worship setting where sermons are preached. Some believe that Christians who are more spiritually mature should mentor others who are less mature. A common denominator of these “best ways” is that all express the relationship-building process within some form of small groups. If one were to

¹ All scripture references will be from the NSRV, unless otherwise written.

² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), 93.

³ North Georgia Leadership 2017-2018. *Discipleship: Dedicated Followers of Jesus Christ*, accessed on Feb. 15, 2018. <https://www.ngumc.org/files/fileslibrary/boardoflaity/port.pdf>.

Google “small groups,” the search results would offer over 183,000,000.⁴ The local book stores contain shelves upon shelves of publications advocating small groups as a vital part of a church’s growth. With these resources, church leaders may determine which form of small groups is best for their congregation. So, how could Magee First United Methodist Church (Magee FUMC) use small groups to improve discipleship?

Section One will explain the United Methodist Church’s (UMC) understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, a member of the church. Section Two will contain a history of the class-meetings. Section Three will share the early order of the class-meetings. Next, the purpose of the early Methodist class meeting will be discussed. Next, the spiritual life of Magee FUMC will be discussed followed by why the class meeting in Magee. Section seven will discuss how the church will move forward with the class meeting. Followed by what is next, and the conclusion.

What it means to be a Disciple:

A biblical precedent exists for becoming a disciple and teaching discipleship. Early in the Gospel of Mark, one reads of Jesus calling his first disciples: *“As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.”* – Mark 1:16-20. One reads a similar account in all of the gospels. This “following” gave the people the opportunity to hear and learn from Jesus. A basic definition of a disciple is one who adheres and follows the teachings of another. In Jesus’ case, a disciple is one who believes that

⁴ Accessed on February 14, 2018.

he is the Son of God, learns the teachings of Jesus, and seeks to follow his example. Jesus' first disciples followed him for three years and upon his death lived-out Jesus' teachings for others to see. They became "fishers of men."

The thought of following Jesus and becoming his disciple was expressed throughout the New Testament. Throughout the gospels, one reads of people following Jesus, and becoming his disciples: women (Luke 8:1-3); the rich (John 3:1-21, 20:39); the poor (Matthew 20:29-34). After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, disciples continued to believe and follow Jesus' teachings. All one has to do to do is read the Pauline letters, and the Epistles to know this is true. The apostles continued to follow Jesus' example and went about making disciples for the transformation of the world until their deaths.

What qualifies an individual to be called a church member or a disciple of Jesus in the UMC? The Book of Discipline for the UMC states that "the membership of a local United Methodist church shall include all people who have been baptized and all people who have professed their faith."⁵ Once these actions are accomplished, it is expected that the individual will become a faithful member within the local church. "Faithful membership in the local church is essential for personal growth and for developing a deeper commitment to the will and grace of God."⁶ Also, each member is expected to participate in the life of the local church. This participation is expressed by each member being a "servant of Christ." The Book of Discipline states, "This servanthood is performed in family life, daily work, recreation and social activities, responsible citizenship, the stewardship of property and accumulated resources, the issues of

⁵ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), 155.

⁶ *Ibid*, 157.

corporate life, and all attitudes toward other persons.”⁷ The hope of the UMC is that each disciple will grow in scriptural holiness.

Being a disciple of Jesus is more than just believing in him. Jesus says in Luke 9:23-24, *“Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’.*” Jesus wanted the apostles to know the cost of being a disciple, but Luke intended the reader to know that Jesus was talking to them also. To be a disciple is to “hear Jesus speak of following him in self-denial.”⁸ In the American church, materialism, commercialism, and other negative aspects of the society heavily influence the actions of the church. Today, members of congregations still struggle with living a life of self-denial that Jesus requires of his disciples.

“Whenever United Methodism has had a clear sense of mission, God has used our Church to save persons, heal relationships, transform social structures, and spread scriptural holiness, thereby changing the world.”⁹ Shortly after the UMC 2016 General Conference, a handbook was published that would help churches grow into what was termed “vital congregations.” Vital congregations “thrive wherever United Methodist disciples engage in mission and ministry to live out God’s vision for a world where poverty is reduced and poor people and communities flourish; a world where children live to their fullest; a world where Christian leaders heed God’s call to **discipleship** (emphasis mine); and a world where new faith communities offer God’s love and grace worldwide.”¹⁰ The desire of General Conference was to

⁷ Ibid, 158.

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 129.

⁹ *The United Methodist Handbook: 2017-2020* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), assessed on February 20, 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid.

encourage more active participation in the local church to “make disciples for the transformation of the world.”

Within the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church, the effort to form vital congregations has been received with little fanfare. The conference formed a committee (committee, committee, another damn committee) that was to work with the districts and local churches. In the beginning stages, the committee was visible throughout the conference, but today there is little communication between the committee and local churches. Each congregation is encouraged to submit weekly statistics such as: worship attendance, professions of faith, number of small groups, and weekly offering amount. These numbers determine who is a vital congregation and who needs to continue to move in that direction. Magee FUMC is not considered a vital congregation as determined by the conference.

The leaders of Magee FUMC are aware that something needs to be done to increase participation in the making of disciples, and the growing of disciples. As a member of the UMC, “Participation in disciplined groups such as covenant discipleship groups or class meetings is an expected part of personal mission involvement.”¹¹ Because active Sunday school classes lack participation from the majority of the membership, church leaders are discussing the formation of covenant discipleship groups which are unlike the Sunday school model. After looking at the history of the Methodist Church, the leaders are preparing to form class meetings.

Magee FUMC has no history of the traditional Methodist class meetings. Their small groups have been information-based and driven. Congregants meet and learn the information presented by the leader. Although there is a place for this, now is the time to attempt something new. Living in an environment where little engagement with the local church occurs except on one hour each Sunday, “Our future lies in looking to our past and readapting and reasserting

¹¹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), 158.

those principles and practices that made Methodism a great movement and denomination. To experience Mr. Wesley and the saints of early Methodism is to be directed to travel with light speed into the New Testament and the early Church and into the tradition of the historical Church, where we will find the passion and the power of the Trinity. That is where our future is waiting for us.”¹² The leadership is ready to recommit to the local church’s mission statement: *A Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will build a Great Church.*

History of Class Meetings:

John Wesley believed that a Christian life is more than just right thinking. For Wesley, he believed that the church should practice living a righteous life. “Yet, it is also important to be clear that for Wesley, orthodoxy, though essential to real Christianity, is not sufficient unto itself. Wesley’s deep concern was with a lived faith, not only a mental assent to propositional truth. Right doctrine, or right beliefs, was important to Wesley because it provided necessary guides and boundaries for right living. In other words, orthodoxy (right belief) leads to orthopraxy (right practice).”¹³

“Wesley was convinced that only through an accountable fellowship could Christian discipleship be nurtured and made effective, and it is on such a context that the development of Methodist polity must be understood. To comprehend the distinctive characteristics of the class meeting in Methodist polity, we will need to trace the formative influence of these ‘rises’ in some detail.”¹⁴

¹² James B. Scott and Molly Davis Scott, *Restoring Methodism: 10 Decisions for United Methodist Churches in America* (Dallas: Provident Publishing, 2006), 33.

¹³ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 36.

¹⁴ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1985), 67.

Wesley wrote in “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist” how people in London were responding positively to his message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified.”¹⁵ Once they had accepted to follow Jesus, they realized that they needed someone to lead them in their Christian growth. They approached Wesley asking him to meet with them. He agreed to meet. The purpose of their meeting together was to “flee from the wrath to come, and to assist each other in so doing.”¹⁶ The societies consisted of all genders, ages, and economic status, and met based on the individuals geographic location.

The establishment of societies in London had been witnessed long before the Methodist *United Societies*. The Moravians had long influenced John. Their influence upon Wesley was both spiritual and organizational. Thus having attended a Moravian religious group, Wesley already understood both the strengths and weaknesses of religious groups. “Wesley was indebted to them in many instances for the incipient structure of his own organization.”¹⁷ The societies quickly began to grow, and spread to other towns.

Another organizational structure was the “bands.” “The bands were voluntary cells of people who professed a clear Christian commitment and who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of intention.”¹⁸ The bands consisted of smaller groups of individuals usually around five or six total. They were divided by “putting married or single men, and married or single women together.”¹⁹ “The central function of the band methodology was what Wesley termed ‘close conversation,’ by which he meant soul-searching examination, not so much behavior and

¹⁵ John Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist.” In *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*. ed. Rupert E. Davis, vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 255.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 256.

¹⁷ Watson, *The Early Class Meeting*, 73.

¹⁸ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Wilmore, KY: Rafiki Books, 2016), 110.

¹⁹ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 267.

ideas, but by motives and heartfelt impressions.”²⁰ Compared to the class meetings, the participants’ level of maturity was greater, and their openness was expected. Those who participated in bands were not considered new believers, but those who were further along in their Christian walk. Concerning the bands, Wesley wrote “They were built up in our most holy faith. They rejoiced in the Lord more abundantly. They were strengthened in love, and more effectually provoked to abound in good work.”²¹

The third structural organization that this paper will focus on is the class meeting. John Wesley wrote: “It scarce can be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this prudential regulation of the class-meetings. Many now happily experience that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before.”²² These words of Wesley express his belief in the importance of the formation of class meetings to the growth of the Methodist Church. Dr. Albert Outler, arguably considered by many as the greatest Methodist historian, wrote: “The class-meeting was more than another experiment in ‘Christian togetherness.’ It was, in fact, a *schola animarium*—a ‘school for growing souls.’ It was also an agency in the permanent Christian revolution on behalf of God’s kingdom, God’s righteousness—here on earth as in heaven.”²³

At Oxford University, there met a small group of men who began praying, studying, and serving the surrounding community. These young men formed a group that was known as the “Holy Club.” Because of their desire to preach to the lost, they began to preach on the importance of justification by faith and the new birth. Their preaching led them all over Great Britain. Among the most well known were John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield.

²⁰ Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 110.

²¹ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 268.

²² James B. Scott and Molly Davis Scott, *Restoring the Wesleyan Class-Meeting* (Dallas: Provident Publishing, 2008), XV.

²³ *Ibid*, XVI.

Because of their actions, thousands came into a relationship with the Triune God. It was argued that Whitefield was a better preacher than Wesley. What cannot be argued is John Wesley's impact on the church still today. For through Wesley's effort, the class meeting was formed.

Since the class meetings began, Wesley believed that the meetings paralleled a form of the early church. Acts 2:42-47: *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved"* class meetings were to emulate this scriptural model. As others questioned the groups, Wesley knew that the Lord added daily to the Methodist Church through the class meetings. "If he saw the class meeting as "helpful" in his early days, it had become "essential" by the time Methodism was expanding into all corners of the nation."²⁴

The understanding of the importance of spiritual formation was pressed upon Wesley long before the Methodist Church came into being. John and his brother Charles Wesley grew up in a home where this was stressed upon them at an early age. Their father (Samuel) was an Anglican clergyman and their mother (Susanna) was a daughter of a Nonconformist minister. This upbringing allowed them to witness the church organization and purpose of Anglican Religious Societies with a form of Puritan pietism. Samuel "instructed his children in the

²⁴ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Wilmore, KY: Rafiki Books, 2016), 103.

rudiments of liberal education and classical languages.”²⁵ Susanna, “in addition to her tutorial duties with her large family, devoted an hour every week with each child to attend to his or her spiritual progress. She considered the nurture of each child’s religious life as a serious duty entrusted to her by God, and the highest calling an individual could receive.”²⁶ The parents’ influence can be seen in the organization of the early Methodist Church. “Young John and Charles Wesley were absorbing instructional techniques that would serve them well in their coming struggles to enlighten the poor, the imprisoned, the alienated, the oppressed. Their learning environment was not at first the university classroom, but the kitchen hearth; their mentors were godly parents who viewed their offspring as sacred trusts.”²⁷

While many today believe that the origin of the class meeting was the “Holy Club” formed by the Wesley brothers and others at Oxford University in England, the class meeting was formed much later. It actually began after the formation of the Founder Society in December 1739. Three years after Wesley formed the first Society, the Bristol Society met to discuss how to repay the debt of their building. As discussion continued, a Captain Foy suggested that the society break into smaller groups with each leader collecting a penny a week from each member. When questioned about how the poor would be able to pay, Foy responded, “Then put ten or twelve to me, and I will supply what is wanting.”²⁸ The others present were challenged to do the same. So class meetings began, in a small way, as a capital campaign for retiring the debt of the Society.

As the classes began to meet, Wesley noticed that the church’s General Rules were not being followed. “The Rules accordingly stipulated three criteria. First, members were enjoined to

²⁵ Ibid, 33.

²⁶ Ibid, 36-37.

²⁷ Ibid, 38-39.

²⁸ Scott and Scott, *Restoring the Wesleyan Class-Meeting*, 3.

do no harm, and to avoid ‘evil in every kind.’ Second, they were to do good ‘of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all Men.’ Third, they were to attend upon “all the Ordinances of God: ‘Such are The publick Worship of God; the Ministry of the word; either read or expounded; The Supper of the Lord; Private Prayer; Searching the Scriptures; and Fasting, or Abstinence’.”²⁹ He encouraged the class leaders to hold the members accountable to the Rules. The Rules are still listed in the Book of Discipline today, and arguably still not followed today. With spiritual formation instilled upon the Wesley brothers, the class meeting became an obvious way to question, teach, and form spiritual growth in the people.

Dr. Kevin Watson writes: “Women and men often, though not always, met together in the same class.”³⁰ The rich and the poor, the young and the old, and the new converts met with the spiritually mature in the same class. “The groups were lead by both women and men.”³¹ The classes were designed to have around twelve participate in each.

Early in the formation of the class meetings, “The leaders were the initial point of contact for those who wished to join a society, and their judgment of potential members was indispensable in the trial period of three months which followed. During this time, on the recommendation of the leader, a note would be issued for admittance to society meetings, and at the end of three months the leader would again be consulted about full membership.”³²

Also, in the beginning of the class meetings, “Every Methodist became a member of a class and attended it regularly—or else he or she was no longer a member of the society.”³³ To ensure that this practice was followed for a short period of time, each member attending the class

²⁹ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 108.

³⁰ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 25.

³¹ *Ibid*, 25.

³² Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 106.

³³ *Ibid*, 93.

meeting received a ticket. After presenting the ticket, they would be allowed admittance into the societies.

In the first few decades, the meetings were stern and methodical. As time passed, the meetings became less instructive, and more experiential. This moving away from accountability hindered the classes. “It is difficult to avoid the inference, that, had the classes been continuing a weekly catechesis which took seriously the accountability for works of obedience and the means of grace as well as the shaping of religious experience, their changing social context would have produced a different record from the inbred religiosity available to us in the sort of literature.”³⁴ As time continued, the class meetings became burdensome to its members and participation waned.

With the decline of the class meeting came the decline of the Methodist Church. There are various reasons offered besides the one mentioned above for the decline of the meetings. “One explanation is that the rise of the Sunday school movement gradually pushed the class meeting to the margins of Methodism, ultimately causing it to disappear Another explanation, perhaps not unrelated to the first, is that as Methodists became increasingly affluent and upwardly mobile ... they were less and less comfortable talking to each other about the details of their lives as followers of Jesus Christ To return to the decline of the class meeting, then, as people increasingly participated in Sunday school, they had less time for other things. And as people committed to a weekly Sunday school class, being involved in a weekly class meeting seemed less important and even redundant.”³⁵ With the decline in the attendance of the meetings came the decline of the attendance of worship. When reading the history of class

³⁴ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 146.

³⁵ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 56-57.

meetings, one can see overtime how the attitudes of church members changed concerning the class-meetings.

The Early Order of the Class Meeting:

“The subject matter of a class meeting was personal experience, not doctrinal ideology or biblical information.”³⁶ In 1807, Joseph Nightingale published the format of a class meeting. He wrote: “The leader having opened the service by singing and prayer, all the members sit down, and he then relates to them his own experience during the preceding week. His joys, and his sorrows; his hopes and his fears; his conflicts with the world, the flesh, and the devil; his fightings without and his fears within; his dread of hell, or his hope of heaven; his pious longings and secret prayers for the prosperity of the church at large, and for those his brothers and sisters in class particular ... After some such harangue at this, the leader proceeds to inquire in to the state of every soul present; saying, ‘well sister, or well brother, how do you find the state of your soul this evening?’ Such advice, correction, reproof, and consolation, is then given, as the state of the case may require, so the leader passes on to the next, and the next ... After this, the leader, or some other on whom he may be pleased to call, gives out a stanza or two of a hymn, which being sung, standing, they proceed with prayer....”³⁷ This personal account of a class meeting is a familiar account written by others. “That sameness is why members could move from place to place and be assured of ‘finding a home’ in a different Class-Meeting.”³⁸

The Purpose of the Early Class Meeting:

Wesley quickly noticed the benefits of having class meetings. He recognized that the meetings could be an effective evangelism tool. “Wesley visualized the class meeting as the point of entry for most initiates into Methodism, and he wanted the entry group to be a warm

³⁶ Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 97.

³⁷ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 95-96.

³⁸ Scott and Scott, *Restoring the Wesleyan Class-Meeting*, 5.

fellowship of fellow strugglers, representing a broad cross-section of Methodism.”³⁹ With the church’s understanding of the importance of salvation, the class meeting was used as a smaller environment to spread the importance of repentance and accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. During Wesley’s time, the church was not always inviting to the poor, the illiterate, or to the person known as a “commoner.” The class meetings would provide a place for all the barriers to be eliminated. “Looking back from the perspective of the twentieth century, the Wesleyan class meeting seems to have been the first and probably the most leveling agent which helped to break up the rigid British caste system and provide upward social mobility.⁴⁰ The meetings were a place of inclusion for all of society.

This accountability would enhance “scriptural holiness” which was expected of every Methodist. From the beginning, Methodists were expected to grow in spiritual maturity. They were expected to live the fullness of a “sanctified” life. Wesley often described this sanctified life as “one moving toward perfection.” Perfection was understood as a growing in love for God, and for humanity. The class meeting helped each individual make progress toward perfection.

Wesley recognized that the meetings could be a place where each member could watch over one another in love. Wesley recognized that the class meeting “provided a sense of security, thereby meeting some basic social and personal needs of their members.”⁴¹ The groups were better able to take care of one another. At a time when debtor prisons were becoming fuller and the populace becoming poorer, the groups were able to support each other in the basic emotional and financial needs.

Dr. David Lowes Watson writes: “If we seek to tradition the class meeting, however, then its significance emerges primarily with regard to its purpose—that the members were enjoined to

³⁹ Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 96.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 96.

⁴¹ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 129.

watch over one another in love, lest they should make shipwreck of their faith. God's grace thereby moved through their lives and made a distinctive impact on the social context; but only because they were first of all obedient in their discipleship, the occasion and the dynamic of which was the relationship with God which they sought to maintain through the mutual accountability of their weekly meetings."⁴² In many ways, the class meetings were to be a form of *koinonia* as experienced by the early church. The meetings were to strengthen the members' communion with God and with one another.

"The key point for now is that the class meeting was the primary structure in early Methodism that was designed to keep every person connected to the rest of the movement, to make sure that people were doing all that they could to cooperate with the grace that God had given then and to ensure that no one was forgotten or left behind."⁴³

The Spiritual Life of Magee FUMC:

Magee First United Methodist Church is the only local United Methodist Church. The church was established in 1900 and has been at its current location since inception. The median age of the church members is 58. The church is composed of former Baptists, former Presbyterians, former Catholics, and former Pentecostals with former Baptists as the largest group. The 100% Caucasian congregation consists of 60 families. In 75% of these families, at least one adult has received some college education. The adults in 100% of the families have earned a high school diploma.

⁴² Ibid, 144.

⁴³ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 27.

Church attendance averaged 93 during Sunday morning worship in 2017. The church has Sunday school classes and Sunday and Wednesday night Bible studies. Over the past five years, the church has averaged 1.4 baptisms, and 2.2 professions of faith per year.⁴⁴

Magee FUMC has experienced a decline in attendance during seven of the past eight years.⁴⁵ The reasons are numerous: deaths, membership growing older, life-changing illnesses, transfer of membership (to Methodist churches or other denominations), job relocation, and apathy to name a few. The most recent noticeable growth occurred in 2012 when members of a UMC in a neighboring community became affiliated members of Magee FUMC.⁴⁶ The lack of numerical growth is disconcerting, but moreso is the apathy that has become more evident in recent years. The lack of spiritual vitality has caused church leaders to discuss the future.

In discussions with the members of the church, the question that I asked was, “What do you believe has caused apathy among the members?” Some suggested that both ministers immediately prior to my arrival stayed for only two years and during this time apathy became evident. One minister was completing his last two years before retirement. Members explained that there was little activity in the church during this time. The minister was a good person, but there was no discussion about the future of the church. There were no new conversations about the spiritual growth of the church. When his retirement came, the conference appointed someone completely different. While the former clergy member was described as laid-back, the new appointee had a strong Type-A personality. He quickly began to clash with some of the church staff, and this tension moved into some of the church committees. After two years, the pastor requested a move. In a span of five years, the church was lead by three pastors. The church experienced instability and she suffered for it.

⁴⁴ This data is from the end-of-year statistical reports.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ To understand more what an affiliated member is look on page 163, ¶1227 of the UMC Book of Discipline.

Arguably, the class meeting could have helped the church during this trying time. By providing spiritual growth, and stability as the church transitioned to another pastor. With early Methodism, clergy moved every two or three years. This is still applicable for Magee FUMC for 42 pastors have served the church since her formation. The new appointment of clergy averages a change every 2.8 years. If the class meetings had been implemented, the class leaders could have provided the leadership the church needed during each transition. The church, in turn, would not be clergy-driven, but laity-driven. This is another reason why the class meetings worked so well throughout the history of Methodism.

Some suggested that the attitude of the church was simply part of the times in which we live, all churches are experiencing apathy. The members are too busy with extracurricular activities such as: attending youth ballgames, camping and hunting, and traveling to name a few. They expressed that the church is not a priority of many people as it was in the past. They suggested that every church in Magee was experiencing the same apathy in their membership. I wondered if this should be accepted. Because every church in the community is experiencing apathy then it is acceptable for Magee FUMC.

Some suggested it was because there was no excitement within the church. There is nothing new happening in church. The worship is not inspiring. The Sunday school classes are boring. Those who attend do not seem to be happy that they are there. "It is easy to see how apathy set in," they replied. Is the lack of excitement because of the actual service or the attitude of the one arriving? Does one come to church to be entertained? Are you saying that God is not about doing something new?

I am appreciative for having these discussions with various members of Magee FUMC, but I noticed that none of the members looked inward to see if apathy was an emotion that they

were experiencing toward the church. No one questioned their commitment to the church. I was left wondering how the class meetings could help them in their Christian walk.

Next, the conversation moved to various committees of the church. The first discussion happened within the Finance Committee. For the past few years, the finances of the church have been affected by declining attendance. In seeking to resolve the issue, the committee has cut the budget year after year. This is certainly good stewardship, but reducing the budget has often negatively affected the church's ministry. It seems that their actions are not based upon the future of the church, but on what we can do to keep the doors open. The committee has been working from a place of "status quo." Let us keep the status quo rather than looking deeper to determine if there are other actions than can resolve the issue. Some have stated that the issue is less financial, and more spiritual. They claim the spiritual condition of the members is where the committee should begin to examine the finances. Conversations have begun to move toward the spiritual health of the church. Questions being asked: What can the Finance Committee do to support the spiritual growth of the church? What can we do to support other committees within the church so that all are moving toward addressing the spiritual growth of the church? How will our decisions affect the ministries of the church? These conversations are becoming more people driven than economically driven.

Another place where conversations are beginning to be more focused on spiritual growth is within the Evangelism Committee. To describe it as a committee is probably the wrong terminology. With the exception of the chairperson, for years the committee has been made of volunteers. This means that the committee does not have appointed members, but is open for all to become involved. Participation has been extremely poor. For the year 2017, committee membership was basically the chair and the pastor. The spring revival became the most

important local evangelism tool. Yet, the church did little to use the revival as such. The “revival” has become more of an inward focus, and the energy and excitement is short lived. By the fall, apathy has set in again.

When discussing spiritual growth, the committee is acknowledging that the church needs to grow in her relationship with God before they can effectively evangelize. How can you share the importance of having a relationship with God, if you do not have one? On Wednesday nights, the chair of evangelism has begun to teach H. Eddie Fox and George E. Morris’s book, *Faith-Sharing*. For those who have participated, the book has been informative, and growth is happening. Unfortunately for many, they know “of” God, but do not “know” God! The committee is supportive of the class-meeting model.

As 2018 drew nearer, conversations began to move toward what can be done to overcome this feeling of apathy so that the church can go forth doing what Jesus called her to do in making disciples. Questions being asked: What options are possible to bring about spiritual growth? How can we best get the people engaged with the church? Is this a need in which the evangelism committee needs to be engaged? If so, how can evangelism help to promote spiritual growth?

Other conversations began to arise in the Administrative Board meetings concerning spiritual growth of the church. The board consists of committee chairs within the church and members at large. The past history of attendance for board meetings has been low. As reports are given monthly, many are limited in their impact within the church. Numbers are the most often heard. How many attended this-or-that event? How much money did the church receive and spend for the month? The conversations are more about numbers than about people. With this being said, different questions are beginning to arise: Where will the church be in five years? How did we get here? What can be done to change the direction the church is heading? What

useful resources are available from the annual conference? These and other questions are beginning to show that the leadership is seeking answers to the right questions.

As the pastor of Magee FUMC, I participated in conversations with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC). The purpose is to review the conversations that committee members are having with the congregation. Some questions are: What is the feeling of the laity concerning the apathy? Are negative feelings directed toward the pastor? Does the laity notice the apathy that the leaders are recognizing? What suggestions are they hearing concerning improving the spiritual growth of the congregation? These conversations that the committee is having with the laity are important because they will help determine the direction the church needs go.

Within all the committees, people are asking about small groups. They hear of their family members and friends being involved in small groups in other churches. Some have purchased books about small groups. The thought of beginning small groups is gaining momentum. However, long-standing members recall how a former pastor tried to begin the groups and was met with resistance. Through these conversations, a lack of understanding of small groups became evident. Questions were asked: Will the church be more receptive to small groups today? What type of groups should we start? Where do we begin? Is one model better than others? Will beginning small groups grow the church? Will beginning small groups improve the spiritual vitality of the church? The discussion moved to the small groups model that helped form the early Methodist church: the class meeting.

Why the Class Meeting:

The history of small groups at Magee FUMC is limited. The active small groups consist of Sunday school, Wednesday night study and a ladies Bible study on Tuesdays. In the past, the

church participated in Disciple 1 Bible study, and a men's study. Though these have shown success, they are limited in meeting the needs of every member. The number of people who engage in these groups is small. Therefore, the church finds the pews full of believers and short on disciples.

The first "Driver of Vital Congregations" that the UMC promotes is the engagement of disciples in small groups. The General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) believes that each church should have multiple groups of all ages. The groups should be divided into different emphases of ministry: "fellowship 10%, ministry 20%, mission/outreach 30%, support groups 10%, and study groups 30%."⁴⁷ The environment at Magee FUMC is not ready to have a variety of groups. Yet, the leaders believe the church could move to these various forms of small groups in the future.

Dr. Kevin Watson wrote: "Not all small groups are created equal! Some small groups are better than others. As I have interacted with various approaches to small groups, I would say that there are three main approaches to small groups in contemporary Christianity. First, there are affinity groups. These groups are organized around common passions, interests, or hobbies ... Information-driven groups comprise the second type of small groups. These groups are focused on conveying information organized by a common curriculum The third type of small groups are transformation-driven groups. These groups focus not on discussion or mastery of content, but on changed lives, on group members' experience of God."⁴⁸

Affinity groups have their purpose, but making disciples is not their strongest asset. Information-driven groups are the most used form of disciple making at Magee FUMC. Again, transfer of information is important in the church, but in this context it has not sustained a culture

⁴⁷ "Implementing the 16 Drivers of Vital Congregations," UMC.org, accessed February 19, 2018, s3amazon.aws.com/Website_Properties/how-we-serve/documents/vital-congegations-implementing-16-drivers-vitality-.pdf.

⁴⁸ Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 6.

of growing disciples. For these reasons, the leadership of the church will explore and implement transformation-driven groups. The leadership is interested in forming the early Methodist Church use of class meetings.

The reason they have decided to use this model is its history of success within the early Methodist Church. They believe that using this model will help build relationships within the church and make them stronger. They believe with stronger relationships, the laity will have a stronger commitment to be engaged with the church and the community. They believe these groups will be life-changing for all who participate. Dr. Kevin Watson writes: “Discipleship, however, is about a way of life, not only the life of the mind. Disciples *follow* Jesus. They are *sent* out in ministry by Jesus. They *heal* the sick. They *feed* the poor. They *tell* people about Jesus and what he has done.”⁴⁹ A disciple experiences life transformation not only at conversion, but as one grows in their love for God and one another.

He continues, “One of the most important contributions the class meeting can make to contemporary Christianity is that it provides an entry point for every Christian....”⁵⁰ All forms of discipleship can take place through the formation of class meetings. All ages, genders, and members of different spiritual maturity can benefit from class meetings. If relationships are important, then one way to help the Millennial to become more open to the church experience is to use this group setting to introduce them to the church. If the poor have a misinformed perception of the church, then the group setting may help them correct their misunderstanding. Magee FUMC hopes to use this model of discipleship to reach those inside the church and out.

Moving forward with the Class Meeting:

⁴⁹ Ibid, 60.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 61.

As the congregation began to move forward with implementing the class meetings, I met with the Lay Leader. Since the groups work better when they are laity-driven, it was important that he support the implementation. Our conversations began with the vision for the church. I shared that as the pastor I believed this was the direction the church needed to go in reclaiming discipleship practices. The following week we met, and he arrived with questions:

- How do we fit this into our current set of programs offered? Do some “programs” need to be eliminated? Dr. Bryan Collier writes: “It is easier to never birth something than it is to kill it.”⁵¹ In answering the question, I asked, “Do our programs hurt or help our mission, our purpose?” I continued, “Is what we are doing now working?” The conversation led us to believe that it is not that current programs are ineffective, but there is possibly a better way.
- How will the congregation respond to eliminating programs that have been around since the beginning (Sunday school, etc.)? I responded that it is not that we need to eliminate Sunday school, but be open-minded to allow flexibility with the laity. Those who prefer to continue attending Sunday school may do so, and those who prefer the class meetings with alternative schedule options will be encouraged to attend them.
- Who will be the leaders? Discernment will need to take place in determining the leaders. Early in the church, the leaders were birthed from the class meetings themselves. But, since the meetings are not in existence here, then a core characteristic of the leaders should be someone who “is primarily being in a living relationship with Jesus and being willing to talk to others about that relationship and encourage them to talk about their

⁵¹ Bryan Collier, *Becoming an Orchard: Fruit Bearing Strategies for Any Church* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2006), 85.

relationship with God.”⁵² The leaders should be those who seek to live “scripturally holy” lives, and seek to “love God and others” more each day.

- How does the training take place and by whom? The leaders will be trained by the pastor. They will meet monthly in a group setting or individually, if needed, with the pastor present to answer any questions, and report how the groups are going. The material that will be used is Kevin D. Watson’s book, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*, and David Lowes Watson’s book, *Class Leaders: Recovering a Tradition*. These two publications will help train the leaders for their responsibilities to the church and the clergy. Once the groups are established, the class leaders will nominate those within the class to become leaders of their own classes.
- How will the groups be formed? Each individual will be invited by the class leader to join their particular group. This previously established relationship should encourage the invitees to participate. Also, the personal invitation should move the invitee to recognize the importance of being part of the group.
- Where do the small groups meet, and how often? The groups can meet at the church, but the leaders will be encouraged to meet in homes. This will be a less threatening environment for those who are uncomfortable with church. The groups will be encouraged to meet weekly.
- How do we evaluate whether or not the groups are successful? One way to determine if they are successful is the weekly participation of the members. If members are attending, then discipleship is taking place. Another trait of successful groups will be the invitation

⁵² Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 95-96.

of visitors who then attend the meetings. Another successful trait will be members becoming more engaged with the missions of the church.

After meeting with the Lay Leader and answering these questions, he was ready to proceed. Kevin Watson's book was purchased for him to read more about class meetings.

With momentum growing, I began having more conversations about class meetings. I began to share more details about the meetings. As I began sharing more about the class meetings, more questions and concerns began to arise. One of the concerns expressed was "Would this lead people to fear they were being judged by their peers?" Living in a society that already believes the church is judgmental is a great concern. Effectiveness of the class meeting within the church will need to be addressed. In 2007, David Kinnaman wrote a book titled, *UnChristian*, where one of the perceptions that the outsiders, and younger generation Christians have about the church is that the church members are judgmental. He writes: "Nearly nine out of ten young outsiders (87 percent) said the term *judgmental* accurately describes present-day Christianity...More than half the young Christians between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine (53 Percent) said they believe that the label *judgmental* accurately fits present day Christianity"⁵³ If this is true, there is not only an entire generation, but arguably people of all ages who question the attitude of the church. In turn, they would question the actions of those within their class meeting. To overcome these concerns, there needs to be a focus of offering grace to all involved. The class leaders will seek to "establish a climate of acceptance."⁵⁴

Dr. Kevin Watson writes: "There is a strong desire in contemporary Methodism to avoid being judgmental or condemning, which has unintentionally resulted in a near-total abandonment

⁵³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007,) 182-183.

⁵⁴ Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 99.

of any real standards or expectations for membership.”⁵⁵ Membership within the church should involve more than just a profession of faith. In the Methodist Church, each member is asked to be an active member of their local church. From my experience, they all have responded, “I will.” So, it seems if individuals are approached out of love, then some of the emotions of “being judged” should pass.

Dr. Watson takes the question of being judged further by adding the fear of being “excluded.” He writes: “So, in general, the class meeting should not really be a place where judgments about your life are being made At the same time, it seems to me that our concern to avoid being judgmental or exclusive is often overdone, especially because I’m not convinced that these can be avoided entirely or that they are inherently bad Avoiding judgment and exclusion altogether is impossible and undesirable. Instead, the concern should be focused on what judgments are being made and what is being excluded.”⁵⁶ The church should not avoid accountability because it makes a person feel uncomfortable. The leaders of the class meetings should encourage each member to “be willing to recognize the importance of placing faithfulness to the gospel ahead of comfort.”⁵⁷ How the church approaches sin in the life of an individual should always be considered an important part of her duty. The “wages of sin is death”⁵⁸ so, the church should encourage everyone to put away the sin in their lives, and move toward “Christian perfection.” This is what God desires of humanity.

He continues: “The point is that in a class meeting, it is not the group’s job to tell you about your relationship with God. Rather, you are telling the groups about your *experience* (emphasis mine) from the past week. The members of the class meeting should support you and

⁵⁵ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 96.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 67-69.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 97.

⁵⁸ Romans 6:23

pray for and with you as you seek to grow as a follower of Christ.”⁵⁹ As this is accomplished, the thought of being judged by your peers should dissipate, and love takes its place.

Another concern mentioned what if only a few participate in the class meetings. This is a good question, and if no one is willing to participate then the church has deeper issues than anyone is acknowledging. Scripture tells us in Matthew 18:20, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” If the numbers are small, do not be discouraged for all who are attending the meetings will be blessed by God. “When people meet together and talk about their pursuit of God, and their experience of God, the Holy Spirit seems to show up and draw people closer to God.”⁶⁰ Throughout all history, when others see lives being changed by the power of God they begin to ask questions. Celebrate those who are attending, and continue to meet and allow God to give the increase.

What is Next?:

As the pastor, I will preach a sermon series on Wesley’s teaching about “scriptural holiness.” Wesley described it as living and practicing sanctification. Many in the church stop with justification, but as Wesleyans we are called to grow in the image of Christ and become holy as God is holy. “In brief, sanctification, or holiness, means that we are consumed with our love for God and for neighbor, united with God, being made in Christ’s image, walking as He walked, being taught and led by the Spirit, serving Christ in the world. Holiness is a life consumed by Christ.”⁶¹ While preaching the series, there will be a strong emphasis on how the class-meeting works to cultivate this life.

Next, I will personally invite those individuals who are already seeking a deeper relationship with God to become class leaders. Throughout the history of the class meeting the

⁵⁹ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 71.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 57.

⁶¹ Scott and Scott, *Restoring Methodism*, 115.

importance of the class leader was evident. In 1875, Reverend John Atkinson wrote: “No one, except the pastor, sustains more interesting and important relation to the Church than the Class Leaders.”⁶² This should encourage the laity to be more involved in the church. In, *The Class Meeting*, Dr. Watson writes how the leaders of the class meetings are being trained to be more than just class leaders but also leaders of the church. From my experience, this is needed as fewer people are moving into leadership positions in the church. After training the leaders, they will be encouraged to invite people to join their own groups. Also, the invitation will be offered on a temporary basis. The leader will ask the invitee to come for four weeks before he or she decides to permanently participate. This will allow members to ease into the group. The leader trusts God to move in the lives of the class members in a short time. The desire is that the groups will be no more than 12. The groups may be larger than 12 until more leaders are formed.

The leader will guide the class. The class will begin with a hymn or Bible verse or even a poem if appropriate. The purpose is to move the members to a place of participation. Next, the leader will begin the discussion. He or she will answer the question, “Where did you experience God this past week?” The purpose of this question is to help each member begin to become more aware of the Holy Spirit moving in their lives. The leader will not be critical if the member does not answer. He or she will only encourage the member to be more open to witnessing the Spirit moving in their lives the upcoming week. The leader will give everyone present the opportunity to answer. Another benefit of answering this question will be that if someone is not a Christian, they will have the opportunity to hear how others are experiencing God away from church. As the meeting progresses, the hope is that the leader will be able to discern when he or she needs to add more to the conversation for this is an accountability group, too. It is not to be implied that the leader is the only one who can speak toward a problem someone might be having or that they

⁶² Scott and Scott, *Restoring the Wesleyan Class-Meeting*, 111.

must speak, but that the leader should be the first, so to make sure the tone is one of love not condemnation. The meeting should not last more than an hour, and at the conclusion the leader should close in prayer.

Early in the formation of class meetings, the class leaders met with the clergy member of the society weekly. My hope is to meet with the leaders monthly unless called upon sooner. I will meet to hear how the groups are going. How is the attendance? How are people participating? Are there any issues that I need to address? Is there someone new to nominate as a class leader? I will offer encouragement to the leader. I believe this allows the leaders to claim responsibility for his or her group.

The leader will care for the group, and promote the other members to care for one another. If someone misses, the leader will contact the person. This will help each person experience mutual care for one another. In a more practical sense, this will help the pastor know what is happening in the lives of the congregants. Who is sick? Who needs special attention? As the church grows, it becomes a greater challenge to care for the membership. The class meeting will meet the need of inclusion that each member desires.

Conclusion:

“Dwight L. Moody, nineteenth-century revivalist, offered this commendation: ‘The Methodist class-meetings are the best institutions for training converts the world ever saw.’”⁶³
This is a ringing endorsement by someone who was not a Methodist.

John Wesley said, “The church changes the world not by making converts but by making disciples.”⁶⁴ Wesley’s use of the societies, band meetings, and the *class meetings* proved to have a huge impact on Methodism. The use of the class meetings became so important to Wesley that

⁶³ Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 91.

⁶⁴ Discipleblog Admin., “Making Disciples: 6 Keys from the Master,” *DiscipleBlog.com*, September 6, 2012, accessed February 15, 2018, <http://www.discipleblog.com/2012/09/making-disciples-6-keys-from-the-master/>.

he feared that the “decline” of the meetings would bring about the decline of the Methodist Church. Kevin Watson wrote: “But as Methodism began to distance itself from the class meeting, its growth also began to decrease, then stop, and finally decline.”⁶⁵ Magee FUMC and the United Methodist Church in America bear witness to his prediction today.

Magee FUMC hopes to use the class meeting model to increase the growth of discipleship among her membership. As the pastor, I am called to lift the vision of the class meeting repeatedly before the church. The hope is that the implementation of the meetings will bring a rebirth to the church.

Reverend Peter Cartwright described the class meeting this way: “In these class-meetings the weak have been made strong; the bowed down have been raised up; the tempted have found delivering grace; the doubting mind has had all its doubts and fears removed; and the whole class have found that this was ‘none other than the house of God, and the gate of heaven.’ Here the hard heart has been tendered, the cold heart warmed with holy fire; here the dark mind, beclouded with trial and temptation, has had every cloud rolled away, and the sun of righteousness has risen with resplendent glory, ‘with healing in his wings;’ and in these class-meetings many seekers of religion have found them the spiritual birth-place of their souls into the heavenly family, and their dead souls made alive to God.”⁶⁶ This is the expectation that the Magee FUMC has for class meetings.

“Participating in a class meeting does not guarantee that you will become a mature Christian. It is not a magic bullet that is guaranteed to make you a saint. But participating in a class meeting will create space in your life for you to give voice to your victories and struggles. This discipline will result in your being more aware of what is going on in your own relationship

⁶⁵ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 31.

⁶⁶ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 129-130.

with God. It will also help you know what is happening with other people in your faith community.⁶⁷ By implementing the class meeting model, Magee FUMC will seek to experience rebirth, renewal, and resurrection. The greatest mistake the church could make would be to not do anything.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 62.

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