



Anne Schlesinger

Growing Faith in Community

WESLEY
UNITED METHODIST

Thank You



There are so many individuals to thank... but mostly I thank the communities of Wesley United Methodist Church in Bakersfield, CA for supporting my faith journey, and The Academy for Spiritual Formation for their care of me. These are the communities that care for and encourage my spiritual growth. Special thanks are due to Nick Strobel, Robert Bewley and Liz Bewley who spent hours helping me clarify my writing and editing out mistakes.

I must also thank the people of Boulder Creek United Methodist Church who helped me begin the journey of discipleship, most especially Becky Perry, Cathy Warner and that special small women's prayer group. (You know who you are!)

Beside their resource listed in the Bibliography, I am very much indebted to Pastors Matt Smith and Linda Dew-Hiersoux, who invited me to use anything I learned from their book, *Growing in Faith at the Table*, without hesitation. They, like many pastors, know that it takes community to succeed in this journey. I especially appreciate their example of leaving room for notes and journaling.

I am grateful for my family, especially my husband David, my daughters Sunshine and Vanessa, my wonderful granddaughters, Madison, Mia, and Penelope, my baby grandson Travis, and last but not least, my son-in-law Trevor. They give me love, even when I don't merit it. (Although we all deserve love, thanks be to God!)

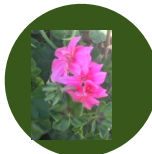
Introduction



Academy #40 was held in San Damiano Retreat Center, Danville, California from July 2018 to February 2020. (The Academy was cut short because of the COVID pandemic.)



Our first year project was to develop a personal discipline to aid our own faith growth. I committed to doing art—painting, drawing, fiber arts—prayerfully. The cover art is part of that project.



Our second year project was to develop something to give back to the community of our choice. This booklet is an attempt to create a discipleship plan for small groups to grow in faith and journey together.



(All photography and artwork in this book are by the author. Many of the photographs were taken at San Damiano Retreat Center, Danville, CA. You will note several photographs of the sea and beaches. These places give my heart solace.

Growing Faith in Community Begins with Discipleship

The mission of the United Methodist Church is “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” There is at least one person at Wesley who argues with that language, saying that making disciples is God’s job. Of course, she is right. God calls us all and gives us the gift of faith. But we, too, have a part in discipleship-making. The Risen Christ commissioned his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations,” and the church is a vehicle for that work. According to Phil Maynard, author and church coach, a church’s focus should be more about discipleship than membership. He says, “As I visit and consult with congregational leaders all around the country and ask about their discipleship process, I usually get either a blank stare or a full-color brochure listing all the Bible studies and special interest studies being offered for that semester (note the academic language.) There’s nothing wrong with a strong Christian Education program. We need strong foundations on which to build. The problem is that we have replaced discipleship with Christian Education. They are not the same. Discipleship is not just about information. It is about behaviors. Discipleship is not just about education. It is about transformation.”¹ Information may lead to transformation, but in order to transform, we each need more than information. We need formation.

Church membership is important for having our voices heard on a denominational level. But discipleship is important on an individual level, on a local church level and just about everywhere in the world. Can you imagine a world where every person put love of God, love of creation, love of neighbor and love of self—not ego or bravado, but of one’s true self—before everything else? In my imagination, that is what God’s beloved kingdom looks like.

John Wesley, who with his brother Charles founded the Methodist movement in 18th century England, created a methodical process for developing and deepening his relationship with God. He prescribed it for everyone interested in Methodism. The goal of the Methodist movement was to “reform the nation, particularly the church; and to spread scriptural holiness through the land.”² Wesley created “General Rules,” which are listed in detail in the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. They have been simplified to “Do good, Do no harm, and Stay in love with God.” Doing all the good we can in the world and avoiding evil of every kind takes discipline and hard work. For Christians, it means living in a way that follows the way of Jesus in everything we do. Staying in love with God is a gift of faith, but can be enhanced and strengthened by human actions of watchfulness for how God is present in our lives.

¹ Phil Maynard. *Membership to Discipleship: Growing Mature Disciples Who Make Disciples*. (Copyright by Dr. Phil Maynard, 2015) pp. 12-13

² *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016) p. 12.



I found Main Beach, Santa Cruz, CA to be a very special place to be in God’s presence.

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.” — **Matthew 28: 16-20**, Common English Bible

How Do We Find Truth?

The basic way we ascertain truth is first by questioning, then by seeking. United Methodists use four sources to establish the truth of a thing: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. (We call this the “Quadrilateral.” Other denominations may seek truth using similar methods, but researching that is not within the scope of this booklet.) In one of my classes in seminary, Theology was described as “where faith meets understanding.” Very often our faith first comes from a teacher—perhaps someone in your family, or a pastor or Sunday school teacher—who introduced you to something that became a seed from which your faith developed. If it was sound teaching, much of it came from **scripture**. The next step in seeking truth is considering Church **tradition**. Christian faith has been passed down over millennia. Something that has been taught for several centuries must have some truth to it. Then, is it **reasonable**? Healthy Christianity doesn’t ask you to believe things that make no sense to as reasonable person. And finally, ask yourself, is that how I have **experienced** God? This is especially useful when determining God’s forgiveness. Have you experienced a God of wrath, a God of grace, or both? What is your experience?

I believe God is a God of grace and mercy. We will all experience difficult times in our life. We will all suffer. Several times in my ministry I have been asked, “What have I done to deserve this suffering?” or “Why is God doing this to me?” Those questions are impossible to answer in times of crisis. But someone who has spent time in seeking truth prior to facing crisis may ask those questions, which would lead to more questions: “Is that who you believe God is?” “Is that your past experience of the God you worship?” “Do you feel worthy of God’s love?”

How did you come to faith? Who or what has helped you on your journey?

What is your experience of church?

I developed faith through establishing a regular prayer life. I grew up in a family that was nominally Christian. My brothers and I were sent to Sunday school at a Presbyterian church when we were small, but my parents did not attend. My mother taught Sunday school when I was in third grade, but I don’t remember much about it other than coloring pictures of Jesus. My family didn’t pray together, and if there was a Bible in the house, I didn’t know about it. We certainly didn’t do family devotions. After my oldest brother went through confirmation, he decided he was “done” with church, so we all stopped attending. But as a young adult, a crisis in my life caused me to turn to Jesus in prayer, and I found him waiting for me. Even after the crisis passed, I continued my prayer life. However, I didn’t join a faith community until about five years later when my daughter asked me, “Mommy, what is Easter?” I realized I was doing her a disservice by not giving her some faith training. We began attending a United Methodist Church on Easter Sunday, and by the end of that summer I had already been roped into teaching Sunday school, even though I’d had no religious training since third grade. I began my theological education with a Sunday school curriculum for kindergarten children! I do not recommend that kind of initiation!

A decade later my family moved to California, and I began attending church in a small town in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Boulder Creek United Methodist Church was a unique place with a congregation that had faith across a vast theological spectrum. Some of the older members were quite conservative, and other members ranged from conservative to the mystical. As I began my journey, I joined a prayer group that met twice a month on Thursday mornings, and that was the real beginning of my journey as a disciple. That group of women opened me and challenged me and invited me to hear God’s call in my life. That small church needed all my skills and trained me up, accepting my mistakes and holding me accountable for my spiritual growth. I became very active in church, taking what was then called Lay Speaker’s Training. When the church leadership decided I was ready,

Can you talk about your faith in this community? Why or why not? Do you?

Doodle space



Building Trust

To grow as disciples, we need to reach deep and to share deeply. It is problematic to have only shallow conversations with people with whom you have only a skin-deep relationship. Yet this can happen at church. How many times have you answered that question “How are you?” with “I am fine,” no matter how rough a time you’re going through? That is especially common during coffee hour right after the worship service has ended. We cannot go deep if we haven’t yet built up trust, and building trust takes time.

Rev. Scott Hughes wrote about establishing trust in an article about how to prepare for a meeting that might become tense. He contends that trust-filled relationships come from practice by engaging often in difficult conversations. Hughes wrote, “A helpful analogy is that of a cauldron over fire. When fire heats the elements within the cauldron, pressure will build. What will contain the pressure exerted on the cauldron is the thickness of the walls. Trust is like the walls of the cauldron. The thicker the walls of the cauldron, the more pressure it will be able to handle. Building trust takes experience and time. It cannot be rushed.” Building trust takes a bit of risk.

This is where small groups become important. That small group bi-monthly prayer group I mentioned earlier was my experience in growing in trust. When I was the newcomer and the rest of the group had been meeting together for years, I had a difficult time opening up. It took several meetings of listening to others and the joys and struggles in their lives before I was able to share my joys and struggles. At first it made me feel vulnerable, but the benefits were enormous! Opening myself and sharing deeply increased not

only my trust in the group, but also my trust in God. And the more I was able to share, the more my faith increased. I was truly blessed. (Thanks to all those wonderful women, but especially Becky and Cathy. You’re forever in my heart.) Those faithful women prayed for me as they had always prayed for each other.

How do we start Covenant groups?

The best way to start any project is with prayer. I don’t want to assume everyone who is reading this booklet is comfortable praying, so from time to time I will include a prayer. But I want to encourage everyone, even those new at discipleship, to become comfortable leading prayer. It is not necessary to use deep theological terms to pray well. What is much more important is to be thankful, and to ask God to use you.

Another part of my story

As I mentioned, after Certified Lay Minister Training, I went to seminary. I attended Pacific School of Religion, where I met a number of people who deeply touched my life. But after graduation, there didn’t seem to be any pastoral jobs open in the California/Nevada Annual



Sequoia National Park

Conference, and I was unable to move to another Conference. What could I do but pray? I began to pray the Covenant Prayer in the Wesley Tradition every day. To this day, I get misty-eyed when praying that prayer, remembering how much I needed to trust in God for my future. Pray this prayer with caution, for it will change your life and focus. (My first appointment was in a wonderful little church in LeGrand, CA. They often received pastors right out of seminary and trained us up!)

A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt,
rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee
or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee
or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O Glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Thou art mine, and I am thine.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

Following prayer, the next step is to find or form a covenant group of four to eight people. People should commit to meet together for 60 minutes every week. As I write this, much of the world is isolated, “sheltered in place” due to the coronavirus pandemic. This has been very difficult for many people. I am extremely blessed to be able to work from home and to have a close-knit family able to reach me via a number of platforms, and yet isolation has underscored the real need for community. As I said, one good thing that has come from this difficult time is that with fewer distractions we are able to make time for God. Another blessing is our ability to be remote community. Although meeting remotely may not seem like a blessing, through technology we are able to connect with people across miles without leaving the comfort of home. Though it precludes human touch, we still have the ability to meet face to face online.

During COVID, each group will meet via Zoom or other remote format. Once able to meet in person, members will gather in a place determined by the group to be comfortable. This might be in one member’s home, or a coffee house, or at church. Sit in a circle facing one another. Covenant groups are not bible study, per se. They are a commitment to watch over one another in love. That means holding one another accountable in a non-judgmental way. A facilitator convenes the group, holding the space and guiding the time. To quote *Growing in Faith at the Table*, “This model allows people to know that we are all in this together and the the authority of a faith community is shared by many and does not solely reside with [the pastor]. We learn from each other as we live life together. We hope [this creates] a safe place for people to listen, share, search Scripture, and pray together.” (page 56). The intention is to create an

atmosphere of intentional disciple making, leaving room for each person to explore and express his or her relationship with God in a safe place. It is also a group intended to make every member feel connected and in a healthy relationship. It will no doubt be imperfect, so it also needs to be grace filled.

Another quote from *Growing in Faith at the Table*:

“Sometimes we idealize what Christian community should be. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, ‘Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it has sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian is likely to bring with him [or her] a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and if we are fortunate, with ourselves,’” (page 141).

We all fall short because we are human. But all healthy humans are relational. God is calling us into deep relationship with God and with human companions.

Notes:


Prayer

Hello, God. We are gathered in your holy name, and we ask for guidance. Guide our hearts, minds and voices. Help us be open to your presence. Help us stay mindful of our love for you and our love for each other. Amen.

Covenant Group framework and ground rules:

The basic framework of the meeting is as follows:

- Gathering (about 3 minutes)
- Opening prayer (2 minutes.)
- Reminder of the covenant groups rules. (2 minutes)
- Group Questions (see below) 40 minutes
- Searching Scripture (10 minutes)
- Closing prayer (3 minutes)

The Questions:

The original Wesleyan small groups were first formed in 1739 by John Wesley following three simple rules: First: By doing no harm (many particulars were listed) by avoiding evil of every kind (again, there was a long list) and by attending upon all the ordinances of God. (Bishop Reuben Job called that “Staying in love with God.”)

Thus we ask,

- “How is it with your soul this week?”
- How have you done good, and how have you done harm?
- What spiritual disciplines have you practiced to stay in love with God?

Some important guidelines:

- We pay attention when someone is sharing.
- There is no crosstalk.
- We are not to fix or advise one another.
- We hold confidentiality strictly.

- If a question arises when someone else is sharing, notice it and wonder what God maybe saying to you.

Some examples of spiritual disciplines:
(From John Wesley)

- The public worship of God
- The ministry of the Word, read or expounded (witness of God in your life.)
- The Lord’s Supper
- Family and private prayer
- Searching the Scriptures
- Fasting or abstinence

We talked about public worship before in the section on the importance of community.

Some people are reluctant to witness because of a bad experience of someone trying to “push” their religion on a reluctant person. But the District Superintendent of the Central Valley recently said that humans are *natural witnesses*. When we see a movie we love, we tell others about it. If we eat at a great restaurant or read a good book, we have no trouble sharing that with our family or friends. In order to effectively witness to our faith, we have to answer the question Jesus posed to those early 12 disciples this question: “Who do you say that I am?” Once we can readily and faithfully answer that question for ourselves, we will be so certain of our relationship with Christ that we will have no trouble witnessing to our faith.

Who do you say Jesus is? Why?

Now when Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Human One is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” He said, “And what about you? Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Then Jesus replied, “Happy are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has shown this to you. Rather my Father who is in heaven has shown you. I tell you that you are Peter. And I’ll build my church on this rock. The gates of the underworld won’t be able to stand against it. I’ll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.” Then he ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Christ. —Matthew 16: 13-20 (CEB)

Discipleship is about transformation of individuals and community. Transformed community affects not only the community of the church but also the community that surrounds the church and eventually — the world.



We bear witness to God’s love in formal ways like preaching and writing theological papers, but we also bear witness through love of family and community, through teaching our children to pray, and most of all by noticing and sharing what God has transformed in our lives.

Prayer is basically talking to God. We may or may not be mightily praying for a miracle. But Paul of Tarsus taught us to “pray without ceasing.” I used to wonder how to do that, but I learned that everything we do and say is a form of prayer. That is a good thing to keep in mind when we are angry!

None of us live perfect lives, although Wesley was convinced we are going on to perfection. In order to do that, we notice both the ways we do good in the world and the ways we do harm. Once we align our lives in such a way that love is at the core of what we do and say, we are living in a way that is fully human. When we fall short of that goal, we get back on track by confession (acknowledging the harm) repentance (turning around) and making amends.

Discerning your place in a covenant discipleship group

As I have said before, God calls each of us into relationship with God and each other. This should be a joyful situation, not one of fear. Fear happens when we feel judged rather than loved. Because developing trust takes time, we must adhere to the rules of no crosstalk or advice. This is not group therapy! Covenant groups are

not intended to “fix” one another, but rather to be places for individuals to discover God’s love through a community watching over each other in love. Unlike those 18th century groups John Wesley created, Bakersfield Wesley UMC will not require participation in a group in order to attend worship or maintain membership. But our Annual Conference is requiring each church to have a plan for disciple making. I hope formation of covenant groups will be such a plan. More than that, I hope participation will deepen our journey and our relationships with God and with each other.

- HOW IS IT WITH YOUR SOUL?
- WHAT GOOD HAVE YOU DONE?
- WHAT HARM HAVE YOU CAUSED?
- WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO STAY IN LOVE WITH GOD?

Jesus and his small group...



Prayer from Corrymeela Community, Ireland

God our Mother and Father, we come to you as children. Be with us as we learn to see one another with new eyes, hear one another with new hearts, and treat one another in a new way. Amen.

Prayer from the United Methodist Clergywomen's Consultation, US, 20th century

Like the sun that is far away and yet close at hand to warm us, so God's Spirit is ever present and around us. Come, creator, into our lives. We live and move and have our very being in you. Open now the windows of our souls.

Prayer for Discernment by Hugh Cameron, Scotland

Almighty God, in a world of change, you placed eternity in our hearts and gave us power to discern good from evil. Grant us sincerity, that we may persistently seek the things that endure, refusing those which perish, and that, amid things vanishing and deceptive, we may see the truth steadily, follow the light faithfully, and grow ever richer in that love which is the life of all people; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Prayer for truth and mercy

Help us, O God, witness to truth—the truth of our lives and the truth of our faith. Help us bear witness to your eternal truth. Guide us this hour to hear your voice as well as the voices of our sisters and brothers. In your mercy, cleanse us of our unhealthy acts and thoughts, and forgive us, we pray. Free us, lead us, love us. Amen.

A Prayer of Saint Patrick; 15th Century, Ireland

Christ be with us, Christ be before us, Christ behind us, Christ in us, Christ beneath us, Christ above us, Christ on our right, Christ on our left, Christ where we lie, Christ where we sit, Christ where we arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of us, Christ in everyone that sees us, Christ in every ear that hears us. Salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is of the Christ. May your salvation, O Lord, be ever with us.

Prayer for healing (Based on a poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes)

What is not well in you? What hurts? What is weak? Beloved God, we ask your presence among us. We need your wisdom and gifts. Holy Spirit, reach us, touch our afflictions and brokenness, and raise us up. Help us rise, and serve. Amen.

Space to write your own prayers, creed, etc:

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Labyrinth in my friend Becky's front yard; lovingly built by her husband Ron.





Wesley United Methodist Church
1314 Oswell Street (Corner of Niles)
Bakersfield, CA 93306

Sunday Worship 10:30 am
YOU are welcome here.