

NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A COVENANT GROUP'S SIX MONTH JOURNEY
TOGETHER FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN THE
NANAIMO CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

A Project
Submitted to the Seminary Faculty
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

By
Gary Peter Nawrocki

Kansas City, Missouri
February 28, 2014

A COVENANT GROUP'S SIX MONTH JOURNEY
TOGETHER FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN THE
NANAIMO CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

Approved by:

First Reader

Research Consultant

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program

Date

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Overview of the Study	1
The Need For Spiritual Growth	5
A Deficit in Spiritual Formation	6
Wesley’s Vision of a Christian	9
Wesley’s Means to Forming Christians	12
Theological Implications	14
Means of Grace	15
The Centrality of Grace	15
Confronting Antinomianism and Works-Righteousness	16
Challenges to Discipleship	19
Definitions	21
The Project	22
The Document	26
Chapter 2: Literature Review	29
Introduction	29
More Than Words	32
Spiritual Formation	34
Grace	35
Means of Grace or Spiritual Forming Practices	36
Important Means of Grace	39
Getting Beyond Ourselves	42
Means of Grace in the Church Today	44

Covenant Groups	47
Spiritual Formation and Service	49
Bringing Wesley to Nanaimo	51
Chapter 3: Research Design	56
Context of the Study	56
The Community	56
The Congregation	58
Discipleship Patterns and Challenges	59
Discipleship Practices	61
Project Design	64
Introducing the Theme of Covenant	64
Recruiting Participants	67
Consent	69
A Safe Place	70
Covenant Expectations	71
Baseline for Evaluation: Spiritual Well-Being Scale	71
Building Community	74
Resource Book	74
Group Meetings	76
Concluding the Project	78
Projected Outcomes of the Covenant Group Experience	79
Chapter 4: Research Data and Results	82
The Sermons	82

Recruiting	83
The Covenant Agreement	85
Introducing Expectations	85
Sample Covenants	86
The Agreed on Covenant	87
The Participants	91
The Weekly Sessions	93
Spiritual Well-Being Inventory	97
Attendance	102
Post Project Survey	103
Responses Outside the Covenant Group	108
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions	110
Summary	110
Evaluation	111
Implications of the Study for the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene	117
Limitations of the Study	123
Surprises Along the Way	128
Further Studies	130
Concluding Remarks	132
Appendices Index	136
Appendix I: Sermons	137
Covenant Forms Community: Hebrews 8:6-13	137
Covenant Means Commitment: Hebrews 9:1-10	142

Covenant Means Consistency: Hebrews 8:1-7	147
Appendix II: Invitation to Join Covenant Group	152
Appendix III: Introduction to Covenant Groups	156
Appendix IV: Spiritual Well-Being Scale	160
Appendix V: Covenant Group Agreements	161
Appendix VI: Chapter Work Sheets for <i>Reflecting God</i>	162
Appendix VII: Post Project Survey	176
Bibliography	178

List of Figures

Figure 1. Overview of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale by Craig W. Ellison and Raymond P. Paloutzian	72
Figure 2. Chart indicating how long each participant professed to be a Christian	92
Figure 3. Spiritual Well-Being scores plotted on a graph	98
Figure 4. Religious Well-Being scores for each participant plotted on a graph	100
Figure 5. Existential Well-Being scores of each participant plotted on a graph	101
Figure 6. Table of attendance for each participant in the group over the twenty-six week project.	102

Chapter One

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this project is to explore the benefits of a covenant group for spiritual formation through its accountability, support and communal practice of Christian spiritual disciplines. The covenant group provides a place where participants are encouraged to listen and respond to what God wants for their lives. Through support and accountability the participants are able to live out what God is doing in them. Since the covenant group emerges from deep historical roots the challenge that surfaces is to determine if it is effective for spiritual growth in today's spiritual and social climate.

For twenty-eight years I have pastored in Western Canada, and have observed some issues in the church that concern me. First, despite all the activity and programs in the church today many Christians desire more in their spiritual walk. "Programs can't muffle the cry of innumerable hearts longing for a meaningful relationship with the Almighty and a sense of community with the people of God."¹ The cry is for a deep, life-transforming relationship with God.

When the covenant group idea was presented at our local Church of the Nazarene in Nanaimo, B.C. many responded as one participant would write: "I want a closer walk with the Lord and [I want to be] able to express that love to others." But the nagging question remains: "What must a person do to experience this deeper walk?" To satisfy this hunger for a deeper spirituality many outside the church, and some within, are charting their own paths, combining elements from various traditions to form their own

¹ Wes Tracy, Gary Cockerill, Donald Demaray and Steve Harper. *Reflecting God* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2000), 27.

gods. Still it has not satisfied the cry of the searching heart. “In these days of confused and frantic longing for God, gods, some god, any god, despair rises like a dark tide.”²

Second, there is a large body of people within the community that used to attend the church but do so no longer. Some have drifted to other churches, but alarming amounts of people are not connected to any church. Many will continue to see themselves as part of the church they left despite non-attendance, and they are not actively looking for a new church to attend.³ Many of those people left the church after age fifteen and sixty-one percent of people in their twenties who were once active in church are now disengaged.⁴ Though there are many reasons for a person to stop attending a local church, a good reason to stay would be a strong, vibrant discipleship program that allows the participants to draw closer to God and each other, building a greater sense of community which elicits greater commitment to that fellowship.

Thirdly, within the local fellowship there is a deficit in leaders. Most pastors bemoan the fact that there are not enough leaders to run the children’s programs, or the youth program, or the worship team. Some of those leaders may be in the statistics of those who left the church, while others may be waiting to be enlisted and trained. However, too many of those who attend are satisfied to come to the weekly worship service on Sunday and then not participate in any ministry beyond that. In fact the posture of too many Christians is that of a consumer, one who comes to the church

² Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*, 16.

³ Reginald W. Bibby, *A New Day: The Resilience and Restructuring of Religion in Canada* (Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, 2012), 52.

⁴ Amy McMillan, citing Barna research in “Are Christian Teens Leaving the Church Because of Unfulfilling Youth Groups?” *Christianity Today* (October 24, 2013) under “Church,” <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/are.christian.teens.leaving.the.church.because.of.unfulfilling.youth.groups/34475.htm> (accessed February 10, 2014).

asking, “Will this church meet my needs?” rather than “What can I do to help?” “It rarely crosses our minds anymore to wonder whether or not we can contribute something or be used to meet the needs of the kingdom in the context of the local church.”⁵

Many Christians do not realize they are to live out their faith in their daily lives, taking the grace of God to the community through missional living. Many Christians believe that justification is the end of the journey, unaware that there is more, and that Christians are saved to serve.⁶ John Wesley challenged the notion that Christians just care for their own salvation saying that “whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others.”⁷ God has so much more for those who will enter God’s Kingdom work, not as a way to earn God’s favour but the way to enter into the abundant life found in the presence and will of God. Sadly too many within the church take on the role of “tourist,” waiting to see what sights the tour guide (pastor) has for them instead of becoming disciples who are learning to grow in grace so that they may in turn minister God’s grace as demonstrated by the Master, Jesus.⁸

Over the years many different approaches have been implemented within the life of the church to address the need for spiritual development. From catechism classes to monastic cloisters, from divinity schools to the Sunday school, all were means to help shape the people of God into Christ followers. John Wesley’s unique contribution was the

⁵ Joseph M Stowell, *Shepherding the Church into the 21st Century: Effective Spiritual Leadership in a Changing Culture* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994), 20.

⁶ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 90.

⁷ John Wesley, in “Sermon on the Mount” cited in Runyon, 106.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 16-17.

society with its various components for spiritual formation: the class meeting, bands, select society, spiritual guides, penitent band and family religion.⁹ Though Wesley's approach to spiritual formation through small groups was not new, its form and practice was unique.

In many ways this project is digging into the Wesleyan roots of the holiness movement to find principles that might guide us forward today. The religious challenges of John Wesley's day reflect some similarities to the challenges faced today, yet a spiritual vibrancy was rekindled in the hearts of many through the ministry of the Wesleys. One of the keys to the success of the Wesleyan movement was the class meeting for spiritual formation. This model of small group discipleship is an important resource for this project and many of its principles are implemented in this study.

Chapter one briefly outlines the need for spiritual growth and how covenant groups, modelled after Wesley's class meeting contribute to faithful discipleship within the church. A brief introduction to the practices within the church designed for spiritual growth which John Wesley called the means of grace is necessary, for these help believers stay connected to the body of the church. Two opposite approaches to the use of the means of grace are contrasted, one being legalism, the other antinomianism. Legalism is participating in the practices of the church for their own sake without understanding their deeper significance. Antinomianism is to place no value on the means of grace, or any kind of church order. Wesley found a middle ground between these extremes and this is the path to be navigated in this study.

⁹ Wesley D. Tracy, "Spiritual Direction in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition" in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices*, ed. Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 118-123.

Chapter one also notes the challenge of faithful spiritual development in a climate of religious consumerism and the obsession with self gratification. It is suggested that a good antidote to this mindset is the covenant group for spiritual growth. Some terms need to be clarified for a proper understanding of the project, and this is followed by a brief overview of the project itself and why this project is relevant for the ministry of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene.

The Need for Spiritual Growth

Throughout scripture God calls God's people to grow in faith and righteousness. For instance, in 1 Peter 2:1-3 one finds the following admonition:

¹ So get rid of all evil behavior. Be done with all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech. ² Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, ³ now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness.¹⁰

Peter likens new believers to "newborn babies" who need to be nourished and cared for as such. But the goal is not to stay as a baby but to "grow into a full experience of salvation."

In Acts 2 we read the following about the practices of the early church: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."¹¹ Notice that conversion, becoming

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 1 Peter 2:1-3.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Acts 2:41-42. All scripture will be cited from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

Christians or babes in Christ and members of Christ's Church was celebrated and marked by baptism. Then they went on to "devote themselves to the Apostle's teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer." These were the means whereby infant Christians could be fed and, by God's grace, grow in their spiritual lives. John Wesley would call these practices means of grace.

A Deficit in Spiritual Formation

In the early years of the church spiritual formation and instruction in the faith was focused on adults who had converted to Christianity. When most converts came from a Jewish background not much instruction was needed, but as the church made converts of those from pagan cultures more instruction was deemed necessary. According to Apostolic writings such as *The Apostolic Tradition*, *Apostolic Constitutions* and the *Testamentum Domini* this was often a three year process¹² so that the catechumen's might become familiar with scripture,¹³ basic doctrines of the faith as outlined in the creeds, and Christian morals. This form of catechism prepared the adult to be baptized into the Christian faith with a reasonable understanding of that faith.

The history of Christian education from the fourth century on takes a new direction. When Christianity became accepted in the Roman Empire under Constantine there was a flood of new adherents into the Christian faith. The church had to educate

¹² Clinton E. Arnold, "Early Church Catechesis and New Christians' Classes in Contemporary Evangelicalism" in *Journal of Evangelical Theological Studies*, 47/1 (March 2004), 44 online http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/47/47-1/47-1-pp039-054_JETS.pdf, (accessed October 22, 2013).

¹³ Arnold, 46 presents the thought that the three year time frame came from a desire to read and teach through all the scriptures before membership, a three year process.

not only new converts but its own members as well.¹⁴ This required an educated clergy to instruct the people, and the emphasis of spiritual formations moved away from educating the masses to educating an elite few who would in turn instruct others.¹⁵

Further, as Christian families started to have children who needed instruction catechism shifted its focus by the fourth century from adults to initiate the children into the Christian faith.¹⁶ As infant baptism started to become more prevalent in the church it was assumed parents and godparents (sponsors) would be involved in the teaching of the children along with the priests, but this assumed a certain level of understanding of the faith in the home that was not always present. With formal education becoming increasingly inaccessible to the common folk, the ability of parents to provide even basic instruction became less likely. Soon the children were not being instructed in the faith. Add to this a belief that baptism was the rite of salvation and the need for instruction declined.

The church's response was to connect catechism to a rite of passage called confirmation, when the child professed belief in the Christian faith. By the fourteenth century it was well established practice that it was at this time that the child could partake of Communion as a full participant within the church. Children learned the basics of the faith in these sessions but many did not live out that faith in their adult lives.

With most people unable to access any form of education, and with Christian training being focused on an elite few, discipleship in the Christian way was at an all time

¹⁴ Chester O. Galloway, "The Historical Development of Christian Education" in *Exploring Christian Education*, ed. A. Elwood Sanner and A. F. Harper (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978), 60.

¹⁵ C.B. Eavey, *History of Christian Education* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 90.

¹⁶ Adrian Valicu, *Civic Catechisms and Reason in the French Revolution* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 21.

low for most of the church during the Middle ages. If it was not for the work of the monastic movements the spiritual condition of the church would have sunk even lower. It was the monastic movements that helped keep the spiritual fervor of the church alive.

In an age of disorder the Benedictine monasteries were centers of quiet and orderly living, communities where prayer, work and study were the custom, and that in a society where prayer was ignored or was regarded as magic to be practiced for selfish ends, where work was despised as servile, where even princes were illiterate, and where war was chronic.¹⁷

These centers of learning and training helped the church in general maintain some form of spirituality but many of the common folk were excluded from this training and teaching of the Christian faith. Many called “Christian” did not live any different from those who proclaimed no faith, or those of other faiths.

During the Reformation there was a renewed emphasis on catechism for instruction within both the Catholic Church and the new Protestant movement. Luther, for instance, focused on catechism for children, and desired to see it implemented in the school system.¹⁸ Luther utilized a question and answer format in the catechism that has continued to this day to teach the basics of the Christian faith. However, with the focus of the Reformation being on the means of salvation, the emphasis in education and discipleship shifted to developing a “proper confession.”¹⁹ Discipleship was not seen as development of Christian character, but rather as a means to learn proper responses to the questions posed in the catechism.

¹⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume 1: to A.D. 1500* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 335.

¹⁸ Valicu, 22.

¹⁹ Valicu, 22.

By Wesley's time England had forged its religious identity as the *via media* ("middle way") between Catholicism and the Reformed tradition. The shaping of the religious climate in England was a complicated story of politics, faith and ecclesial struggles. The result of this turmoil was that anything deemed "fanatical" was rejected, moral as well as political. In no time the effect of this sentiment was evident: "the growth of immorality and irreligion as a crisis."²⁰ Most of Wesley's hearers considered themselves Christians because of their baptism, yet showed very little evidence of Christian values in daily life.²¹ This deficit in Christian behaviour prompted Wesley to look for ways to help Christians be educated in what it means to live as a Christian. The means best suited to this end, it soon became clear, was the establishment of the society with its classes and bands. It was in this context that Christians could learn a "*responsible* appropriation of saving *grace*,"²² or put more simply, spiritual formation.

Wesley's Vision of a Christian

For a life to be shaped as a Christian one has to know what the vision of a Christian looks like. What kind of behaviors should one expect to observe in the life of the Christian who is growing in the faith, and being formed spiritually? John Wesley addresses this question in a sermon entitled "The Almost Christian." Wesley concludes the sermon with the following remarks:

²⁰ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 21.

²¹ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 218.

²² Maddox, 219.

May we all thus experience what it is to be, not almost only; but altogether Christians; being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus; knowing we have peace with God through Jesus Christ; rejoicing in hope of the glory of God; and having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost given unto us!²³

Wesley addresses spiritual rebirth as he describes the one justified by the redemption found in Christ Jesus. But for Wesley justification was just the door to our religion, and there is a whole house to explore in the process of sanctification.²⁴ The exploration of the house called sanctification is what Wesley called “having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts.”²⁵ Wesley was not simply calling people to religious practices, no matter how important they may be. People could engage in the practices of the Christian faith and still not be properly formed as a believer. This is why Wesley would summarize his series of sermons based on the Sermon on the Mount not with a call to do more, but with these words: “In a word, let thy religion be a religion of the heart.”²⁶ For Wesley, being a Christian included a change of heart that necessarily resulted in a change in one’s actions until all is shaped into one goal: that we might reflect the love of God as demonstrated in Christ. Henry H. Knight III correctly observes:

... Christianity is “inward” rather than “outward,” and of the “heart” rather than the understanding.” [Wesley] rejects the description of Christians as remaining sinners, though forgiven and reconciled, and as doing good works out of obedience in spite of the sinful hearts which remain. Rather, Wesley saw the Christian life as the result of a transformation of the heart,

²³ John Wesley, “*The Sermons of John Wesley – Sermon 2: The Almost Christian.*” Wesley Center Online, Northwest Nazarene University. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-2-the-almost-christian/> (accessed September 4, 2013).

²⁴ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 27.

²⁵ Romans 5:5.

²⁶ Cited in Gregory S. Clapper, *The Renewal of the Heart is the Mission of the Church: Wesley’s Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 11.

wherein these affections grow over time and sin correspondingly declines.²⁷

That Christians should be growing in love is the clear call of Wesley throughout his teaching and preaching, and is at the heart of much of his structures such as the establishing of the class meetings. “The Christian is above all marked by *love*, which is productive of *all right affections*,” was Wesley’s thought.²⁸ Even the distinguishing doctrine of Christian perfection or holiness was shaped by this conviction that above all else God’s people will be a community of love as described in John 13:35: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”²⁹ As Blevins and Maddix summarize, “The essence of the Wesleyan message of holiness is never “holiness for holiness’ sake” or “sinlessness for sinlessness’ sake.” Grace-enabled holiness empowers us to love God and others, especially those who need Christ.”³⁰

The Christian filled with God’s love and living in that reality will reflect the very image of God back to the world. The image of God in Christians will be imperfect and sometimes distorted. Only Jesus can say, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”³¹ Only Jesus perfectly reflected the love and grace of the Father in this world. This is why the call to holiness, love perfected, is a call to Christlikeness. In Jesus the love of God was perfectly demonstrated, leaving an example for God’s people to follow.

²⁷ Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 19.

²⁸ Cited in Clapper, 13 from John Wesley’s “*A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*” first published in 1753, now found in Albert Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 183ff.

²⁹ John 13:35.

³⁰ Dean G. Blevins and Mark A. Maddix, *Discovering Discipleship: Dynamics of Christian Education* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2010), 61.

³¹ John 14:9.

By the gracious work of God's Spirit, the image of Christ is being formed in God's people.³² "For the Christian, Jesus Christ is the central reference point in that ongoing process [discipleship], the goal of which is to be changed by God into more loving, more Christlike people."³³ Wesley's vision of a Christian is not only one who follows Jesus or claims Jesus as Lord, but is one who reflects the image of Christ to the world.

Wesley's Means to Forming Christians

The goal of all Wesley did was to see Christians transformed into a people who love God and reflect God's love to the world as Christ did. It was clear that the established structures of his day were not producing that end. Even the societies for spiritual renewal, like the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, made little headway. These groups worked with those most likely to see moral improvement, but not with the down and out of society. They focused on nurture and not conversion.³⁴ These societies believed ignorance was the root cause that prevented holy living, but more information did not lead to the transformation England needed. Though Wesley would learn much from these societies, he would have to do something more to address the spiritual needs of his day.

John Wesley grew up in an environment that valued the effectiveness of small groups meeting for specific purposes. As a young boy Wesley was tutored each

³² 1 Peter 2:21 reads "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

³³ Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesley's Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2004), 15-16.

³⁴ Heitzenrater, 22.

Thursday night in his spiritual development by his mother, Susanna. These informal meetings were cherished by Wesley and deeply shaped his spiritual life.³⁵ Here he learned the importance of paying attention to the needs of the individual, a concept that never left him and is seen in the later developments of his structures.

In Oxford Wesley was assigned the responsibility of caring for the academic and spiritual wellbeing of a group of undergraduates. This group included his younger brother, Charles. Soon this group reflected the austere regiment that characterized Wesley's life at this time, and included not only spiritual discussions but performing acts of mercy to others. This group became known as the "Holy Club" and gave rise to the nick name "Methodists."³⁶ Drawing from his experience with the Religious Societies through his parents Wesley valued the dynamic of Christians gathering for study and for spiritual formation. But Wesley added a new dimension. Rather than allow the process to end with cognitive acquisition, he demanded practical performance.³⁷ This emphasis on living the values discussed in small groups and holding each other accountable to do this would be the focus of Wesley's spiritual formation practices throughout his life.

In the context of small groups the Christlike life of love could be explored and practiced. It is true that love "... cannot be love apart from that which is loved... love necessarily creates community."³⁸ In the classes believers learned about and practiced

³⁵ D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meeting* (Anderson: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 37-38.

³⁶ Henderson, 42-43.

³⁷ Henderson, 43.

³⁸ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Christian Perfection: A Methodist Perspective on Ecclesiology" in *Our Calling to Fulfill: Wesleyan Views of the Church in Mission*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2009), 95.

confession, encouragement, forgiveness, patience and accountability, necessary expressions of love. Believers watched out for one another not because they had to but because of a bond formed by the love nurtured in this environment. This unity formed by love reflected God to the world as nothing else could.

Theological Implications

The model for Christian fellowship is found within the fellowship of the godhead itself, for the relationship of the members of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit demonstrates the kind of community God desires for God's people. There is "perfect relationship and holy love" within the Triune God,³⁹ a community of love that is the model of what humankind was created to enjoy. God invites people into relationship with God's self, a relationship with the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. There God's people receive perfect love and acceptance and grace. And from that place God's people learn to love as they have been loved, forming a community as God has in God's self. The Christian doctrine of Trinity points believers beyond an individualistic faith for "the teaching of the Trinity shows us that isolated, individual discipleship is not what God intended for us. While honoring our personhood, God calls us to fellowship within the family of faith that echoes the Divine Community above."⁴⁰ Within community Christ is formed in the life of the believer because it is within community that God's grace can be experienced in a unique and powerful way.

³⁹ Blevins and Maddix, 57.

⁴⁰ Wes Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*, 46.

The Means of Grace

For Wesley the goal was to grow spiritually so that the love of God would be evident in all the believer did. He believed that God not only called God's people to this life of Christlike love, but God also provided means to the Christian to aid in that journey. From start to finish salvation was always a work of God, and even the journey towards holiness required the gracious work of God in the life of the believer.

The Centrality of Grace

John Wesley believed that the Christian life is a grace filled life. Grace is God in love reaching out to a sin filled creation and making God's self known, inviting creation into relationship with the Creator. "Grace for Wesley is most essentially God's triune act of love which has at its goal the renewal of human lives."⁴¹ From start to finish salvation is the loving act of God so that the relationship lost through sin can be restored for all eternity. Grace is about relationship.

Wesley asserted that God acts before people acknowledge God's presence, and this he called "preventing grace" or "prevenient grace."⁴² A loving God communicates love to humans, longing for a positive response; desiring a relationship of trust, faith and love. By grace God accepts a sinner who comes by faith in the atoning work of Jesus.

⁴¹ Knight, 9.

⁴² Runyon, 28.

Also through grace God forgives and adopts the believer into the family of God. The relationship lost through sin is restored. This is justifying grace.⁴³

Grace also calls God's people to a holy life, where the image of the loving Creator is restored in God's people. This is "sanctifying grace," the "process of perfecting the image of God and extending the new birth into every aspect of human existence."⁴⁴ From start to finish the life of the believer is bathed in God's grace.

Wesley believed that there were means or practices whereby the believer could become more aware of God's grace through their practice. It was through these means of grace that believers could grow in Christlikeness. These practices "encourage openness to the presence of God."⁴⁵ More will be said later about the means of grace in chapter two. However, it is important to note that Wesley believed grace could be found outside these practices, and these practices only were beneficial to the believer if appropriated by faith.⁴⁶ These practices in themselves could not bring salvation (i.e. baptism does not save) but they draw us to God whose presence allows the believer to live out the salvation found by faith in Jesus.

Confronting Antinomianism and Works-Righteousness

It is important to note that this emphasis on Christian practices as a means of grace can lead to one of two dangerous positions for a Christian: antinomianism and works-righteousness. Antinomianism is an extreme view of salvation by faith alone that

⁴³ Runyon, 42.

⁴⁴ Runyon, 82. Runyon also uses the term "transforming grace."

⁴⁵ Knight, 13.

⁴⁶ Maddox, 196.

is “so radical in its opposition to legalism ... that it promoted moral laxity.”⁴⁷ Works-righteousness is the belief that through the efforts of the believer salvation can be achieved.

John Wesley was well aware of these extreme positions. Wesley often engaged in spirited dialogue with proponents of Calvinist thought, preachers like George Whitefield, arguing that the belief in divine election and predestination led to antinomianism because there was no need of obedience in the elect. The accusation levelled against Methodists was that because they believed in free will and emphasized the means of grace as necessary in the life of the believer they believed in works-righteousness.

This debate on works-righteousness and antinomianism could rise up within the ranks of the Methodists as well if careful teaching and direction was not given. On one side of the equation are those who would believe they are Christian because they have participated in the means of grace. They were baptised, participate in worship, partake of Communion, give to charity, read the scriptures and pray. Meanwhile their lives demonstrate a lack of spiritual growth for there is dishonesty in business dealings, uncharitable attitudes within the home, hardness of heart towards the needy, or participation in ungodly entertainments. This Wesley would call the “dissipated life.”⁴⁸ “To live a dissipated life and trust in the means of grace is to have the illusion of salvation; it is at best to go through the motions of being a Christian while in reality remaining without God.”⁴⁹ Living with the outward Christian practices without a change

⁴⁷ Heitzenrater, 12.

⁴⁸ Knight, 32-33.

⁴⁹ Knight, 33.

of heart is what Wesley would also call “formalism.” It is also known as legalism, an emphasis on keeping rules as opposed to having a heart of love. This was the works-righteousness side of the equation. It was a danger in the church of Wesley’s day and remains a challenge to the present.

On the other side of the equation are those who deny the need or benefits of the Christian practices. Wesley encountered this as he observed the Moravian Brethren. On this side of the equation the emphasis is on Christ’s sufficiency to the extent that there is nothing we can or should do in the name of religion. The Moravian Brethren practiced something called “stillness” where one simply did nothing in the worship services until moved by the Spirit. Wesley admired this freedom at first but soon discovered that this shifted “the focus from the fruit of the Spirit as manifested in relation to God and neighbor to a passive waiting for a particular kind of experience.”⁵⁰ Wesley saw this as inhibiting the growth of Christians in their faith. One cannot claim to be truly Christian and withdraw from the world and its needs. Those emphasizing emotional experiences were called “enthusiasts” and they claimed one does not need the means of grace, only faith. Also within this camp could be found the antinomians who emphasized salvation by faith to the extent that they felt no obligation to live by the moral law of the church. One could live like the world because it was faith that saved, not works. This is what Wesley feared would be the outcome of the doctrine of predestination.

How did Wesley navigate his way through these extremes? It was through an emphasis on the promises of God. One does not trust in the means of grace but on God who has promised to meet believers as they participate in these God ordained activities.

⁵⁰ Knight, 39.

The more one participated in these practices the more they encountered the living presence of Christ who does the work of transformation in our hearts and lives. “Wesley believed if one intended to live a Christian life, one would freely undertake the disciplines which nurture that life.”⁵¹ Since Wesley believed Christianity was a religion of the heart, a religion of relationship with the living God, whatever opened the door to God’s presence in the life of the believer was valuable in the process of being transformed into the image of Christ.

This brief background on the means of grace indicates why this was an important practice for the covenant group formed for this project. As Wesley made clear to those in the class meetings the means of grace are a vehicle through which God can be encountered, and in that relationship spiritual growth will happen. The presence of God is transformational, for a life that experiences the love of God cannot help but be transformed by that love.

Challenges to Discipleship

The church that wants to take seriously the mandate to make Christlike disciples finds the mindset of many Canadian Christians a major challenge. There is a strong focus on self improvement and self help with a goal of prosperity and happiness rather than Christlikeness. Many Christians are consumers, shopping among the various churches to see what appeals to their sense of felt need. Churches inadvertently become entertainment centers so that a larger crowd can be attracted. They cater to the desire of

⁵¹ Knight, 43.

people for the rousing sermon, the display of miracles, the rock concert styled worship, the noted guest speaker, all of which can be easily marketed to a consumer world. People try each new trend until they tire of it, and then move on to the next new thing. Sadly some ministries are being reshaped not by traditional Christianity but by new religious expressions like Zen, faith healers, the power of human potential, parapsychology and instruction on successful living. As Eugene Peterson saliently points out, “There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.”⁵²

A steady diet of consumerism does not lead to true Christianity. The Christian call is to a cross, to a denying of self. It is through loving service that the love of God that brings salvation and hope can be evidenced to the world. Other pursuits, be it health or wealth or entertainment, can soon take the place of God in one’s life and leave one spiritually impoverished.

The covenant group provides a context where these tendencies can be challenged, and replaced with the pursuit of God. Through mutual accountability and honest sharing improper affections can be exposed and confessed. In the context of the group, a means of grace according to Wesley, God can shape God’s people to love the things God loves. The commitment to others in forming such a group stands in contrast to the “me focused” world too many people live in. Covenant can form a commitment to others that does not count the cost to self.

⁵² Peterson, 16.

The early Methodists found that to take seriously the call of Jesus to follow (emulate) him often put them on the outside of society. They were rejected and often ridiculed for their commitment to “do no harm,” “avoid evil” and “do good as far as possible to all men.”⁵³ To be able to gather with others of like mind was a great encouragement as well as an opportunity for accountability. The class meeting was the place where they gave an account of what it was like to be a faithful disciple over the past week.⁵⁴ They shared lessons learned, confessed failures, and encouraged one another to hold fast. Knowing they were not alone on the journey helped many of the early Methodists stay true despite opposition. Nurturing that same environment of supportive relationship within a covenant group is a goal for this project.

Definitions

A covenant group is a small gathering of people (six to twelve) who have committed themselves to meet together, and have established certain “agreements” or “rules” that will be practiced within the context of that group. These “agreements” constitute the covenant. A covenant drawn up by the members of the group will more likely be adhered to than one imposed upon the group from the outside. It will reflect the values of the group.

The covenant group is about exploring what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, and participating in various practices that have been proven to aid Christians on

⁵³ David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 45-46.

⁵⁴ Watson, 43.

that spiritual journey. John Wesley called these practices “means of grace” and they include reading the scriptures, praying, worshipping, partaking of the Lord’s Supper and ministering to others. This project adopts Wesley’s language to describe these practices for spiritual growth among Christians. These practices are found within the ministry of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene, so by practicing them the group members are intimately connected to the local church.

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale is simply a tool used to measure the feelings of participants in regards to their spiritual life. Since spirituality can be defined as participation in practices of religion as well as a general feeling about overall happiness with a person’s place and purpose in life, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale measures both elements of spirituality. This scale is a means to introduce objective data into the study as opposed to strictly relying on observation and dialogue exchanges.

The Project

The research project establishes a covenant group composed of six to twelve members of the congregation meeting weekly over a six month period. The congregation is introduced to the idea and validity of covenant relationships through a three-week sermon series preached in the Sunday morning worship hour. Participants are recruited from the congregation through invitations in the announcements. This group must meet together and form a covenant statement after reviewing covenant agreements from Wesley’s classes and bands. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale from Life Advance⁵⁵ is the

⁵⁵ SWB Scale © 1982 by Craig W. Ellison and Raymond F. Paloutzian. Obtained through Life Advance. <http://lifeadvance.com/> (September 10, 2013).

tool used to measure the participant's perceptions of their spiritual well-being before and after the six-month journey as a covenant group. These two test results can be compared to see if the participants experience any change in their sense of spiritual well-being.

The guidebook for the group is *Reflecting God*⁵⁶ and each week a chapter (or a portion of a chapter) is studied and discussed. This book is a Wesleyan-Holiness study on discipleship meant to help focus the group's discussion times. Questions pertaining to the assigned chapter help stimulate thought on the subject matter and guide the discussion in the class meetings. Nonetheless, the focus is not the material of the book. Instead, the dialogue and relationships formed through the dynamic of sharing one's own experiences related to the topic of the day is the key component of each session. Accountability is established as participants attempt to find ways of applying the material to life, honestly sharing the outcomes of that attempt. This kind of dialogue takes much trust and honesty.

The study group consists of volunteers from the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene who heard of the covenant group through sermons and announcements from the pulpit. After careful explanation of what they are committing to the participants are given the chance to step out of the project. There is no predetermined "best" composition of this group, so anyone who applies is accepted into the study. Even though a group consisting of men and women makes open discussion more challenging with some topics all members are invited to join the study. A mix of age groups, like that found in the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene, is desirable. Also a mix of new Christians and long time Christians makes the covenant group more representative of the church family and provides for more interesting discussions.

⁵⁶ Wes Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*.

Finding a time that works for everyone is a challenge but meeting before the morning worship service, 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings seems to be an opportune time. This, however, requires punctuality and careful attention to the time as the worship service starts at 10:30 a.m. Discussions cannot run beyond the set meeting time even when the group is engaged in a topic. It can be continued the following week if the group so wishes. It is important to be punctual so that busy people feel their time commitment is being honoured.

This project involves adult participants and is not designed for children or youth. Nonetheless it is conceivable that simplified covenants could be drawn up for children or youth with a focus on building friendships in the group.⁵⁷ It would not be suggested that covenant groups be composed of adults and children/youth mixed together as this would hamper the freedom of discussion. The issues faced by the different age groups do not lend themselves to one discussion group.

This project looks at the benefit of covenant groups for discipleship in the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene, but it is also designed to be a resource to other churches as well. Since the focus is on relationships and not the study material, churches of all denominational backgrounds can adopt this covenant group model. There may be some churches unfamiliar or even uncomfortable with the Wesleyan emphasis in this study, but the core theme of discipleship crosses all traditions. Discussions with pastors in other churches shows that the challenges that led to this project in our church, the need for better discipleship, drifting members and the raising up of committed leaders, are issues faced across denominational lines.

⁵⁷ Delia Halverson, *The Nuts and Bolts of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 14.

It is important that the covenant group never be seen as something outside of the life and body of the church. It must be, as Wesley understood his societies and class meetings to be, a means for renewal within the larger church context. If the group withdraws in any way from the ongoing life of the rest of the congregation then this experiment has failed in its purpose. Instead the desire is for a greater appreciation and commitment to the body of Christ expressed in our local fellowship. The participants will hopefully gain a greater appreciation for the wider fellowship of the church outside the Church of the Nazarene as they explore the Wesleyan heritage and as they share the backgrounds they have come out of with each other.

Six months is a short time to observe spiritual development considering discipleship is a life-long journey, but it is long enough to give participants a taste of covenant commitment and mutual accountability. This will be long enough for participants to ascertain whether there is value in such a group for spiritual growth and the study gives participants an opportunity to give feedback on the value of the covenant group in their own spiritual formation.

The project will explore the value of the covenant group in addressing the issues identified earlier as the stimulus for this study: the cry of God's people for something more, the falling away of so many from the church and the lack of leaders in ministry. Studying what happened in John Wesley's time, particularly the radical transformation of the spiritual climate of England through the Methodist revival, encourages a search for transferable practices that may help change the spiritual climate of the church today. As the class meeting was at the heart of much of what Wesley did to see the people of his day grow in their faith it seems an appropriate place to start a journey in spiritual

formation within the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene. The desire to grow in Christ-likeness, participating in whatever means will best accomplish this, prompts the researcher to be an active participant rather than standing on the outside of the covenant group looking in. This is not just a personal quest for holiness, for as one called by God to give leadership to a particular congregation the desire is to see the whole congregation impacted by the grace of God leading to spiritual maturity. The covenant group can act as leaven within the fellowship, members excited about the journey they have been on, willing to walk alongside others so they too may experience spiritual growth through the accountable and encouraging ministry of a covenant group. The greatest outcome for this project is seeing the covenant group project repeated with the first participants taking a leadership role in the next cycle of the project.

The Document

The first chapter introduces the project, the background that prompted the study as well as introducing the reader to major themes and goals of the study. It allows the reader to get a glimpse at why this is an important theme for the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene. It also clarifies terms used in the study and introduces some of the methodology.

The next chapter surveys some of the material on the topic of small groups, the means of grace and spiritual formation that leads to ministry. Wesley is the main source for this study on small groups, along with many scholars who have worked within the field of Wesleyan studies. Wesley becomes a key resource for this study because he

believed the church most resembled early Christianity when it gathered in small groups for accountability, encouragement and instruction. When asked why Methodists "... could not content themselves with preaching and letting God look after the converts instead of going to all the trouble of forming them into societies and classes and bands..." Wesley's response was that when the small groups were not formed the fruit was lost.⁵⁸ Wesley saw that the small accountability groups worked in forming disciples so he was not going to stray from that plan. The research seems to indicate there still is a place for covenant groups like Wesley's classes today.

The third chapter walks the reader through the covenant group project itself. The context of the project, including the community and the church fellowship, is explained, along with a brief description of the participants within the study group. The chapter explains what happens in the weekly meetings of the group and how data is collected and recorded. This chapter directs readers to an appendix at the back of the document which supplies copies of the sermons, questionnaires, chapter assignments for the study book, and the Spiritual Well-Being Scale done at the start and finish of the project.

The fourth chapter looks at the data collected, both empirical (the survey) and the observations of the researcher through conversations with participants and others. It walks the reader through the project, from the sermons, to the covenant agreement, the participants and the weekly sessions, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale and the post project survey. The reader discovers what was observed through the six month project.

The fifth chapter looks at what can be concluded from the study. The goal is to test if spiritual development or discipleship is aided by a covenant group experience. The

⁵⁸ D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meeting* (Anderson, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 105-106.

conclusions drawn and the rationale for those conclusions are found in this chapter.

Lessons learned through the process are an important part of this chapter, and how those lessons will be implemented into the life and ministry of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene. The project's value is determined by how it shapes the ministries of the local church, allowing for more effective discipleship in all its programs. This chapter also deals with the hard questions of what was done well and what was not handled well in the study. This is to help others avoid the same mistakes and make the project more effective in future applications. A great investment of time and effort by the researcher, his supervisors, and the participants made this project possible. It is a worthwhile investment if the covenant group proves beneficial to the spiritual growth of the individuals involved as well as aiding in the improvement of the spiritual climate within the church fellowship.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

Small groups established for accountability and support is not a new idea, and has been tried in many forms throughout the years. This study borrows much from work done three hundred years ago by John Wesley in England and attempts to transfer concepts from that context to twenty-first century Canada. Small groups with covenant agreements for accountability and safety worked well for Wesley but that was another time and place. Today there may be no appetite for such relational groups. This chapter explores what others are saying about this topic.

Ministries seem to come and go within church work. In the 1970s there was the bus ministry fad followed by the small group phenomenon in the eighties. More recently the Alpha program has become a significant tool, a basic Christian outreach program being used effectively by many churches. It seems that as soon as a program gets popular it begins to fade away and something else rises up to take its place. Two hundred years ago the Sunday School was established as an effective small group ministry to educate children, but statistics today show traditional Sunday Schools are waning in popularity.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ While 19 out of 20 protestant churches still offer Sunday School, it reaches a smaller age segment, no longer is linked to VBS or midweek offerings, and is no longer a top priority for pastors (1 in 7 say it is top priority) according to Barna research. *Sunday School is Changing in Under-the-Radar But Significant Ways*. Barna Group website. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/175-sunday-school-is-changing-in-under-the-radar-but-significant-ways#.Ui9VR39temU> (accessed September 10, 2013).

Maybe small groups that call for accountability should be seen as a thing of the past and left on the shelf with other programs that have come and gone.

However, looking beyond the walls of the church into the community reveals a proliferation of support groups meeting in churches, community halls and business places. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) and spin off groups like Narcotics Anonymous, Co-Dependents Anonymous and Adult Children of Alcoholics have sprung up in almost every community. There are support groups for those fighting addictions with gambling, sexual issues, shopping, eating and the list goes on. What is curious is that while some churches are suggesting small groups no longer work, all around them are these support groups which offer what was once found in Wesley's classes and bands, and the Sunday School of past years. These groups often have a "covenant" agreement of what can be expected of the group and the individuals in that group. For instance, A.A. has twelve traditions that define what is expected of those who attend, not only asking for commitment to the group⁶⁰ but also a pledge to acknowledge a Higher Power, a commitment to seeing others recover and anonymity among the members.⁶¹ Members of A.A. will testify to the benefit of this support group and many remain members throughout their lives.

These recovery groups suggest that small groups formed for support and accountability still have a place in our society today. A need to belong, to have a sense of purpose and to have a task to do is all part of healthy personhood, and structures like the small support groups are well suited to meet those needs. The church can take the small

⁶⁰ Tradition One: "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity." in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1973), 133.

⁶¹ Tradition Two, 136, Tradition Five, 154, Tradition Twelve, 188 in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

support group concept further by helping participants connect with God as well as each other. Strong bonds of relationship formed in a safe community allow for development of healthy personality. As Charles Foster states, “Perhaps the most powerful of all the gifts to the world found in the Christian heritage is its sense of community.”⁶² Instead of shying away from the gift of community to be found within the bonds of faith the church should be promoting it. Perhaps a community formed and shaped by the love of God and one willing to share that love will attract a world still starving for authentic, safe, affirming relationships more than a community formed to protect doctrine and morality.

It is interesting that John Wesley, a man steeped in church doctrine and tradition as a priest in the Church of England, did not put adherence to a certain doctrine as the prerequisite to joining his societies. A simple desire to “flee the wrath to come” and assist others in doing this was all that was required to be a part of Wesley’s societies.⁶³ When the classes met from week to week the focus was not on reciting doctrinal creeds but on answering questions for accountability. This resulted in a deep bonding within the group. Wesley’s focus was similar to that of Jesus who said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”⁶⁴

Today there is a renewed interest in not only the small group for discipleship but Wesley’s contribution to this through the class and band meetings. Wesley’s emphasis on the means of grace as vehicles through which discipleship can take place has caught the attention of many who desire to see Christian formation take place within the context

⁶² Charles R. Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 56.

⁶³ John Wesley, “Plain Account of the People Called Methodists” *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 9: The Methodist Societies, History, Nature and Design* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 256.

⁶⁴ John 13:35.

of the local church. Wesley's understanding of religion as social, requiring community for its true expression, with love of God and neighbour being the goal, excites those seeking authentic fellowship. The emphasis on ministry to the poor and needy as a means of grace and a natural bi-product of holiness helps those involved in community restoration steer away from offering simply a social gospel where social programs become an end in themselves. This chapter looks at how current writers have embraced Wesley's practices and thoughts about spiritual formation through covenant groups and the mutual accountability found there. Since the groups never stood alone for Wesley there must also be an understanding of the larger context of church ministry necessary for the means of grace and a theology that embraces relationship and love over cold and formal creeds.

More than Words

For many believers Christianity has been reduced to a simple formula of "inviting Jesus into one's heart, asking him to forgive one's sins." At this point one is ushered into the family of God and is promised life eternal in God's heaven. Though everything in this confession is true and an important part of the Gospel message, it is not the whole story. Being a Christian is far more than a simple assent to a certain confession, for this confession should affect the believer not only in some distant future by providing a heavenly home but should make a difference in how life is lived now. Jesus points his followers to a new kind of life when he says, "I have come that they may have life, and

have it to the full,”⁶⁵ and “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”⁶⁶ Neither of these sayings of Jesus has any meaning if a relationship with him does not make a difference in the life of his followers while they are still on earth. This can also be said about the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew chapters five and six, where Jesus speaks about the values of the kingdom as they should be lived in the present day.

Scripture does say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”,⁶⁷ but the question that must be asked is, “What does it mean to believe?” John Wesley answered by saying that believing is not intellectual assent to a creed or statement of faith. It was not merely an activity of the mind. Wesley would write, “Only beware thou dost not deceive thy own soul, with regard to the nature of this faith. It is not, as some have fondly conceived, a bare assent to the truth of the Bible, or the articles of our creed, or of all that is contained in the Old and New Testaments. The devils believe this ... and yet they are devils still.”⁶⁸

Wesley would press further and describe the essentials of being a Christian, saying: “Do you know what a Christian is? If you are a Christian, you have the mind that was in Christ; and you so walk as he also walked. You are holy as he is holy, both in

⁶⁵ John 10:10.

⁶⁶ Luke 9:23.

⁶⁷ Acts 16:31.

⁶⁸ John Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 5, ed. Thomas Jackson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, 85 cited in Steve Harper, *The Way to Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 47.

heart and in all manner of conversation.”⁶⁹ Being a Christian is far more than just knowing a certain collection of information. As C.S. Lewis aptly summarized, the goal of Christianity is to form “little Christs.”⁷⁰ This was Wesley’s goal and it led to the formation of the societies with their classes and bands.

Spiritual Formation

Christian spiritual formation is about having the mind of Christ formed within the believer, a process that will take a lifetime and still not be completed. This is not to discourage one from making the journey, but simply a realization of the human condition, where transformation is often slow, adapting to the changes in one’s life circumstances. Though most religious traditions have some form of spiritual formation, Christian spiritual formation remains unique in that the goal is to reflect the character and values of Jesus Christ. With this in mind Mark Maddix suggests that the concept of Christian spiritual formation is taken from Galatians 4:19 where the Apostle Paul writes, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”⁷¹ “Christ being formed in you” is the goal of Christian spiritual formation.

This process of becoming like Jesus is not something accomplished through personal striving, nor is it achieved by drafting a set of rules that say “this does and this

⁶⁹ John Wesley, “A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion” in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 5, ed. John Emory (New York: Carlton and Porter) 88. <http://archive.org/details/theworksofjesley05wesluoft> (accessed March 25, 2013).

⁷⁰ Cited in Mark A. Maddix, “Living the Life: Spiritual Formation Defined” *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011), 11.

⁷¹ Maddix, 12.

does not” look like Christ is formed in you. This process of becoming like Christ, which is properly called sanctification, is the work of God within the heart and life of the believer. The process of sanctification that transforms the believer to reflect the image of Christ is how a holy God makes a holy people. God does a work within the believer through the presence of the Holy Spirit. As Diane Leclerc correctly points out, “holiness is first and foremost a condition of the heart before it expresses itself outwardly.”⁷² This is a change wrought by grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer, so that we might be a “more loving, more Christlike people.”⁷³

Grace

Grace is a key component to understanding Wesley’s view of spiritual formation, or holiness. As Gregory S. Clapper suggests, in Wesley’s mature thought “grace is everywhere, although it is by no means irresistible.”⁷⁴ What Clapper is getting at is that God continues to call for cooperation with what God is doing in, around and through God’s people, but never is God’s agenda forced on anyone. God continues to give people choices in life, including what will be done with “Jesus who is called Christ.”⁷⁵

Grace is not something that can be packaged and handled as something tangible, but is something far greater. Western theologians tend to describe grace as divine pardon

⁷² Diane Leclerc, “Being Whole: Holiness and Sanctification as a Wesleyan Paradigm for Spiritual Formation,” in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011), 49.

⁷³ Chilcote, 16.

⁷⁴ Clapper, 8.

⁷⁵ Refer Matthew 27:22.

and forgiveness, while Eastern theologians have interpreted grace as the power of God working within to renew our nature. Wesley, who was well schooled in both traditions, tended to include both ideas in his definition of grace. Theodore Runyon sums up Wesley's view of grace by saying "it is most fundamentally God's love for humanity made evident in Christ. This grace, when received, both communicates forgiveness and makes renewal possible."⁷⁶ Active in every person's life this love of God is at the heart of Wesley's theology and practice. When people receive God's love and in turn reciprocate that love, a bond is formed, and it is in that bond that the creature, humankind, can come to share in the nature of God.⁷⁷ So at the heart of spiritual formation is the love of God that transforms those willing to say "yes" to God by their faith in Jesus and the salvation he brought through his death and resurrection. It is God's love graciously transforming God's people to reflect the image of Jesus to the world.

Means of Grace or Spiritual Forming Practices

Spiritual formation, then, is the process of being made to reflect more and more the character of Christ as the love of God shapes and molds the believer in what Wesley would call God's grace. Spiritual formation can be said to be the fruit of a love relationship, a relationship that grows deeper and stronger with the passing of time. Like every relationship it will take commitment and effort to see it grow, and there will be certain practices that aid in that process. However, one must be careful not to confuse the means for the end. One cannot think that the performance of certain practices will

⁷⁶ Runyon, 26.

⁷⁷ Runyon, 26.

automatically result in a deeper spirituality. Since spiritual formation is about developing a love relationship it cannot be reduced to a process of practicing certain exercises, or undertaking certain activities for their own sake. As Steve Harper observes from the life of Wesley, “To know Wesley is to know a person of intense and meaningful discipline ... But discipline was never an end in itself. It was the means to a vital relationship with God and the resulting power that comes from that relationship.”⁷⁸ The spiritual disciplines are essential “means of grace,” those places where the believer through faith intersects with the loving presence of Jesus and as a result the life of the believer is shaped and molded to reflect the character of Christ.

Wesley said no one had to ask the members of the early church what the means of grace were, or what their purpose was. However, as time passed, people started to seek the practices for their own sake, and missed the point of why God instituted them. In his sermon called “The Means of Grace” Wesley would say the following:

But in process of time, when "the love of many waxed cold," some began to mistake the means for the end, and to place religion rather in doing those outward works, than in a heart renewed after the image of God. They forgot that "the end of" every "commandment is love, out of a pure heart," with "faith unfeigned;" the loving the Lord their God with all their heart, and their neighbour as themselves.⁷⁹

Despite the confusion and even abuses that happened within the life of the church Wesley still insisted that there were certain practices that have been providentially revealed as means of grace, and verified as such through the experience of God’s people through the ages. In his own words: “By "means of grace" I understand outward signs, words, or

⁷⁸ Harper, 14.

⁷⁹ John Wesley, “*The Sermons of John Wesley – Sermon 16: The Means of Grace.*” Wesley Center Online. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-16-the-means-of-grace/> (accessed March 25, 2013).

actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”⁸⁰ Many of those practices are quite familiar to the modern Christian, but their purpose and value may have been overlooked. It is therefore important to study again what Wesley had to say about these means of grace and how they contribute towards spiritual formation or holiness.

Wesley had various categories when describing the means of grace. The first category was called works of piety or instituted means of grace. This included such practices as prayer (private, family and public), searching the scriptures (by reading, meditating, and hearing), the Lord’s Supper, fasting and Christian Conference (fellowship). The second category, called prudential means, had much to do with how the Christian related to the needs of people around them. This could include anything from visiting in the prisons to evangelizing the lost, from denying oneself and taking up the cross to exercising the presence of God in everyday activities.⁸¹ Wesley also strongly believed that works of mercy were important and even necessary means of grace for the believer. He would say that God’s grace could be found in places other than in these practices but these were the “usual” ways to encounter God’s transforming presence. Finally, Wesley would strongly insist that these practices did not guarantee spiritual growth for they must be appropriated by faith.

⁸⁰ Wesley, “Sermon 16 - The Means of Grace.”

⁸¹ Blevins and Maddix, 85-86.

Important Means of Grace

Identifying the most important means of grace in Wesley is not difficult. Prayer, the study of scripture and worship, which included the partaking of Eucharist, were always a priority for Wesley. Most Christians would agree that these practices are essential to spiritual growth, but few would ask as pointedly as Wesley did, “What difference is our spirituality making in our relationships with those around us?” Wesley knew that the chief aim of Christian faith was to love God and our fellow human beings, and spirituality was meant to prepare and equip one for that task. The means of grace must aid in this pursuit.

Wesley knew the power and importance of prayer. It was the key to maintaining a relationship with God, the chief end of all religion. Many writers attest to the importance of prayer throughout the life of John Wesley in both his practice and his teaching.⁸² Raised and trained in the Church of England Wesley was very familiar with the Common Book of Prayer and valued the wisdom and depth of meaning in the prayers recorded there. He also embraced the prayers of the church Fathers throughout the centuries in his devotional life and worship. But Wesley was also familiar with extemporaneous prayers and did not shy away from using these in public and personal devotions.⁸³ Prayer was an important means of grace that could only be neglected to the detriment of the believer. Prayer opened one to the loving presence of God, and was not only an expression of love

⁸² For instance the editors of a little book called *How to Pray: The Best of John Wesley on Prayer* (Uhrichsville: Barbour Publishing, 2007) write in the introduction: “... underlying all of his amazing achievements was his devotion to prayer.”

⁸³ Harper, 20.

for others through intercession but allowed one to listen to God's direction on how love was to be expressed.

Though Wesley was well read in almost all schools of thought, he still regarded himself a "man of one book," and that book was the Bible. It was his source of Christian thought and conduct, and all other writings had to be measured by this standard.⁸⁴

Reading and meditating on scripture was an important and essential means of grace for believers as it was here one hears the voice of God. Wesley practiced the reading of scripture out loud, much like one participating in the ancient practice of *lectio divina* today, listening as he read for the voice of God to speak to him.⁸⁵ Wesley wrote in the preface to his collection of sermons the following about his practice of studying scripture: "Here I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book, for this end, to find the way to heaven."⁸⁶ Scripture reveals God's concern for community and what that community should look like. Scripture also confronts the reader with those vices that get in the way of community, those practices that hinder love's expression. Scripture shows the essence of God's love lived out in everyday life, and what happens when that love is absent. Scripture points to a God who is ready to change a person's heart so he or she may love properly.

Wesley also held the Lord's Supper in highest regard, and saw it as essential for the life of all believers. Wesley encouraged his people to participate in Eucharist as often as they could at the local parish, a way to keep them connected to the Church of England.

⁸⁴ Harper, 28.

⁸⁵ George Lyons, "Knowing the Scriptures: How to Study the Bible as a Spiritual Practice" in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*, ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011), 23.

⁸⁶ John Wesley cited by George Lyons, 23.

He saw Communion as a converting and sanctifying means of grace, a place of healing and hope.⁸⁷ This was possible because Christ was present at the table with the worshipper, not in the elements (as in the doctrine of transubstantiation) but through his real abiding presence as his followers gathered in obedience to “do this in remembrance of me.” As believers drew closer to Christ at the table by necessity they drew closer to one another. It was an expression of the believer’s participation in the body of Christ, and a reminder of the call to take up the cross as a follower of Jesus. Giving of one’s self in the name of love was never far from those who gathered at the table of grace.

Wesley held that fasting was a means of grace and practiced this throughout his life, and always it was for the sole purpose of drawing closer to God.⁸⁸ Wesley did not believe so much in protracted periods of fasting but preferred regular, systematic seasons of fasting (i.e. a day a week). This practice of self denial to set aside time for God is an important means of grace for the believer, for in its practice one is “saying no to food for the body so we may concentrate on food for the soul.”⁸⁹ Fasting allows a person to earnestly seek the heart and will of God as other things are set aside that may distract from this pursuit.

Christian conversation was Wesley’s term for the gathering of believers to discuss the things of God. It could include a one on one mentoring relationship, or a large assembly, such as the society meeting. It could include a sermon that explains the way of

⁸⁷ Brent D. Peterson, “Worshipping as Created: God’s Gift of Communal Worship and the Sacraments” in *Spiritual Formation: a Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011), 102.

⁸⁸ Diane Leclerc, “Finding the Means to the End: Christian Discipleship and Formation Practices” in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011), 83.

⁸⁹ Wes Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*, 146.

the Christian, a Bible Study, or a testimony shared in the class meeting. Wesley was concerned that the focus of the conversation be on the things of God and not things of this world. In this the Christian grows and learns more about the grace of God as stories, scripture and prayers are shared. “Infrequent worship” alone, the practice of most Christians in eighteenth-century England, was not producing a people committed to holy living. Gathering people to “confer about inward and outward holiness” is what Christian conferencing was about, recognizing the communal aspect of spiritual formation.⁹⁰

These practices, prayer, scripture reading, and fasting can be done in isolation and often are. One can even attend Christian conferences (worship) without really connecting with others. However, Wesley would always remind Christians of the communal aspect of all these practices, and the goal of not only shaping the heart in love for God but also for those around them.

Getting Beyond Ourselves

Wesley was concerned that the pursuit of holiness might become an exercise in self examination and personal piety that made no difference in the communities and relationships of the believers. Wesley was also keenly aware that the Gospel as taught by the Lord was good news to the broken, hurting people of society. So Wesley challenged the people to think about how their faith could be made practical – looking beyond oneself to the needs of others. As Yust and Anderson, in their book *Taught by God*, suggest, “The spiritual life thus becomes a movement between inward reflection and outward service, calling forth a new vision of the self as a child of God and the world as

⁹⁰ Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition: A Workbook* (Nashville: Upper Rooms Books, 1995), 122.

God's creation."⁹¹ Wesley knew that the goal of discipleship was more than just to grow in knowledge and spiritual practices. It was about learning to love as Christ loved us.⁹² "People do not serve Christ by sitting around waiting for grace to permeate their being," David Lowes Watson reminds us. "If they are waiting for God's blessings, they should do so actively, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisons - just as Jesus taught (Matt. 25:31-40)."⁹³ This was at the heart of Wesley's thought. So central to the Wesleyan way of spiritual formation was the call to love in action that it was incorporated into the hymns to be sung in Christian gatherings.⁹⁴

Help us to help each other, Lord
Each other's cross to bear.
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel his brother's care.
Help us build each other up,
Our little stocks improve;
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
And perfect us in love.⁹⁵

If learning to love was at the heart of being a Christian then finding the needy of the community and by God's grace helping them was just as much a means of grace as the instituted means people most often associate with spirituality.

It is important to pause and remember that though Wesley was convinced the means of grace were essential to the spiritual growth of God's people, he also knew that

⁹¹ Karen Marie Yust and E. Byron Anderson, *Taught by God: Teaching and Spiritual Formation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 53.

⁹² Chilcote, 29.

⁹³ Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, 32.

⁹⁴ Hymns were an important teaching tool for spiritual formations with the Wesleys, called a means of grace by David Hempton in *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 71.

⁹⁵ From *Collection of Hymns*, cited in Hempton, 71.

without the Holy Spirit being present in the practices they would become dead and hollow.⁹⁶ Still he was convinced that “never can you use these means but a blessing will ensue. And the more you use them, the more you will grow in grace.”⁹⁷

The reasoning of the early Methodists is quite easy to follow. If the call of Christ to discipleship does make requirements of us; if these requirements are clearly laid out in the teachings of Jesus; if they can be met only by availing ourselves of God's grace - something that is clear to any Christian who has tried to meet them in his or her own strength alone; and if the church has found across the centuries that there are certain reliable channels for this grace; then good sense must surely dictate that Christians use these means of grace in the fullest possible way in order to fulfill their obligations to Jesus Christ.⁹⁸

This lengthy quote from David Lowes Watson, who passionately calls his Methodist Church back to an appreciation of the Wesleyan way, sums up the rationale of Wesley. Wesley was very practical, and if a practice did not violate a scriptural principal, he would try it. And if the practice was beneficial to the growth of the Christian, he would promote it. Thus his research and experience proved the means of grace were beneficial to the spiritual growth of believers and he encouraged their use through his societies and classes.

Means of Grace in the Church Today

There is a great need for spiritual growth in the church today, for many members are consumers and spectators rather than growing disciples of Christ. In an attempt to always be novel and creative the evangelical tradition has all but turned its back on the

⁹⁶ Wesley, “Sermon 16 - The Means of Grace.”

⁹⁷ Blevins and Maddix, 86.

⁹⁸ Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, 15.

ancient ways, much to its detriment. To satisfy the hunger and thirst for a deeper, stronger faith Christians need to hear the call to the means of grace once again today.

Wesley also knew that spiritual formation was not something that was done in private, but required a community of faith. This confronts the very individualistic, personalized view of faith prevalent in Western Christian culture. Bookstore shelves are lined with self-help books, symptomatic of our self-indulgent society.⁹⁹ Too many believe that with the right information a person can fix him or her self without needing the help of others. Sadly this mentality has crept into the life of the church as well.

Wesley, of course, took a very different view of spirituality. Wesley believed in the necessity of Christians banding together for support, encouragement and accountability, for “*unus Christianus, nullus Christianus*” — “one Christian, no Christian.”¹⁰⁰ Wesley would first form the society, a large gathering of believers who met for worship, instruction from the scriptures via the sermon, and accountability in the Christian walk. Soon the societies were quite large and providing proper care was almost impossible. Wesley’s trusted leaders were sent out to collect the society dues and found they got to know the members through this encounter. As each member gave an account of their spiritual journey, it seemed wise to do this in small groups to save time, and this was the start of the class meetings; small groups formed for accountability and instruction. As Gregory Clapper observes:

Wesley was not one to recommend lonely mountaintop contemplation, for he knew too well the human heart’s propensity for deceit. Wesley was constantly

⁹⁹ Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 121.

¹⁰⁰ Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, “My Journey Into the Orthodox Church” in *Response*, Winter 2009, Volume 32, Number 1. <http://www.spu.edu/depts/uc/response/winter2k9/features/orthodox-church.asp> (accessed January 28, 2013).

forming new believers into classes, societies and bands where the Christians could examine each other and openly and honestly share with each other the course of their spiritual struggles. Seeking “feedback” and direction from others was more the norm of the Methodist movement than the exception.¹⁰¹

Watson reminds us that in most realms of life we see the value of cooperation, and working together, from the mountain climber to the construction worker. Yet for some reason in the spiritual realm we continue to try and do it alone, "deliberately opting for self-sufficiency in our discipleship" which leads to what Wesley would term a "shipwreck of our faith."¹⁰²

Individualism is rampant within North American Christianity, where the “essential core of the Christian faith is reduced to what takes place in the individual and his or her personally experienced awareness of God.”¹⁰³ Wesley was wise enough to know this would destroy a person’s faith, so intentionally people were gathered into small groups for mutual encouragement, accountability and ministry. The class was the primary group, a gathering of people who have agreed to certain practices and responsibilities: a covenant. The group worked together to help each other uphold the covenant made with one another. Confessing sins to one another was an important part of the group dynamic, so that the bond was made at the point of weakness, and not strengths. Becoming vulnerable to one another opened the door to further honesty and growth.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Clapper, 86.

¹⁰² Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, 17.

¹⁰³ Runyon, 102.

¹⁰⁴ David Watson, *Called and Committed* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1982), 90.

Covenant Groups

The idea of covenant comes from God who, in forming a nation from the offspring of Abraham, pledged God's self to a people and invited them to pledge themselves back to God in faithful obedience. The guidelines of the covenant fill much of the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, rules meant to help a group of slaves grow into a community that gave witness to the one true God. The practices under the covenant would benefit the people, protecting them and teaching them how to draw near to a holy and righteous God while forming a healthy community.

Jesus also displayed covenantal love towards humankind, pledging his life in exchange for humankind's faith in him. The writer of the book of Hebrews highlights this saying:

¹³The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! ¹⁵For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant...¹⁰⁵

This new community formed within the covenant Jesus established also has practices that build relationship within the group and with God. These practices help the members of the community learn more about one's self, each other and God through mutual accountability and transparency. It also described how to best live to bring glory to God.

Though the church is in essence a covenant group, the community formed under the new covenant introduced through Christ, it is sometimes necessary to form smaller, more intimate groups within the church fellowship for the purpose of spiritual formation.

¹⁰⁵ Hebrews 9:13-15.

John Wesley understood this need for smaller groups and formed classes and bands within each of the societies. The classes were an intimate group of about ten to twelve people who “met weekly for personal supervision of their spiritual growth.”¹⁰⁶ This supervision was not by a professional but by a fellow seeker, as the class members watched out for one another.¹⁰⁷ These class meetings were very interactive and not built around curriculum, making them adaptable and beneficial to people at all levels of personal and spiritual development. Wesley wanted those further on in their spiritual development to learn to care for those new to the faith and to learn how to watch out for those simply seeking to know more about God’s will for their lives.¹⁰⁸ Michael Henderson reflects on this goal in the following manner:

The collective goal toward which the classes pulled was the attainment of personal holiness, or what Wesley called “perfect love”, or the character of Christ. As new converts took up these goals for themselves, they were nurtured in the encouraging context of an affirming group, all of whom were in various stages of the same quest.¹⁰⁹

The care found within the small groups like the class meeting continues to be necessary in the church today. As Blevins and Maddix say in their summary of the modern small group movement in the church: “The benefits of small groups include developing community and growing in the grace of God, needs central to life and faith.”¹¹⁰ Times

¹⁰⁶ Henderson, 95.

¹⁰⁷ Henderson, 96.

¹⁰⁸ Blevins and Maddix, 245.

¹⁰⁹ Henderson, 100.

¹¹⁰ Blevins and Maddix, 240.

have changed since Wesley, but the need for small groups and what they provide for spiritual formation has not.

Spiritual Formation and Service

Christian character and Christian conduct were to be shaped within the small group setting, reasoned Wesley. Yet a focus on personal edification and self improvement was never enough. Looking to see the needs of others and, by God's enablement, do what one can to improve their circumstances was also necessary. Paul Wesley Chilcote addresses this when he writes:

The primary question for the Methodist is not, am I saved? The ultimate question is, for what purpose am I saved? For the Wesleys, the answer was clear. My neighbor is the goal of my redemption, just as the life, death and resurrection of Christ are oriented toward the salvation of all humanity. The self-giving love of Christ must therefore become the goal, purpose and style of our lives. The genuine Christian is the one who embraces the mission of Jesus in humility and servanthood.¹¹¹

In the class meeting believers would grow in their understanding of who God is and what God is doing. Those who have entered relationship with this living, active, redeeming God soon catch the vision and, motivated by love, desire to be involved in the work God is doing.

For John Wesley there were some obvious places to start to look for the fingerprint of God. Wesley would send his members to visit in the prisons, bringing help and hope to prisoners, taking seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew twenty-five where the sheep and the goats are separated on the day of judgment by what they did for those

¹¹¹ Chilcote, 101.

in prison and in need.¹¹² Wesley also found scriptural precedence in his concern for the widow and orphan.¹¹³ Wesley's concern did not stop there, however, and Methodists did much to rescue the populace from the "almost epidemic" problem of alcoholism in the eighteenth century.¹¹⁴ The transformation that happened within the hearts and lives of God's people as they were "renewed in the image of God" sent them out empowered to "live out that image" as coworkers with God bringing grace to all they met.¹¹⁵ Wesley would agree with modern Christian educators who would say, "Faithful discipleship entails shaping people into the kingdom of God, helping them discern God's direction, and empowering them for faithful, missional engagement in the world."¹¹⁶ Wesley was able to accomplish this through the classes, and a virtual army was sent out to bring God's transforming grace to every community across England, Europe and beyond. Christians were not only enthused with new life from God they were sent out with a passion that came from an encounter with a God who deals with all creation with mercy, grace and love.

¹¹² "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Matthew 25:44-46.

¹¹³ "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." James 1:27.

¹¹⁴ Henderson, 137.

¹¹⁵ Runyon, 191.

¹¹⁶ Blevins and Maddix, 99.

Bringing Wesley to Nanaimo

The congregation of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene is composed of people from birth to nearly a century in age. Their backgrounds are as diverse as the Canadian landscape with folk newly immigrated from China, India, the Philippines, Europe and Russia, as well as people born and raised on Vancouver Island. The spiritual backgrounds are just as diverse, with some boasting long time roots in the Nazarene family, while others come from backgrounds as diverse as Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Full Gospel Assemblies. Several have come into the faith within the last twelve months, while others have walked with the Lord so long they cannot remember when the journey began. Yet all these diverse peoples have this in common: they are loved by God, and God desires a deep, life-changing relationship with each person so that our community might know of the grace, love and mercy of their one true Creator and Redeemer.

God is drawing each person to God's self, putting a spiritual hunger within for a greater sense of God's presence and love. In her book *A Praying Congregation* Jane E. Vennard reflects on this saying: "Sometimes, intimacy with God becomes possible – not because we deserve it or because we have earned it, but because our longing to be with God is a reflection of God's longing to be with us."¹¹⁷ Within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition we call this Prevenient Grace, God acting in our lives before we even acknowledged God's presence. God is always taking the lead in the relationship, for the God who is expressed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit desires humankind to enter into

¹¹⁷ Jane E. Vennard, *A Praying Congregation: The Art of Teaching Spiritual Practice* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2005), 43.

relationship with that Holy Union, experiencing the beauty of true love. Spiritual practices within the context of a community of accountability help remove distractions allowing the voice of God to be heard. It may be said that the tools used to measure spirituality are merely indicators of whether the participants have been able to hear God.

The spiritual climate of the whole congregation will be affected by the covenant group with its focus on spiritual formation, like leaven working in the dough. The six month covenant group project focuses on the spiritual growth of volunteers from the congregation, but their experience impacts others in the congregation as well. The testimonies and practices of this group are intended to spark interest in the rest of the congregation, so that they too may engage in a process to deepen their spiritual walk. The message to the church is that the Christian life calls for more than a superficial commitment. Charles Foster points out that congregational life is shaped by the practices of the group, and in time the group is identified by its practices.¹¹⁸ For too long the Church of the Nazarene and the Holiness movement have been identified by what they do not do: don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance, and don't attend movies. It is better to be known as a church that takes discipleship seriously, the fruit of which is a congregation that truly loves one another and the community.

As spiritual formation takes place and the servant heart of Christ is formed within Christian service naturally flows from the believer. One of the great challenges our church faces, along with many others is the inability to identify and recruit leaders. Wesley's answer to this challenge was the class structure, where lay leaders were trained and enabled to lead. Anyone could become a leader, and many took advantage of the

¹¹⁸ Foster, 39.

opportunity presented in the class meeting, and soon Wesley had an abundance of trained leaders in the church. As Henderson says:

It took no training or talent to be a class leader; anyone could do it. Being a class leader was in no way related to wealth or education or professional expertise or social standing; it was not an elite position. But, it did demand faithfulness, honesty, and concern for people. Anyone who demonstrated these qualities as a class leader could rise to higher levels of leadership, but without them it was impossible to be a Methodist leader, no matter how educated or wealthy or talented.¹¹⁹

The class provided the training ground for all kinds of leaders both in and out of the church, from pastors to politicians.¹²⁰ Wesley's model of practical training in a safe, supportive small group setting can be used in the church today to open the doors of service to a host of new leaders who have been waiting for an opportunity to serve.

Where will the leaders come from? There are long-time Christians in our church who have learned to be content as spectators in the work God is doing. There are new believers who need to be discipled so they do not end up as consumers within the church. There are children and teenagers who need to be raised within a new environment of Christian discipleship. By making the covenant group a central part of the ministry of our congregation opportunity is provided to change the DNA of the church. Making disciples is essential to the life and ministry of the church and providing an environment where that can happen helps strengthen the spiritual life of the whole body of believers.

Covenant groups are a place where participants are given an opportunity to listen and respond to what God wants for their lives today, and through accountability they can be encouraged to live out what God is doing in them. Looking at Wesley's class meetings

¹¹⁹ Henderson, 101.

¹²⁰ For instance Theodore Runyon in *The New Creation*, 124.

Runyan points out that by “holding one another *accountable*, they not only forged a renewed community, they overcame the natural tendency toward complacency and encouraged one another to “grow in grace.””¹²¹ The waning joy and enthusiasm many experience in their Christian walk is counteracted by allowing others to lovingly bring encouragement and rebuke through a relationship of accountability. The group supports the believer’s desire to “stand firm”¹²² no matter what is faced. In a safe place where Christians are not judged for failing but are encouraged as they hold on new strength is found. Together the group wrestles with scripture passages, interpreting what is meant and how it ought to be applied today. The group encourages the one who has not left margin in his life to slow down. The group might help someone discover that the impatience they are experiencing is less a spiritual failure than the symptom of an exhausted body.¹²³ The group may see what the individual cannot see in herself, but in that context they are given permission to address that issue in her life.

There are many traditions that speak to spiritual formation, but this project focuses on the Wesleyan response to discipleship. The focus on religion of the heart as opposed to structures and rules appeals to our post modern thinking. The strong emphasis on community as the place where spiritual formation takes place appeals to a society experiencing a deficit in authentic relationships. It is easy to get caught up in building the organization, keeping the members of the church busy, trying to deal with the

¹²¹ Runyon, 123.

¹²² Hebrews 6:13 “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

¹²³ Joe Gorman, “Recognizing Our Limitations: The Wisdom of Self-Care” in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*, ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), 133-134.

financial pressures of the church, but these things “can’t muffle the cry of innumerable hearts longing for a meaningful relationship with the Almighty and an experience of community with the people of God.”¹²⁴ What the heart cries out for is found in Jesus, and in Jesus believers are invited into a fellowship of others who also aspire to holiness of heart and life and are willing to help each other on the journey leading towards God.

Wesley was convinced that the secret to spiritual discipleship was the dynamic that happens when believers gather and encourage, exhort, worship and minister together. Within this context God the Holy Spirit comes and shapes God’s people in the image of Christ. Christianity is a social religion, for the heart of the matter is love for our Creator and love for one another. This cannot happen by withdrawing in isolation to pursue a personalized path to holiness. As noted earlier, Wesley would declare with the ancient Fathers, “*unus Christianus, nullus Christianus*” — “one Christian, no Christian.”

If the goal of salvation is a heart renewed in love then there must be others in the life of the believer that will be the objects of that love. Through covenant groups members of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene have a chance to explore what love from a renewed heart looks like. As the group listens together for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and seeks to take God’s love to the needs of the community around them they will be shaped to reflect the image of Christ.

¹²⁴ Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*, 27.

Chapter Three

Research Design

Designing a project that facilitates spiritual growth within a certain context and measuring if that project is successful is a challenge. The covenant group with its high level of accountability as well as intimacy was chosen for this project, a concept that is greatly influenced by the classes of the Methodist movement of the eighteenth century. Volunteers from the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene gathered for six months on a weekly basis, studying Christian practices and thought together, sharing how their lives were being impacted by what they studied and experienced. To evaluate the effectiveness of the group is difficult, for spirituality can be influenced by so many factors. Even deciding on a definition of spirituality is tricky as there are many ways to define this. Nonetheless feedback from the group obtained through the Spiritual Well-Being survey and a post project questionnaire provides data for evaluating the impact of the covenant group on participants. The following details the steps necessary for this project.

Context of the Study

The Community

Nanaimo is a small city of 90,000 people with an area population of about 120,000. It is a community that has lost the main industries that built the city; fishing, coal mining and forestry. The University, tourism and the jobs that service a community such as teachers, city workers, police, doctors, nurses, and retail workers are the backbone of the economy. One pulp mill and one sawmill still exist that employ a few

hundred people, and two ferry terminals linking the city to the mainland (Nanaimo is situated on Vancouver Island off the coast of British Columbia) employ a many people. A dock for cruise ships was recently added to our updated and lovely harbour front in an attempt to lure tourists to the city. However, many young people frustrated with the lack of job opportunities in the area fly to northern Alberta where the oil and gas industry provides high paying jobs. Many will fly in and out to the jobs, preferring to keep a home on the island.

Vancouver Island, including Nanaimo, has a large population of seniors who came from all over Canada to retire in a milder climate (for Canada). The area has an average of 1800 hours of bright sun each year and an average high of 21° C (70° F) in the summer and seldom dropping below freezing (0° C or 32° F) in the winter.¹²⁵ Snow is a rare occurrence in Nanaimo. The largest number of people moving to Nanaimo is in the 40-59 age range followed by the 60+ age group.¹²⁶ This influx of seniors affects the housing market, demand on the medical services, and recreation facility preferences. It has also made a huge impact on the demographics of the Nazarene Church in Nanaimo. Today 45 of the 150 who call Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene their church home are over the age of 65, and being the most consistent attendees the church often looks to be a church of seniors.

¹²⁵ From the fact sheet found on the City of Nanaimo Website.
<http://www.nanaimo.ca/assets/departments/economic~development/why~nanaimo/communityprofile.pdf>
(accessed September 13, 2013).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

The Congregation

The Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene is considered a small church, with average attendance of 78 reported to the District Assembly in 2013.¹²⁷ Organized in 1958 the church soon bought property and built a small facility in a residential area. For nearly fifty years this was the location from which ministry took place. This is significant because in 2004 that facility was sold with no solid plans for a future location. This is when I arrived at the church, finding a people quite demoralized, feeling they had no pastor, no church building and on the brink of closing as one third of its membership left due to the sale of the building. The attendance at that time was about 55 and falling. The first rental location for services was a funeral home which did not help the attendance or morale of the people. The theme constantly repeated to the people was, “God still has a plan for this church.” It should be noted that an average attendance of 55 was still higher than most years as the congregation averaged between 20 and 35 in worship attendance most of its history, with the average spiking to 75 under the leadership of the previous pastor. A quick glance at the history of the church shows an average pastoral stay of two years, which likely contributed to the church’s inability to gain any real momentum over the years. The longest stay of any pastor was five years, and that was the pastor that preceded my coming to Nanaimo.

During the course of the research project some significant developments have taken place at the church. In April 2013 the congregation completed negotiations with the Anglican Church of Canada to purchase the building that was leased for the past six years (the next move after the funeral home was torn down). This meant high levels of

¹²⁷ According to Nazarene practice this includes adults as well as children attending.

excitement as well as huge adjustments as the transition was made from renter to owner. The mindset of the people has shifted from survival mode to optimism about the future of the church. No doubt this excitement was reflected in the responses of the participants of this study.

Discipleship Patterns and Challenges

Adult discipleship is the focus of this study, and looking at the programs of the church one might be tempted to say there is very little intentional discipleship happening. There is a growing awareness and appreciation for the transformational ability of worship services, special projects and seasonal celebrations,¹²⁸ but there is still a need for ministry that allows adults to go deeper in their commitment to follow Jesus. Over the past few years so much energy was put into searching for facilities and/or property and trying to keep the congregation moving forward in a united way that discipleship was under emphasized. Sunday School prior to the morning worship service was discontinued several years ago due to a lack of leadership, and until recently only one adult study group was meeting. Ministry projects such as raising funds for missions and volunteering in the community comprises a component of discipleship that involves several adults along with some of the youth. Nonetheless most adults are not involved in any formal means of discipleship.

Faithful discipleship must bring together the diverse peoples that compose the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene. On any Sunday morning one will find a crowd

¹²⁸ Foster, 43-46.

representing people with Chinese, Filipino, Latin American, Indian, First Nations,¹²⁹ Russian, and other European backgrounds gathered together. In fact, over thirty percent of the congregation have Filipino background. There are few members who were raised in the Church of the Nazarene, and attendees come with Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Salvation Army, Baptist, United Church of Canada, Mennonite, Anglican and a host of other backgrounds. Almost every week there will be students from the local University present in the services. One will find attendees who have been in the church for decades, alongside those who have come into the Christian faith by profession only a few months ago. Some have come back to the church after years of absence while others are new to the culture of church community. It is an exciting mix of people to be a part of yet this also presents a challenging task to lead this community into a mature faith.

Carl S. Dudley outlines eight church personalities, or images, portrayed by a congregation both to themselves and the community.¹³⁰ Drawing from the first two images which ask “What holds us together?” the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene can be described as a Christian Nurture Church. It is relationship that holds this church together. According to Dudley this kind of church “must develop a common language and establish a network of relationships to care for individuals and to sustain family life in a highly mobile world.”¹³¹ There are few families related to one another, and no long term family ties. A recent study showed that of the average attendance of seventy-eight, twenty-five of those have been in the church more than ten years. Only one family has

¹²⁹ First Nations is a Canadian term for Native Americans, or North American Indians.

¹³⁰ Carl S. Dudley, “Using Church Images for Commitment, Conflict and Renewal” in *Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform*, ed. Carl Ellis Nelson (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).

¹³¹ Dudley, 98.

been at the church more than twenty five years. So it goes without saying that our church is "... a "new" and more open family composed of people from different backgrounds who are bonded by their common faith..."¹³² As Dudley suggests, though our church has a "denominational label, it is far more interested in meeting the needs of individuals and families in the area it serves."¹³³ To help bond this group, and lead them forward in discipleship, the covenant group is a valuable ministry to help this newly formed family "watch over one another in love."¹³⁴

Discipleship Practices

Christian formation for adults in the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene has taken place in three main arenas. First there is the preached word through the sermon. Blevins and Maddix highlight that the three primary educational goals are *formation, discernment and transformation*.¹³⁵ The sermon is strong in formation as it provides not only exegesis of scripture but also outlines doctrine. Each sermon provides opportunity for discernment, asking what each passage or topic means to the listener today. The greatest challenge is transformation, knowing if the challenge of the message translates into action. Who will believers be accountable to for living out any commitments made? The realization that transformation is the "missing link" in the chain of discipleship in our church prompted a desire for small group discipleship with its emphasis on mutual accountability.

¹³² Dudley, 100.

¹³³ Dudley, 101.

¹³⁴ Halverson, 14.

¹³⁵ Blevins and Maddix, 42.

A small group ministry for adults is not a new concept within the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene. Weekly Bible Studies, Sunday School classes, and prayer gatherings comprised the majority of the small group experiences of the church. Breakfast fellowships, work parties and mission projects were occasional events that brought members together for discipleship through ministry.¹³⁶ However, the emphasis in the Bible Studies and Sunday School classes was on gaining information, learning lessons through scripture, with a minor emphasis on discernment as the material was contemporized. Curriculum was from a Wesleyan-Holiness publisher and the goal of transformation was a holy life, though too often the focus was on information instead of transformation. More can be done in the way of discipleship for adults in the church as too many members still function at a shallow level of commitment and look far more like the world than like Christ. Also transformation that reaches beyond the confines of the congregation into the greater community does not occur as much as one might hope.

The Nanaimo Church is striving to become the “Christian Servant Church” and “The Faith Evangelist Church”¹³⁷ using Carl Dudley’s categories. These categories describe a church’s engagement with the community, reaching out to meet both physical (servant) and spiritual (evangelist) needs. In the past five years there has been an increase in involvement in ministries of the community that give aid to families and individuals in the name of Jesus (i.e. Crisis Pregnancy Center, Island Crisis Society, Loaves and Fishes Food Bank, Teen Challenge Discipleship Center) and this involvement is seen as a necessary step in discipleship. This reflects the continued commitment to the

¹³⁶ Foster, 45.

¹³⁷ Dudley, 106, 110.

Wesleyan spirit that saw service as much a spiritual discipline as prayer.¹³⁸ Also, within the past three years, more people have been led into a personal relationship with Jesus than in the previous seven years. This renewed evangelistic thrust presents the church with the opportunity to disciple and nurture these new Christians.

In most small groups, Sunday School classes to Bible Studies, the teacher/student format is used. This means relationship building that can nurture spiritual growth in individuals and the Christian community is not as strong as it could be. Nonetheless, those who participate regularly in the small groups are bonded together in a way non-participants never experience. Faithfulness in attendance, readiness to serve and long term commitment to fellowship are all indicators that some form of spiritual growth is taking place in those who participate in small groups.

Covenant groups exist “to foster spiritual growth and active discipleship in the world”¹³⁹ and are the perfect vehicle for spiritual formation in our context. The covenant group modelled after the class meeting initiated by John Wesley for spiritual growth informed this project. The reality that “spiritual formation and growth always take place within a social context”¹⁴⁰ underlies the design of this project. Though youth and children can be discipled in a covenant group setting¹⁴¹ this study tested the value of a covenant group among adult members of the church.

¹³⁸ Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*, 156.

¹³⁹ Bevins and Maddix, 239.

¹⁴⁰ Bevins and Maddix, 239.

¹⁴¹ Halverson, 14.

Project Design

The project extended for more than nine months as it needed time for introduction to the congregation through a sermon series, a time to recruit, six months of meeting together and a time to bring to conclusion the project through interviews and inventories. This chapter walks the reader through the process giving some of the rationale and background as to why the various practices were incorporated into the project. This chapter ushers the reader into the weekly session of the covenant group, how that session was shaped by the participants and the important factors that strengthened the experience for the group. Comments from participants help the reader understand the value of the group experience for those who met over the course of six months.

Introducing the Theme of Covenant

The theme of covenant needed to be introduced to the congregation, for this is a key concept within the Christian faith and an important element in this project. This was done through a three part sermon series. Charles Foster, writing about educating congregations, highlights the importance of congregations knowing the story of God. A Christian is defined as one who has entered the story of God by faith, so it is important that Christians are familiar with scripture and its story. Part of knowing the story is learning the vocabulary. Foster says “our faith vocabularies do more than shape our perceptions. They inform our sense of who we are. If we do not know the words

associated with the sacred texts ... we cannot live out the promises of the Christian story.”¹⁴²

The word covenant is important to understand who God is and how God acts towards humankind. It speaks of God’s faithfulness and of God’s desire for relationship with humankind. The whole Old Testament can be seen as the repeated call of God to humankind to enter covenant relationship.¹⁴³ The three sermons on covenant can only introduce the term into the vocabulary of the people and give a limited perspective on the idea of covenant. The sermon was chosen as the means to introduce this theme because this form of instruction is familiar to the people and it is very much a part of our Wesleyan heritage. Wesley was a master at using the sermon to introduce doctrine and teaching to the Methodist gatherings. Also, the sermons allowed the whole congregation to be introduced to the theme of covenant and the project itself, not just a select few.

The concept of covenant is also central to understanding the New Testament, for in Christ’s death and resurrection God continues to invite humankind to enter into relationship with God’s self. In the New Testament the believer is introduced to God in Trinity, the Godhead revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit “in perfect relationship,” expressing “holy love toward one another,”¹⁴⁴ and the believer is invited to enter into fellowship with this God of relationship. The book of Hebrews describes this relationship in terms of a new covenant established in Jesus, and makes this book a logical choice for a sermon series on covenant from a New Testament perspective.

¹⁴² Foster, 70.

¹⁴³ Les Steele, *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 17-22 cited in Blevins and Maddix, 29.

¹⁴⁴ Blevins and Maddix, 57.

So it is not surprising that all three sermons were taken from the book of Hebrews, noting the strong emphasis on the better things that have come because of Jesus, including a better covenant: "... Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant."¹⁴⁵ The sermons focus on the material in chapter eight of Hebrews where Jesus is said to be the High Priest of a new covenant, a covenant made necessary not because of the inadequacy of the old one, but because of the inadequacy of the people who pledged to uphold the covenant agreement. This passage is clearly a continuation of the story of the covenant making God found in the Old Testament.

The sermons did not deal with the nature of covenants or the rich history of covenant within the story of God but focused instead on the results, or consequences, of people entering into covenant relationship. The titles of the sermons were as follows: Covenant Forms Community (Hebrews 8:6-13); Covenant Means Commitment (Hebrews 9:1-10); and Covenant Means Consistency (Hebrews 8:1-7).¹⁴⁶ These topics highlight the communal aspect of covenants, and how community is integral to the pursuit of spiritual formation. The sermons helped the congregation see how discipleship and covenant groups connect, for it is in community that we best grow in our faith.

Wesley was careful to craft his sermons for instruction,¹⁴⁷ which were distributed for reading among the societies and classes. His sermons reflected the theological convictions and Christian practices of Methodists. This means of grace was effective in opening the mind of the listener to what God was saying to God's people. Of course the

¹⁴⁵ Hebrews 7:22.

¹⁴⁶ All three sermons can be found in Appendix I.

¹⁴⁷ Heitzenrater, 94.

source of the content of Wesley's sermons was scripture, for Methodists, like Wesley himself, would be a people of one book.¹⁴⁸

Following in this tradition the theme of covenant, rooted in the story of God revealed in scripture, was introduced first to the congregation. These sermons informed the congregation and helped members appreciate God's covenant love. It also piqued interest in the covenant group. This means of grace allowed members of the congregation to be open to hear God, producing a hunger for more of God that discipleship in the small group can satisfy.

Recruiting Participants

As the topic of covenant was being introduced to the congregation through these sermons, announcements were also put in the church bulletin calling for volunteers to form a covenant group. The congregation was informed that the covenant group would run six months and was designed to help participants grow spiritually. Therefore all participants must commit to being involved the full six months. It was also made clear that other expectations of the group would be determined by the participants themselves.

On April 12, 2013 a bulletin insert asking people to commit to the covenant group was distributed.¹⁴⁹ It was critical to have six to twelve people voluntarily join the group. Wesley formed his classes with ten to twelve members, for this was a practical number for the leader of the class to meet with each week.¹⁵⁰ It is suggested that the ideal size of a

¹⁴⁸ Knight, 148.

¹⁴⁹ The invitation to join the covenant group is found in Appendix II.

¹⁵⁰ Henderson, 95.

small group is five to twelve. “The larger the group, the less individuals open up.”¹⁵¹

Teena Stewart also suggests that a group smaller than five members lacks necessary resources to function well.¹⁵² However, a more critical issue may be that shy people can be intimidated and feel unwanted pressure to have to speak. This pressure may keep the shy person from returning to the group. Having six to twelve people allows for good dialogue while maintaining a sense of intimacy among the group members. This is something a larger or smaller group cannot provide.

The bulletin insert was used as opposed to direct invitations to guard against people participating because of coercion. Mary Moschella warns pastoral researchers that coercion can take many forms, and is to be avoided as much as possible.

The line between inviting people to participate and coercing them can be blurry, especially in congregations or organizations with top-down power structures. When congregations are in the habit of doing whatever their pastor says, or even merely respecting their pastor’s position, they may automatically assume that it is their religious obligation to comply with the leader’s request for participation in the study. It is incumbent upon the pastoral leader to emphasize the participant’s freedom of choice.¹⁵³

The bulletin insert gave enough distance so that participants responded according to their interest and not because they felt coerced by a direct appeal from the pastor.

During the first meeting of the covenant group material was distributed to the participants to help them understand the nature of a covenant group, how they were used by John Wesley in his class meetings and the nature of covenant found in scripture.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Teena M. Stewart, *Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2007), 22.

¹⁵² Stewart, 22.

¹⁵³ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 91.

¹⁵⁴ See Appendix III.

Through this the participants were introduced to the deep tradition they were entering into as participants in a covenant group experience, including the rich Wesleyan tradition of discipleship through the class meeting.

The “means of grace,” Wesley’s designation for practices that allow the participant to encounter God, is an important theme the participants needed to understand. These practices took on a new and fuller meaning for the participants as they studied the book *Reflecting God* together. Participation in the various means of grace found within the community of faith was emphasized for the sake of the ongoing spiritual development of the participants once the project was completed. Though the participants helped test the effectiveness of a covenant group for spiritual development, their need to grow spiritually was not over. The means of grace are practices that will help participants continue the journey started in this project.

Consent

During the first meeting the participants were informed that though this covenant group was meant to provide a place for spiritual growth through fellowship and accountability, it was also an important part of Pastor Gary’s doctoral program. As participants in a research study they needed to know that they were being observed and evaluated, and they must give their permission for such scrutiny.¹⁵⁵ “Emotional or spiritual harm” can be inflicted upon participants if confidential material is handled recklessly, warns Moschella.¹⁵⁶ The researcher must ensure that the utmost care be given

¹⁵⁵ Moschella, 89.

¹⁵⁶ Moschella, 88.

in collecting, storing and sharing information. The trust given the researcher must never be violated by careless use of confidential material. Though no written consent forms were signed, each participant had to clearly indicate consent to the study leader before entering the study.

Participants were allowed to ask any question to help them clarify what they were getting into, what was expected of them, and what would be done with the data collected from the study. It is important that each participant be as informed as possible about what the six month covenant group would look like. When all questions were answered the volunteers were given the opportunity to continue in the study or drop out if they wished. It was important that all participants were there on their own volition.

A Safe Place

Establishing a safe place for open and honest discussion was very important. There should be no pressure to speak. A person could opt out of any discussion or practice at any time without judgment. Also, there could be no fear of negative reactions to anything said. All were entitled to their opinions, stories and view points and were encouraged to share these without fear. This ground rule was essential for honest and open sharing within the group. Moschella borrows from Margaret Kornfeld descriptions of two types of community: “real community” as opposed to a “pseudo-community.” A “real community” is “a place where people are free to be themselves and know that they will be accepted, a place where conflict can be expressed and resolved, and a place where diversity of opinion is honored.”¹⁵⁷ The pseudo-community appears welcoming at first

¹⁵⁷ Margaret Kornfeld, *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities* (New York: Continuum International, 2000), 19 cited in Moschella, 34.

but is not a safe place if opinions differ from the group's stated values. A person is reprimanded for not adhering to the accepted beliefs. One does not feel "safe" in this environment, feeling like a misfit, which could cause one to "go into hiding." This group must be a "real community," for this is where the most spiritual growth takes place.

Covenant Expectations

The group had to develop its own covenant, expectations that all the participants could agree upon. The covenant contained the guidelines for this group, the things that could be expected from each member for the sake of the group. Discussion was started by looking at the expectations Wesley had for his bands:

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us; to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.¹⁵⁸

A covenant formed by the participants was more likely to be remembered and adhered to than one imposed upon them from the outside. The participants were given one week to draw up a list of the items they deemed important for this covenant group,

¹⁵⁸ John Wesley, "Rules of the Band Societies: Drawn up Dec. 25, 1738" *Works* 9:77.

Baseline for Evaluation: Spiritual Well-Being Scale

Objective data to measure the state of the spiritual well-being of the participants at the beginning of the study was necessary to act as a point of reference for comparison sake with data from the end of the six month project. The objective tool chosen was the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWB)¹⁵⁹ developed by Craig W. Ellison (Christian counsellor) and Raymond F. Paloutzian (psychologist). This scale measures the subjective state of well-being among participants through a twenty question survey that measures two different aspects of spiritual well-being: a religious sense and an existential sense.¹⁶⁰ Figure 1 below gives an overview of the spiritual well-being scale used.

Spiritual Well-Being Scale by Craig W. Ellison & Raymond P. Paloutzian	
Positively and negatively worded items with responses ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" are given numeric values from 1 through 6. These are totalled to get the scoring totals.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a score range of 20-40 reflects a sense of low spiritual well-being - a score range of 41-99 reflects a sense of moderate spiritual well-being - a score range of 100-120 reflects a high spiritual well-being 	
Divided into two sub-categories according to two main views of spirituality	
Existential Well-Being	Religious Well-Being
-measures one's level of life satisfaction and life purpose	- measures how one views their relationship with God, reflecting a sense of satisfaction and positive connection with God
Scoring	
- range 10-20 suggests a low satisfaction with one's life and lack of clarity in life's purpose	- range 10-20 reflects unsatisfactory relationship with God
- range 21-49 suggests a moderate level of life satisfaction and purpose	- range 21-49 reflects moderate sense of religious well-being
- range 50-60 suggests a high level of satisfaction with life and a clear sense of purpose	- range 50-60 reflects a positive view of one's relationship with God

Figure 1. Overview of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale by Craig W. Ellison and Raymond P. Paloutzian.

¹⁵⁹ See Appendix IV.

¹⁶⁰ Ellison and Paloutzian, "Manual for the Spiritual Well-Being Scale" by Life Advance, first published 1982.

When people speak of spirituality there are two general meanings to that word. The first sense of spiritual is how a person relates to God, which this scale calls religious well-being. The second sense of spiritual refers to overall satisfaction with life, which this scale calls the existential well-being. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale is divided into these two categories, with half the questions relating to religious spiritual well-being and the other half to existential spiritual well-being. The separation of the two categories of spirituality in this scale allows one to analyze a broader spectrum of religious experience, and see if there is a correlation between the two experiences.

This Spiritual Well-Being Scale has been around since 1982 and has been used in many studies, from research dissertations to clinical work, from congregation assessments to nursing and health care settings. It has a test-retest reliability coefficient over four tests in a one to ten week testing of .96, .99, .96 and .88. This means the results are consistent and reliable. This particular scale is most sensitive to a lack of spiritual well-being.¹⁶¹

This same tool administered at the start of the project was also used at the end of the project, and the scores were compared to see if there was any change. This tool is simple to administer and the results are easy to analyze, making it a good instrument for this project. It was not intimidating or overwhelming for the participants to use. The results helped determine if there was a sense of spiritual growth in the life of the participants.

¹⁶¹ This analysis of the well-being scale by Ellison and Paloutzian comes from the fact sheet provided with the scale at purchase, backed by an extensive bibliography at <http://lifeadvance.com/>

Building Community

To facilitate the building of trust and to encourage participation the participants were invited to share a little of their own story, a testimony of where they were on the spiritual journey and what led them to this point. Community is formed as stories are shared,¹⁶² stories of what God has done and is doing in our lives. This exercise called for vulnerability in the group, laying the ground work for deeper sharing in the future. The commitments of the covenant the group agreed on were tested in this exercise, for sharing one's story makes one vulnerable to the rest of the group. How the stories were handled by the participants determined the extent to which this group became a "real community" as opposed to a "pseudo-community." As members of the group heard ideas that differed from their own, and accepted each person's experience as valid and important, the ground work for a strong community was laid.

Resource Book

A resource introduced to the group was a book entitled *Reflecting God*.¹⁶³ This introduced the covenant group to the means of grace and other theological truths and Christian practices from a Wesleyan-Holiness understanding. *Reflecting God* brings together in twenty chapters an overview of Wesleyan-Holiness thought through a presentation that is well suited for dialogue. Designed to be a resource for a small group discipleship program its chapters tackle one topic at a time while keeping in mind the larger picture of God and God's will for the church. With four authors there are different

¹⁶² Blevins and Maddix, 183.

¹⁶³ Wes Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*.

voices throughout the book. This allowed participants in the covenant group to take in more from those writers whose style suited them best, and the group dynamic allowed them to appreciate the material of writers they did not relate to as it was discussed. This book is filled with practical stories and illustrations which helped the reader relate to the topics better. To have this resource guarded against the “group process becoming mere therapy (sharing emotions but not ideas) or shared ignorance (a battle of anecdotal experiences).”¹⁶⁴ This resource added substance to the group’s sharing times.

It is fair to ask why a study book was even used when the purpose of the covenant group was to form relationships and not simply gain information. Within Wesley’s class meetings participants simply asked questions of each other during the time the group met. There was no study guide or resource book in those early meetings. The choice of this book came out of two different concerns.

The first concern was to “pay attention” to the dynamics of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene congregation. “Paying attention, or discerning, prepares us to provide appropriate ministry.”¹⁶⁵ The participants were familiar with small groups focused on studies of scripture texts or other written materials. The book made the participants feel safe for it was a familiar format. However, covering the material in the book was not the objective of the group. Instead the topics of each chapter provided a launching pad for discussion and interaction. Work sheets reflecting the content of a chapter in the book were emailed to each participant to help focus the discussion in each meeting.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Blevins and Maddix, 172.

¹⁶⁵ Blevins and Maddix, 100.

¹⁶⁶ See Appendix VI. Spaces left for answers are removed to reduce document size.

The second concern that led to the choice of a book, and this book in particular, is the desire for our congregation to be well disciplined in the Wesleyan tradition. As Blevins and Maddix point out, the danger is for Wesleyan thought to be swallowed up by American Evangelicalism.¹⁶⁷ Many Nazarenes do not know of the rich heritage that is theirs through the Methodist revival. This book, written for small group study, is a great resource for this purpose, introducing theological themes, practices and ministry through the Wesleyan-Holiness lens. In the Forward to the book Marlin R. Hotle writes:

God's desire is not simply that we experience Him, but that we become a reflection of him. We can never cast a clear reflection, however, until we have given ourselves completely to Him. This complete surrender opens the door to a wonderful journey of holiness. Our excellent *Reflecting God* writers have provided us a clear map to guide us on a journey toward Christlikeness.¹⁶⁸

A greater understanding and appreciation of Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is an important outcome of this project. This book enhances that study through an appealing presentation. It wrestles with deep theological issues through stories and illustrations so that those truths come alive for the reader. The generous use of story also opens the group up to discussion, prompting participants to tell their own stories.

Group Meetings

In our busy world gathering a group of six to twelve people on a consistent basis is not easy. Weekdays are filled with commitments and weekends are increasingly becoming filled as well. To allow each member to attend consistently a time must be chosen that is accessible to all who participate. The meetings must start on time and

¹⁶⁷ Blevins and Maddix, 21.

¹⁶⁸ Tracy et al., *Reflecting God*, 4.

finish within the set time frame of one hour. This honours the commitment of the participants and reflects acknowledgement that their time is important.

The meetings did not have a complicated agenda, but took on the following format:

- a. Welcome
- b. Open in prayer
- c. Question: how are things with you today?
- d. Review questions from worksheet or other items from chapter
- e. Discuss application or some response to the lesson
- f. Close in prayer

As the focus of the group was on sharing and drawing closer to one another, completing the questions on the worksheet was not the most important thing the group did. Only one or two of the questions might be addressed each session so that the conversation could explore topics that were on the hearts of the participants. The best discussions focused on the questions: “What does this mean to me today?” and “What should I do?” Heart felt dialogue draws participants closer to each other and to God.

This was the first time this congregation used a covenant group for discipleship, and so it was expected that there would be learning along the way. Throughout the course of the covenant group comments made about the spiritual journey as well as responses to the group dynamic were documented. As the confidentiality of the group members was important there were no names attached to the comments in the notes. Comments in regards to the group from the rest of the congregation were also recorded. This information will be available to future groups formed in the church making them stronger. As David Lowes Watson reminds us, the pilot group is testing the ground for the congregation in covenant group development. This group is exploring, not

experimenting.¹⁶⁹ The lessons learned here will be shared and implemented by others at a later date.

Concluding the Project

After the six months of meeting together were completed two means of gathering information were implemented to determine if the objective of spiritual development had been achieved. The first means of gathering information was to have participants complete the same Spiritual Well-Being Scale taken at the beginning of the project. The results of this second inventory were compared with the results of the first to see if there was any notable change in the sense of spiritual well-being.

The second means of gathering information was a post project survey. To get a more complete picture of how participants felt about the covenant group experience a survey with seven questions was distributed to each person. After the survey was completed by each participant the researcher interviewed each person allowing for elaboration of the answers.¹⁷⁰ This survey provided a more robust response to the covenant group experience with its open-ended questions rather than yes/no responses.

Before the group disbanded the members were invited to wrestle with the question, "Now what?" A preferred outcome of this project was that members of the covenant group would want to see the group experience continue in the context of their church and be willing to give leadership as new groups were formed. If this response came spontaneously from the group it would be a positive sign of spiritual growth.

¹⁶⁹ David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 72.

¹⁷⁰ See Appendix VII.

Projected Outcomes of the Covenant Group Experience

The covenant group was designed to provide a place where spiritual growth and development could take place. Through honest and open sharing and the study of a common resource participants were given a chance to draw closer to God and each other. Some of the outcomes anticipated for this project included the following:

- A greater awareness of and appreciation of Wesleyan-Holiness thought and practices. There was no formal “testing” of this for there were no exams at the end of the course, but through the excellent material found in *Reflecting God* participants were exposed to key concepts and practices from this viewpoint. The weekly dialogue that came from the study of this text indicates a high level of engagement with the material, and much has been understood and appropriated into the thinking and practices of the participants.
- A sense of community formed among the participants. It is not enough that the participants have a shared story of belonging to the covenant group. Holiness is love in action so there should be a recognizable bond among the participants.
- A growing sense by the participants of a deepening spiritual life which is also reflected in the Spiritual Well-Being Scale. The answers in the final questionnaire should indicate changes in thought, actions and affections which indicate growth in the spiritual lives of the participants.
- A stronger appreciation for the means of grace and a commitment to faithful participation in these practices. Observation of the involvement of the

participants in these means of grace gave some indication of how important these were to each person. The question of how well the means of grace were understood and if there is a greater appreciation of them was addressed in the exchange at the end of the covenant experience.

- A willingness to be involved, or continue involvement in ministry. A lack of leaders was one of the issues that prompted this study so a desired outcome would be to see new leadership raised up. This could be within the church and its existing programs but may also embrace a ministry that takes members outside the walls of the church into the community where the need to bring the love of Christ to people in a tangible way is very real. Though ministries may not be immediately available at the end of the project a desire to be involved, and searching for God's will would be a sign of successful discipleship.

John Wesley tried to maintain a balance in Christian formation between “orthodoxy” (right belief), “orthopraxy” (right practice or behaviour) and “orthopathy” (a right heart – a heart shaped in holiness).¹⁷¹ Today we may express this by desiring Christian education that is holistic, being aware of the need to include doing, knowing and being.¹⁷² A goal of this covenant group project for discipleship was that participants grow in knowledge, in right behaviour and a right heart towards God. Yet this was not the end of the project, for if the experience is replicated again and again within the life and ministry of this local Church of the Nazarene then the project will be deemed a success.

¹⁷¹ Blevins and Maddix, 133-134.

¹⁷² Blevins and Maddix, 155.

Finally, if lessons learned through this project can be helpful to other congregations then it is hoped those truths will be passed on. Sharing about the value of the project and the lessons learned through means of the networks with other pastors, both within the Nazarene family and within the broader church community is anticipated. Though it may be possible to present this study in a formal way, such as a seminar, it is anticipated that most sharing will be in informal settings. The experiences of God's grace and the lessons learned on the journey should be shared with those who want to hear.

Chapter 4

Research Data and Results

The personal research project was designed to test the theory that small accountable groups for spiritual formation and development are effective and beneficial. This required that a covenant group be formed from members of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene. This group would meet over a period of six months adhering to a covenant drawn up by the group itself. Through observation, including careful attention to comments made by participants, and through an objective measuring device called a Spiritual Well-Being Scale the goal was to observe progress in the participant's spiritual development. The following chapter outlines the project and the raw data that came from the various steps necessary to see the hypothesis tested.

The Sermons

The project began with a three sermon series to introduce the topic of covenant to the congregation. This was necessary as the term covenant is not one used often in the Nazarene tradition. It was important to introduce the idea of binding commitments into the understanding of Christian discipleship to make the covenant group experiment even possible.

This phase of the project was geared for a general audience, which included the whole congregation. Observation from the pulpit indicated that the topic was of interest to the congregation as most were quite engaged during the preaching of the sermon. Comments afterwards were "This is an important topic, Pastor," and "I had not thought

about covenant like this before. I always saw it as just an Old Testament idea.” This kind of conversation was helpful to measure if the concept and importance of covenant was getting through to the congregation. There was no formal feedback mechanism, so conversations were important sources of information.

The sermons also facilitated the introduction of John Wesley’s class meetings as an example of covenant groups in an industrialized modern society, which helped bridge the gap between the Old and New Testament understanding of covenant and today. The sermon laid out an example of a group of people covenanting together for spiritual growth in Wesley’s class meetings. This prompted various responses from the congregation, some asking if we could do something similar today, others questioning if it would work in our setting. This provided opportunity to explain the nature of the personal research project designed to test the effectiveness of covenant group meetings today. Many in the congregation were interested now in the project about to be undertaken.

Recruiting

The main tool for recruiting people for the group was an insert in the bulletin that introduced people to the covenant group with its six-month commitment. Announcements in the church bulletin informed people that there would be a request for people to form a covenant group, but the insert was the first chance for people to respond. The bulletin announcements piqued interest in the covenant group project, prompting questions and discussion about what was to happen.

The insert stated that “The only prerequisite [to join the group] is that you love God and want to draw closer to him.”¹⁷³ Some people may feel they do not qualify to be part of such a group because they do not have enough Bible knowledge, or are not articulate in sharing their beliefs, or have not been committed to the church in the past. It was important to open the group to anyone and everyone who might show interest. Some people needed further assurance that anyone could qualify for the group, a task undertaken through conversations leading up to the organizing of the group.

The insert was in every bulletin distributed on three Sunday mornings making it possible that a large number of people could sign up to be a part of the group. Some thought had to be put into how to screen candidates. A group larger than twelve participants would not be as effective as a smaller group if intimacy was desired. It was decided to simply see how many interested people signed up, explain the necessary commitment and see who would remain committed to the project. The assumption was that many people would be unable or unwilling to commit to a group that required a six-month commitment.

After three weeks of distributing the sign up forms it was time to organize the group. Seven people indicated interest in being a part of the project. This was a manageable number for the group, but there was concern that if any dropped out the group could be too small. My first response was disappointment that so few showed interest in the project. However, as anticipated, others indicated they were interested in being a part of the group but could not make the six-month commitment, especially since the group would run over the summer months when many would be away for holidays.

¹⁷³ See appendix II.

The Covenant Agreement

Introducing Expectations

Once potential members of the covenant group were identified through the sign up forms, it was important to organize and set the expectations of the group. Before participants were asked to make the six-month commitment it was important that each person clearly understood what they were committing to. A meeting time was established to organize the group, which interestingly, was in the hour before worship service on Sunday. This was the traditional Sunday School hour, and there had not been adult Sunday School in the church for several years as it was assumed people would not attend. Nonetheless, this was the time chosen by seven busy adults to meet to organize their covenant group.

At that first meeting a document called “Covenant Group Background” was distributed which described my personal journey leading up to this project.¹⁷⁴ The following excerpt from this document explains a motivation that prompted this project:

I have also met some people who did not seem to be changed much by their experience with Jesus. They seemed as hard, judgemental, unforgiving, selfish, greedy or self-absorbed as the many non-Christians I rubbed shoulders with. Indeed, some of the non-Christians sometimes shamed those within the church.¹⁷⁵

It was explained that the covenant group, patterned after John Wesley’s class meetings, was an attempt to counter the apparent shallowness in the experience of so many Christians. It was not suggested those who signed up lived shallow spiritual lives for the interest shown in the covenant group indicated this group was not complacent about their

¹⁷⁴ See appendix III, Introduction to Covenant Groups.

¹⁷⁵ From “Covenant Group Background” handout.

spiritual journey but wanted to grow and mature in Christ. This did, however, open up discussion about desire for growth in the Christian walk and the need for development in spirituality beyond a simple prayer of faith to receive Jesus into one's life.

Another important component of the project was to test the importance of relationships in spiritual formation. The document introduced this theme with these words:

Though these groups often centered on study and information gathering, Wesley was led to introduce a relational component to his groups, believing that it was through relationships that Christians grow to be Christian. In fact the focus of the teaching of John Wesley was on holiness or perfect love. All of Christian life revolved around the call to love God and to love the neighbour.¹⁷⁶

The group was reminded that one of the key components to the covenant group experience would be the formation of relationships in the group and observing how that helped in spiritual formation.

Sample Covenants

The group would have to form its own covenant, an agreement of what to expect from each other and the group. To help facilitate this process a simple document called "Covenant Group,"¹⁷⁷ which outlined agreements from Wesley's band meetings, was distributed. Many of the agreements in these groups sounded very much like those found in contemporary support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. The group was asked to focus on the expectations that related to building community from the instructions Wesley gave to the bands. Those instructions read as follows:

¹⁷⁶ From "Covenant Group Background" handout.

¹⁷⁷ See appendix III Introduction to Covenant Groups.

The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." To this end, we intend-

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us; to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.¹⁷⁸

Using this as a starting point the participants discussed what they wanted to see in their own group. Discussion focused on things such as "confidentiality", "respect", "honouring one another", "no judgemental comments" and "honesty." The group was challenged to put these into a document, and this was to be shared with all members of the group, collated and formalized throughout the course of the week via email communications.

The Agreed on Covenant

There was a good exchange of emails, though two individuals were most thorough in bringing together the various thoughts of the group. One was an administrator at a care facility and the other a licensed minister in the Church of the Nazarene. As one noted, it was not an easy task "as there was a lot to consider."¹⁷⁹

When all the ideas were worked through and put into point form the following became the covenant the group proposed:

¹⁷⁸ Henderson, 117-118 citing John Wesley's *Works*, VIII: 272-273.

¹⁷⁹ Comment from participant.

Covenant Agreements

1. We will try to meet together as a group at least once a week. This will be a priority and we will do all we can to be present.
2. We pledge ourselves to confidentiality. What is said in the group will stay in the group and never go beyond.
3. This is a closed group, meaning we will not be adding new members now that we have started, and we will make our meeting safe with closed doors and no access to others.
4. We will be sensitive to each individual's experience, respectful and free of judgement. When someone shares we do not express disgust or shock, only support and encouragement.
5. We are not there to "fix" the others in the group, but to encourage. Only God can fix us, and our goal is to help each other grow closer to Him and find His answers.
6. We will share as honestly as we can. If we do not feel comfortable sharing something we have the freedom to remain silent without being judged.
7. We are free to ask for prayer and encouragement, even words from scripture that may help us. If, however, a request is not made we will be careful to respect that and not start "preaching" at one another.
8. We will pray for one another through the week.
9. We give each other permission to contact us for prayer, encouragement, or advice through the week. To this end we agree to share our contact information with one another.
10. We will read our chapter each week and reflect on it, ready to share at the next session.
11. Testimonies of how God has led us will be welcome, but they will be shared without an agenda ("Hope he hears this!").
12. Each opinion is valid, and we are not to correct each other but listen. We trust the Holy Spirit to guide us and correct us when needed.
13. We will each endeavour to read scripture and pray through the week so that we might be prepared spiritually for our times of gathering for worship and sharing.¹⁸⁰

On the second meeting of those who signed up for the group the covenant was read aloud and all agreed to each of the terms as presented. There were some practical items that grew out of this covenant agreement. For instance, as there were others gathering in the church building during the meeting time (it was agreed that the pre-service meeting time was the best time to meet for the whole project) it was agreed the door to the meeting room be shut. The first two meetings proved the importance of this as individuals who

¹⁸⁰ This is also found in Appendix V Covenant Agreement.

were not committing to the group did try to sit in on the meeting. It was awkward but they had to be asked to leave so that the safe, confidential environment the group desired to form could be maintained.

Another important decision had to be made at the start in regards to the attendance of the son of one participant. The son was an adult but functioned at a much younger level due to severe learning challenges. Should he be allowed to stay when others were asked to leave? The group agreed that he was “safe” and would not share things discussed in the group with others. It became an interesting dynamic to have this man in the group, for though he did not read the material distributed, did not understand much of the discussion, he did feel he was part of the group.

When another family member asked to sit in on the study after the group had met for a month the group painfully agreed it was too late to admit new participants. There was great tension in the group as participants wrestled with the reality that Christians are to welcome all people but this particular group had agreed to restrict who could attend the meetings. The group members were willing to abide by the agreement they made in adopting this covenant despite the challenges it presented them.

The covenant agreement was essential to providing the environment in which participants were able to grow in their spiritual lives. In most of the post project interviews participants said the covenant was very important to the success of this project. Three key commitments by the group helped facilitate the growth in love:

14. We pledge ourselves to confidentiality. What is said in the group will stay in the group and never go beyond.
15. This is a closed group, meaning we will not be adding new members now that we have started, and we will make our meeting safe with closed doors and no access to others.

16. We will be sensitive to each individual's experience, respectful and free of judgement. When someone shares we do not express disgust or shock, only support and encouragement.¹⁸¹

These three agreements within the covenant allowed the participants to feel safe no matter what was being discussed, and gave them freedom to contribute without fear of being ridiculed. This was very important as some members had been in settings where this level of safety was not present, and it had affected them negatively. For instance, participant D said, "I know we are all Christians and we have built a trust and I know what is said is said in confidentiality. I feel safe." Participant A added, "It was a "safe haven" for me, and very important as I am not a very trusting person."

Participant C, in the post project survey, dealt with the importance of nurturing a safe place for discussion and sharing saying:

What was also different from other groups was the freedom to express differing opinions. Many groups are designed for indoctrinating; you must believe a certain way. The feeling is that people respond to differences of opinion by saying (or implying), "What do you mean that you believe that way?" We came together to share and grow together, we did not come to have material brought to us top down. Though Pastor came with more training and broader learning experience, even he was a learner on the journey with us. It never felt like it was "top down", but we were equal partners learning together.

By Margaret Kornfeld's definition a "real-community" was formed as opposed to a "pseudo-community."¹⁸² People had a chance to grow as they shared honestly and openly with others. The participants would all agree that real community was achieved.

¹⁸¹ From the Covenant Agreement accepted by the group, found in appendix V.

¹⁸² Kornfeld, cited in Moschella, 34.

The Participants

With the covenant agreement in place there was a clear understanding of what was expected of the participants. The volunteers were again asked if they still wanted to participate. All seven participants agreed to remain as part of the group and be in the study. Some observations about the participants are as follows:

- Two members were male and five were female.
- One member was of Filipino descent, the rest were Caucasian.
- Ages ranged from late twenties to over sixty.
- Two participants had been part of support groups for addictions, and four others were familiar with the material of such groups through family members who battled addictions.
- Three of the participants were members of the Church Board.
- One of the participants had a local preacher's license, working as a chaplain in a local senior's home.
- All participants had a relationship of trust and respect with the pastor.
- Church background ranged from lifetime Nazarene of fifty years to Catholic upbringing and recent attendance at the Nazarene Church.
- Participants ranged from one who had accepted Christ just a month before the project began to one who had been a Christian over fifty years, a cross section that represented the spiritual demographics of the congregation well. Figure 2 graphs the number of years the participants professed to be Christians, highlighting the range of spiritual experience.

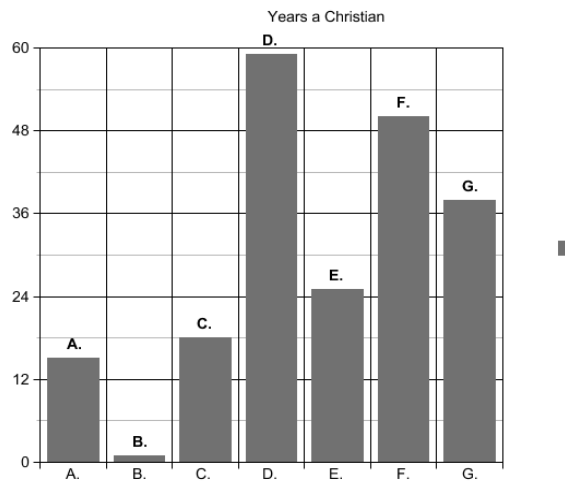


Figure 2. Chart indicating how long each participant professed to be a Christian

The range of years the participants professed to be Christians was from one month to sixty years, yet all participants indicated both through the Spiritual Well-Being Scale and the post project survey that there had been significant spiritual growth during the six months the group met. This helped establish the fact that the covenant group was beneficial to new and established Christians alike.

The spiritual journey of each participant leading up to participating in the covenant group was quite unique. In the first group meeting participants shared a brief spiritual autobiography with one another. Participants were very honest and open about their spiritual journey, allowing the group members to know one another on a very intimate level. This sharing fulfilled the expectations of honesty and sensitivity to others. This time of sharing seemed to cement the group relationships and set the tone for the rest of the sessions together.

The Weekly Sessions

The book *Reflecting God* was introduced to the group as a possible resource for the small group meetings. The group chose to have this study guide to follow rather than simply share from personal experience week to week. Each week a chapter was read with corresponding study questions distributed via email to stimulate thought, promote accountability and act as a starting place for discussion during the meeting times.¹⁸³ It was stressed that mastering the material was not the main objective of the group. The goal was to draw closer to one another through open and honest dialogue so that in this supportive environment spiritual growth could occur.

The emphasis on relationship over content became very important early in the life of the group as participant A phoned asking to be given permission to withdraw from the course. This person felt the material was too hard to understand. Struggling with low self esteem and the perception that academic work was beyond their ability, a perception well ingrained through the years, this person was ready to give up. When assurance was given that it was not about mastering the material but about building relationships participant A decided to stay with the group. Nothing was said to the group about this desire to withdraw until late in the group's life when participant A shared this struggle. It was also shared at this time that it was the right decision to stay in the group for this person felt that participation in the group had been the difference between walking away from the faith and growing much stronger. During the course of the project this participant faced

¹⁸³ See Appendix VI Chapter Worksheets for *Reflecting God*.

serious issues with health, relationships and finances but found strength to overcome despite these circumstances because of the group's support and encouragement.

Each week participants were given opportunity to share how they were doing in their spiritual life. This was one of the most valued parts of the group experience, especially for participant B, the new believer. This helped this individual test how faith could be made real in the work place and in one's relationships. Challenges at work, in personal health and in family relationships were shared with an openness and honesty that allowed participants to truly draw close to one another. One participant shared, "We can attend church with people for over ten years and never really get to know who they are. This group has allowed me to know people in a whole new way."

Seldom did the group get through all the questions distributed for the week as conversations stimulated by the material took the hour allotted for the group. On two separate occasions the discussion needed to be extended over another week as there was so much more to share. The group was not upset when they were unable to discuss all the questions assigned for the week but instead looked forward to the opportunity to discuss new topics with each other the following week.

The group members were true to their commitment to accept each person's opinion even if it differed from their own. People felt safe in the group, and even some of the quietest, most withdrawn members entered into the discussions. The group also honoured the commitment to let people pass if they did not feel like sharing. This privilege was exercised on several occasions, notably the day one participant was obviously struggling and when asked a question simply replied, "Not today." The group

moved on with no pressure applied. The participant expressed gratitude the next week at not having felt pressure to speak when unable to do so.

The topic of prayer elicited interesting responses. One participant expressed concern about something called “centering prayer” so research was done on the topic and this information was shared with the group the next week. The group even experimented with putting actions to the Lord’s Prayer as suggested by Jane Vennard.¹⁸⁴ When a prayer the pastor wrote about full surrender was shared¹⁸⁵ several responded by writing their own prayers of surrender. Below are a few examples:

To my Father in heaven,

Thank you for the change I feel inside and out. I'm forever grateful for where I am today.

Still, a sinful nature lives within me. I want to take my love higher. Help me quiet the sinful nature and replace with love, tolerance, patience and honesty. Fill me with your will, Lord. I'm tired of feeling tension and trying to control everything. You know what's best for me and I'm ready to live your will. Use me for your purpose and give me signs for what I should do. Help me to say yes or no and leave out maybe. Be with me on my journey as I learn to trust and surrender everything.

Thank you Lord for always being with me through the good and the bad and drawing me towards you.

Amen

Oh God, my Heavenly Father.

Please forgive me for my sins and relieve me of the burden of self. I ask for the gift of giving in place of selfishness or greed, to live by the word and actions of your Son Jesus Christ, and free from my misguided intentions. To have faith and clarity from the guidance of the Holy Spirit as I leave the darkness of my past and into the light of God as I journey down the road of life. May I follow the hope and faith you had for us as you suffered on the cross, giving us the ultimate gift of your life so I could share in the love of your Father, the Almighty God. Amen.

¹⁸⁴ Vennard, 118-119.

¹⁸⁵ See Appendix V under worksheet for Chapter 10 for a copy of the prayer.

July 21, 2013

Lord Jesus, thank you for this day and thank you for my life. Thank you so much for dying on the cross, for shedding your blood because without it there would be no remissions for my sins. Thank you so much for washing away my sins, for forgiving all of what I have done wrong in your eyes. Now help me to do your will; not my will but yours be done, Lord, in me. May your Spirit Divine fill this being of mine as I long for you and surrender my whole life to you to be cleansed and be fit to be your instrument. Lord I want that you not only be a resident but be the President of my whole life. Please take me as I am: O to Be Like Thee!

These prayers truly reflect the depth of commitment by the participants, desiring to grow in their faith and reaching out to God who alone can satisfy that desire. They also reflect the transparency and honesty developed within the context of the covenant group.

The weekly sessions always ended with a time of prayer, sometimes led by the leader, at other times a participant. Some weeks the group closed in silence so all could pray without verbal expression, while at other times a prayer was read in unison. When one member shared that a surgery was scheduled to deal with cancer the group gathered around and prayed, anointing with oil and offering words of encouragement. Another member was struggling at work, so the group lifted this person in prayer. One member was moving away to take a job in another Province, so the group sought God's guidance and protection for this person through prayer. These were rich times of encouragement and support and displayed the depth of connection of the participants to each other and to God.

The group sessions were scheduled for one hour, and with the morning worship service soon to follow, the group worked hard to dismiss on time. However, on many occasions the members would continue their discussions long after the pastor had left the room to arrange for the morning service. Phone calls, emails and visits among the

participants maintained connections through the week. The group conversation never seemed to end. This was a good sign that important relationships were being formed through this project.

Spiritual Well-Being Inventory

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWB) developed by Craig W. Ellison and Raymond P. Paloutzian was used as an objective tool to measure the spiritual growth that occurred during the project. The participants completed the inventory at the start of the project and again at the end, with the results compared to see if any change was noted. If the end results showed a higher level of spiritual well-being than that indicated at the start it would suggest that spiritual growth had occurred.

When the Spiritual Well-Being Scale was first introduced to the group some suggested this format was unfamiliar to them, and they were uncertain about doing it. When explanation was given as to how the scale worked each participant agreed to complete it. For some it felt like a “test” which brought up negative memories from the past, but all worked through it, taking the process very seriously. One participant with a Filipino background found the questions written in the negative yet requiring a positive answer confusing. The Filipino language does not allow for this kind of question. However, being in Canada for many years allowed this participant to work through this challenge and complete the inventory.

The inventory consisted of twenty questions with a range of answers from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A number was assigned each answer, from one to six,

and it was from these numbers the scale gained its numeric values. These numbers indicated the level of spiritual satisfaction, from low to high. A moderate sense of spiritual well-being was reflected by scores in the 41-99 range, which included the entire group at the start of the project except participant G. This participant, with a score of 119, reflected a high sense of spiritual well-being. At the end of the covenant group experience four participants moved into the high sense of spiritual well-being, and the rest were close to that level. This indicates an increased sense of spiritual well-being for six of the seven participants, with an average increase of fifteen points on the Spiritual Well-Being Scale. The general movement upwards in spiritual well-being can be seen as the results are plotted on a graph in figure 3.

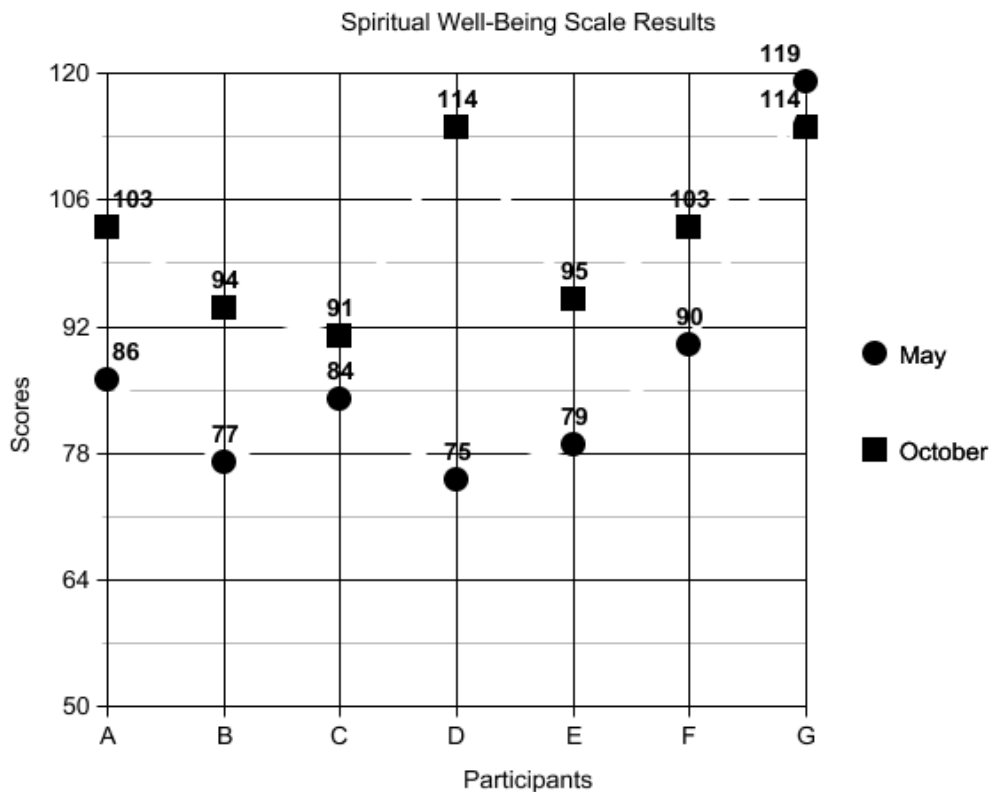


Figure 3. SWB scores plotted on a graph.

A quick note on participant G's decreased score at the end of the project is in order. First, the change is very minor, and can reflect changes in "feelings" that can fluctuate even from day to day. The survey obviously captures how the participant feels at a moment of time so variations should be expected depending on what a person is going through. From the time this participant did the first survey to the last survey there had been a death in the family, personal health issues and challenges with family members. Only a slight dip in score after all these challenges likely showed growth rather than the contrary. Also, this participant was heavily involved in ministry, and had a hard time distinguishing between who they are and what they do. This scale could reflect for this person a feeling of competency as much as spiritual well-being. Even the post-project survey reflected this for many answers were not about this individual as much as about what was observed in others. The following quote from this individual illustrates this ministry mindedness rather than a focus on personal growth: "I don't need a group to express myself with, but I enjoyed watching others grow which in turn helped me to grow. I saw strengths and weaknesses in us as we shared together."¹⁸⁶ Nonetheless, this individual did share that the group was beneficial beyond just mentoring for ministry, and that there was a sense of self understanding and closeness to God that resulted through the group experience.

The scale also gives a three-fold breakdown of results: over-all spiritual well-being (SWB), religious well-being (RWB) and existential well-being (EWB).¹⁸⁷ RWB

¹⁸⁶ Post-project survey, Participant G.

¹⁸⁷ From the spiritual well-being information guide provided by Life Advance.

reflects one's view of their relationship with God while the EWB speaks of one's overall satisfaction with life and sense of purpose. Comparing the religious and existential well-being scores from the two inventories showed movement upwards for most participants. Only participant C saw a drop in the religious well-being score while the existential well-being score increased significantly. This could indicate that the participant was secure in the religious expression of his/her spirituality but was struggling with issues of purpose and direction at this stage of his/her life. During the project some of these questions about purpose may have been answered for the participant even as he/she shared in the life of the covenant group. Participant G was the only person to see a drop in both the religious and existential well-being scores leaving a lower spiritual well-being score at the end of the project than at the start. However, as was noted, that change was not very significant.

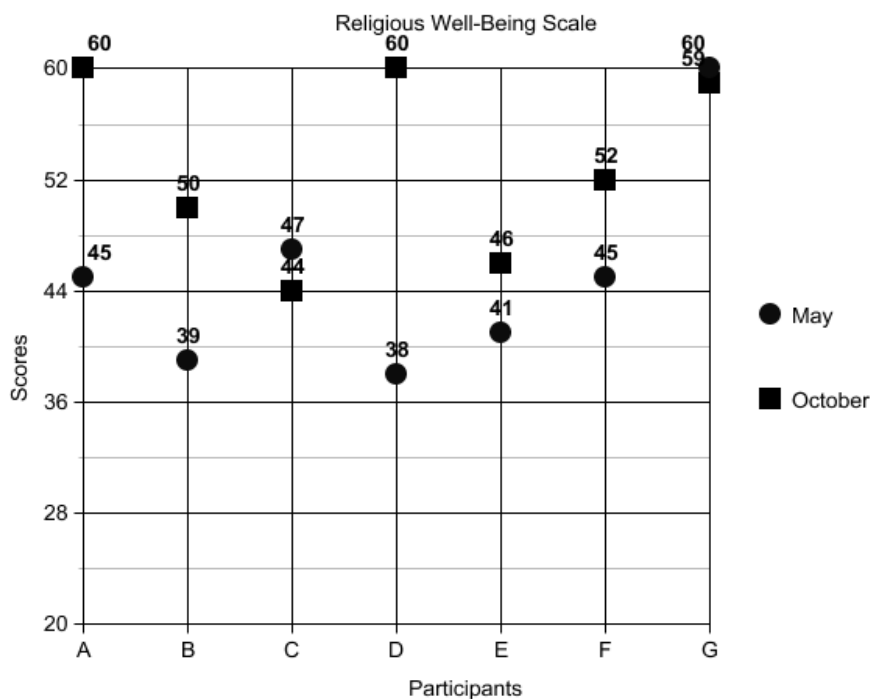


Figure 4. RWB scores for each participant plotted on a graph

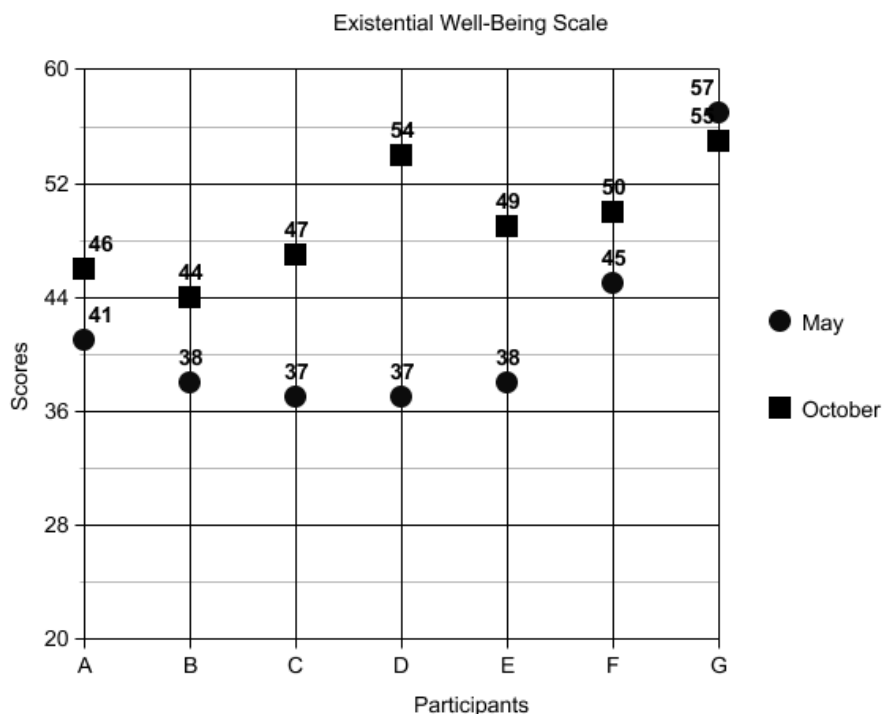


Figure 5. EWB scores of each participant plotted on a graph

The scores lined up well with the observations made about each participant. For instance, participant D made significant strides spiritually during the six months, moving from nominal participation to strong personal commitment. The scales indicate that with both a marked increase in religious well-being (RWB) and existential well-being (EWB). Participant A also experienced a significant spiritual event as this project began which made a significant difference in the life of this participant. The scale reflected that, as figure 4 shows. Participant C had a chance to question some long held religious ideas and explore new answers during the six months with the group which is reflected on the RWB scale (Figure 4). Participant E, a very shy individual, showed significant change in existential well-being during the project, (Figure 5) likely the expression of a strong sense of belonging and safety. These kinds of observations could be made for each participant.

It appears this scale does give a reflection of what happened in the life of individuals who used it, and the results indicate that this project truly was beneficial to the participants in the development of their spiritual lives. There was positive change in their over-all sense of spiritual well-being. This supports the assumption that meeting together within a covenant group setting for spiritual growth was beneficial to the participants. The dynamic of being together, sharing struggles and triumphs opened the door for spiritual growth and development.

Attendance

Being present each week was an important element in the group dynamic for it was in the face-to-face interactions that relationship was formed and strengthened. The project ran over twenty-six weeks and included the summer months which are often noted for scheduled vacation time and sporadic attendance of church members. The attendance of the participants was very consistent, as seen in figure 6.

A.	24/26
B.	25/26
C.	26/26
D.	21/26
E.	22/26
F.	21/26
G.	26/26

Figure 6. Table of attendance for each participant in the group over the twenty-six week project.

This shows that participants were present 85-100% of the time. This high level of attendance indicated that participants took seriously their commitment to the group and

the covenant made with one another at the start. The first item in the agreed on covenant stated:

1. We will try to meet together as a group at least once a week. This will be a priority and we will do all we can to be present.

This consistent attendance pattern meant the group members could count on the other participants being present. When preparing for the meeting they knew there would be input from all members in the discussion. Even when the pastor, who was facilitator of the group, was unable to attend the group met and continued the process of sharing and supporting one another. Spending this much time together helped facilitate the strength of the relationships formed over the course of the six-month project. Participants observed each other and what faith looked like in each person through a broad range of experiences faced over the course of the project. This gave a greater appreciation of the variety of expressions of faith within the family of God.

Post Project Survey

At the end of the six months participants were asked to complete a brief survey to indicate what impact this project had on their lives.¹⁸⁸ The survey was distributed as a handout but each participant met with the pastor to share his or her answers so that a more thorough response might be recorded. Most interviews were done within two weeks of the project's conclusion, though one survey was completed more than a month later. Interviews took from one to three hours to complete.

¹⁸⁸ See appendix VII.

Most of the participants commented on the value of the trust developed, and how quickly that was established within the group. The following are representative of the comments made in the post project interview:

- “It was a safe haven” for me, and very important as I am not a very trusting person,” said participant A.
- When asked what made this group experience different from other groups the response from participant C was, “Amazing how quickly the bond was formed, probably because of our focus on being a covenant group. It happened before we realized it, forming a safe place to share.”
- “Some did not talk at first but opened up after time, as trust was built. Their perspectives were different, but valid and it was good to hear from them,” said participant D.
- “Trust is so important. These people could be shattered if the trust was violated,” commented participant G.

It was the trust formed early on in the group that allowed the participants to share freely about very personal issues. There were stories told that “I have never told anyone else before.”¹⁸⁹

A trusting environment means that participants can share ideas that differ from the group consensus without fear of being reprimanded. Kornfeld described the “real community” as a safe place for honest sharing while the “pseudo-community” appears open at first but does not tolerate opinions different from the community’s accepted

¹⁸⁹ Participant comment.

belief structure.¹⁹⁰ Forming a real community was the goal of this covenant group project and the following comments suggest the group was successful to some extent in achieving this:

- “The covenant group really is important,” said participant B. “It could save somebody. We do not know what people are going through but having a place to share and express what is happening in their life people have a chance to be rescued when bad thoughts are going through their minds.”
- “One good thing about the group was that no one condemned the thoughts or ideas of others. We could all express our own experiences freely with no judgement. Everyone’s input impacted the others. We were lucky with this group,” said participant D.
- “I could talk and no one judged me. Other groups feel judgemental because they do not know your background. One must be cautious.” This was from participant E who is very shy and withdrawn.
- Participant G shared some very personal and emotional experiences with the group during the sessions and made this comment in the survey: “I had no trouble telling the group things, things that would be beneficial to them.”

With a real community established during the six months of meeting together the group learned to look out for one another. One member faced cancer during the time the group met. Another member had to deal with the death of a spouse. One member faced unemployment after years of working at the same job, while another member faced the pressures of competing for top sales person for all Canada at work. One member dealt

¹⁹⁰ Kornfeld, *Cultivating Wholeness*, 19, cited in Moschella, 34.

with a daughter having to undergo major reconstructive surgery during the sessions, while another adjusted to having a new daughter-in-law. Life certainly was not put on hold for these participants while they committed themselves to each other and to deepening their walk with God. Two comments indicate the value of the group experience in the face of the challenges experienced:

- “The group was like a family having dinner, sharing how the day went. This is how we grow together and celebrate the victories,” reflected participant B.
- “What would I have done if I had not done the covenant group before I got news of my cancer? I would have gone – left the church and the faith. I did that in the past when I went through trouble – just gave up on God and the church. I felt, “What’s the use.” Not now. I have grown stronger and stronger....” said participant A.

It is clear that the group experience impacted the participants in a very positive way.

When asked if they would recommend the covenant group to others within the church all responded with the answer of “yes”, and two participants were more emphatic as they answered “absolutely!” In fact the group did not want the sessions to end and for six weeks after the formal commitment was completed the participants continued to meet weekly, sharing and planning how they might incorporate others in a similar experience. The group stopped meeting simply because of the busyness of the Christmas season, but agreed to meet again in the New Year. This they have done.

One of the goals of this personal research project was to see Christians in the local church engage in leadership for ministry. This project was not designed to train for leadership so much as to prepare participants through spiritual growth to embrace the vision of God to reach and disciple others. Though there were no questions specifically

geared towards this aspect of discipleship comments in regards to leadership and ministry in the post project survey show it was in the hearts and minds of the participants:

- “I can see the potential that this church could bond so tight with small groups if all were involved, meeting on a weekly basis... We do not want the group to end, and we want others to experience it as well... There is a lot of excitement about what we can do. The danger is we may want to try too much. We can start simple and see where that takes us...” said participant B.
- “Now I am more confident in my faith I am willing to suggest to friends we should pray about matters, or I talk more about my faith. This did not happen before, but it is not hard now,” observed participant A.
- “Discipleship cannot grow on its own – we need to be reaching out – not to all, but to those who come our way,” commented participant D.
- “Here I saw discipleship done in a group setting. Usually I see it as a one on one or one with two people settings. I feel safer now to try discipling in a larger context,” reflected participant G.

Much of the conversation in the meetings following the covenant group experience focused on how to start new groups that others could be invited into. Many of the covenant group participants wanted to take a leadership role in this.

The post project survey yielded many positive comments as the participants were open to share their experience of being in the group and its value in their lives. All participants felt the time together helped them grow spiritually. Even the post project survey with its opportunity to reflect on the experience was helpful to some.

Responses Outside the Covenant Group

The congregation was aware of the project though little was said to the pastor about it. Some were interested to know how pastor was progressing in his studies, knowing this project was a part of the process, but there was little discussion about the group itself. It may be that since the group was a closed group there was an air of secrecy, an expectation that questions were not supposed to be asked. It also appears that some did not fully understand the nature of the group formed for the project. One person asked the participants if they got a certificate for completing the project. The association with the doctoral work of the pastor left the impression it was a course that had a grading system and a reward for completion; a graduation. Of course this was not the nature of the project.

There were some who were curious to know what conclusions were reached in regards to the small covenant group project and whether it would be something worth implementing again. These conversations probed procedures, premises and responses and were helpful in rethinking some of the project procedures and conclusions. Once again the value of community is noted, with its ability to broaden one's perspective and challenge one's assumptions. This time it was the researcher who benefited.

Pastors within the community inquired about the progress of the Doctor of Ministry program and the project undertaken. Some were curious about what lessons were learned from the project while others brushed the project aside as just another small group experience. It is likely that there will be conversations with other community pastors when more time can be afforded to dialogue with them. One local pastor has

inquired about the possibility of sharing about the small group dynamic at the school of ministry run by his congregation.

There has not been a great deal of time to share the project with other pastors on the Canada Pacific District Church of the Nazarene. After the symposium and completion of the writing assignments observations will be shared with the District leadership and options of how to share this project with other pastors will be discussed. It is likely the Sunday School and Discipleship Ministries leadership will be most interested about the possible applications of this project to help encourage small group discipleship on the District. This would be a welcome opportunity.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusions

Summary

The six month project of running a covenant group at the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene produced results that indicate it was successful. The goal was to find a means to help the participants grow spiritually, focusing particularly on the relationships formed within that covenant group. Following John Wesley's insistence that love is at the heart of Christian discipleship¹⁹¹ (for this is the nature of Christlikeness or holiness) the project looked closely at the relationships formed in the group, even more than at the material studied. Both the testimonials from the participants and the Spiritual Well-Being scores indicate there was spiritual growth during the project. Observation of practices and ministry participation of those in the study showed changes in their behaviour, first towards each other and within the context of their homes, church, jobs and community. The bond formed within the group was significant and contributed to the honest exploration of the faith that took place during the six months of meeting together. This study would suggest that a group covenanting together for spiritual growth will succeed as deep bonds of love are formed, providing fertile soil for growth in Christlikeness. For in learning to love one best reflects the image of Christ, the goal of all Christian discipleship.

¹⁹¹ John Wesley noted that the Christian is above all marked by love, which "is productive of all right affections," in *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity* (Bristol: William Pine, 1761), 5 http://books.google.ca/books?id=8ixcAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed February 25, 2014).

Evaluation

Small groups for study and growth are not new to the church, and have been the backbone of discipleship in the church for years. The new element that was introduced to this group was the idea of covenant, a list of commitments made by the group to each other and God. Several of the commitments were essential to the success of this group process, like the commitment to confidentiality, freedom of expression without judgement and unconditional acceptance. These commitments let the participants lower their guards and open their hearts to one another, and soon there was a level of trust and even love that many had not experienced in a small group setting before, or in the church. Though love is a hard thing to evaluate, which will be discussed below, there was little doubt that the level of love for God and each other had increased. This was an important outcome for it is at the heart of discipleship from a Wesleyan perspective.

The goal of spiritual formation is that the life of the believer would reflect the nature of Christ more and more. This goal of becoming like Christ was a central theme in John Wesley's ministry, and he would write: "Do you know what a Christian is? If you are a Christian, you have the mind that was in Christ; and you so walk as he also walked. You are holy as he is holy, both in heart and in all manner of conversation."¹⁹²

Wesley would describe this holiness of heart and conversation as being filled with love. From start to finish the goal of Wesley was to lead people into a relationship of love towards God which in turn filled them with love for the people around them. To

¹⁹² John Wesley, "A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 5, ed. John Emory (New York: Carlton and Porter), <https://archive.org/stream/theworksofjesus05wesluoft#page/88/mode/2up> (accessed March 25, 2013).

help believers grow in this love Wesley used the class meeting. Henderson describes the function of the class meeting as follows:

The collective goal toward which the classes pulled was the attainment of personal holiness, or what Wesley called “perfect love”, or the character of Christ. As new converts took up these goals for themselves, they were nurtured in the encouraging context of an affirming group, all of whom were in various stages of the same quest.¹⁹³

The study group consisted of people at various stages of spiritual development; from the newly converted to the long time believer; from the one new to the church to one preparing for vocational ministry; from one starting as a “sometimes” attendee to one who seldom missed over the past fifty years of church involvement. Nonetheless within weeks this eclectic group had formed a very close bond, willing to share personal stories told to no other group, and in some cases, not even to the spouse. When one member announced a move to a new community was about to occur, the group gathered for fellowship and prayer. This member was not gone two weeks when a call was made back to the pastor expressing how much the group was missed. When the job did not work out and the member returned it was as if a long lost child had returned home; there was sincere celebration when the member appeared at the next session. This kind of close community, resembling a family more than a study group, can best be described as a fellowship of love.

When another member was diagnosed as having cancer during the six months of meetings, the group tearfully gathered around to lend support and prayer. The participant was anointed with oil and prayers were offered for healing. Everyone waited anxiously

¹⁹³ Henderson, 100.

for the surgery and its results. Loving support of the group helped this individual through this crisis. Hear again what the participant who faced cancer had to say:

What would I have done if I had not done the covenant group before I got news of my cancer? I would have gone – left the church and the faith. I did that in the past when I went through trouble – just gave up on God and the church. I felt, “What’s the use.” Not now. I have grown stronger and stronger....¹⁹⁴

Though I have been involved in many small groups in the past, from Sunday School classes to small groups in my home, I have never seen a group bond so quickly as this group did. I would concur with the participants who noted that the covenant with its agreements likely aided this process significantly. Participants looked forward to being together each Sunday morning and continued to meet after the project was completed.

Exploring what it means to be a Christian, how to live out the loving lifestyle exemplified by Christ was the focus of conversation within the group. Listening attentively, sharing personal experiences, celebrating victories and encouraging after failures made the group a “real-community” built on love. Paul Wesley Chilcote’s description of the ministry of John and Charles Wesley sounds much like what this group experienced:

By means of these intimate circles of dedicated men and women, Wesley’s followers were encouraged to watch over one another in love. They shared their pilgrimages of faith... the fellowship of the community meant to help each other along the way.¹⁹⁵

All the participants agreed that this was one of the most exciting experiences in spiritual discipleship that they had been a part of, not because of the material studied, nor the teaching delivered in each class session. It was the deep relationships and the challenge

¹⁹⁴ Post-project survey, participant A.

¹⁹⁵ Chilcote, 50.

that bond produced to stay strong for the sake of the others. Participant D said, “The value of making this journey with a group is it keeps me grounded and accountable. There is a positive pressure in the group to help us grow.”¹⁹⁶ The bond that love formed caused the participants to be careful not to disappoint one another, while the honesty and trust developed kept them from playing games and hiding the truth. Spiritual growth was evident in the sharing, and always at the heart of what was said there was the message of love; for God and for others.

If love is the goal, how does one know when he or she has arrived? It is hard to measure love, though we know when it is absent. How can we determine levels of love, which would be necessary to evaluate this project? We know that the life of Jesus is the one place where we are able to see love lived out, but it is still difficult to form a definition for love. We look at the Apostle Paul’s beautiful hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13 and find the following description for love:

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.¹⁹⁷

Yet even this inspired description leaves us having to define patience and what act is most kind. So measuring love as an indication of spiritual life is not an easy task.

It is important to remember that love is expressed in relationships to others, be it family, friends or God. The goal of the project was to see if, in six months, community could be formed within the context of a covenant group. Within the safety of this community the desire was to see spiritual growth occur by seeing the evidence of love

¹⁹⁶ post-project survey, participant D.

¹⁹⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

within the group. The covenant allowed deep bonds to form quickly, and honest, open sharing followed. Though the book *Reflecting God* provided a great focal point for discussion, it was through the conversations that took place in our meetings that the bonding occurred. One participant compared this group with a support group and noted this: “There is more love in this group, and less self centered. In the AA group it is all about self, but not in our group.”¹⁹⁸ It was in a community where love could grow that participants drew closer to each other and to God. As Paul Wesley Chilcote states, “For the Christian, therefore, community is necessary, and it is only in the context of community – a family – that God’s love will grow in us.”¹⁹⁹

Theologically we note that God is eternally in community as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the message throughout scripture is that this same God desires relationship with that which was created. When sin removed the trust of the created for its Creator, and formed a huge barrier between the two, God made a most remarkable move to restore the relationship. God came in Christ to offer through self sacrifice a way for the barrier to be destroyed and relationship restored. God offered forgiveness and adoption. The Apostle John reflects on this act of God writing, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”²⁰⁰

The fruit of sin has always been acts and attitudes that destroy community. Greed, lust, thievery, slander, envy, even pride are destroyers of community. When God said, “thou shalt not” it was not for God’s sake to prove God’s authority but for the sake of the

¹⁹⁸ post-project survey, participant B. Though support groups necessarily emphasize a focus on self, for participants are not to be fixing others but dealing with their own “stuff” it can sometimes be about the individual fixing him or her self without recognizing the need for God or even the group.

¹⁹⁹ Chilcote, 48.

²⁰⁰ 1 John 4:10.

community being formed. God is not a tyrannical dictator but a deity that desires to form community described in terms of family: sons, daughters, bride, heirs, and “my people.” God desires a family united in the same kind of loving relationship displayed in the Trinity. Though terms describing God’s Lordship and our servanthood are biblical, Dennis Kinlaw is correct in saying “they are not the primary categories for describing our relationship with God.”²⁰¹ It is significant that when Jesus teaches his followers to pray he gives them these words; “Our Father, which art in heaven...”²⁰² Learning to live as the family of God, reflecting the family traits displayed in Christ requires sacrificial love and self-abrogation.

The covenant group bonded like a family, with one participant saying, “This trust builds more strength in the church. It becomes more like a family, like a spider web with the connections growing and interconnecting.”²⁰³ From notes sent by a participant comes this: “I saw a lot of love coming from [participant A]. It looked as if [participant A] considered the group ... family.”²⁰⁴ Participant A would say, “[the covenant group] helped me start bringing down the HUGE walls I had built around myself all my life because of my hurts. I was hurting and to protect myself I pushed others away – often by hurting them. This was a disaster for all.”²⁰⁵ This kind of familial relationship reflects the

²⁰¹ Dennis F. Kinlaw, *The Mind of Christ* (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1998), 26.

²⁰² Matthew 6:9.

²⁰³ post-project survey, participant D.

²⁰⁴ Notes from Sunday, October 20th, 2013.

²⁰⁵ post-project survey, participant A.

community God desires to form in the church. In this community love can grow, and in that love Christians can be formed to reflect the image of Christ.

Implications of the Study for the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene

Often programs and studies leave pastors feeling disappointed and frustrated as the promises made were not realized. This study proposed spiritual growth and new spiritual vitality for the participants, and all seven volunteers seemed anxious for this outcome. As pastor of this church and researcher I was also cautiously optimistic that this experiment would prove to be a significant step forward in the church's desire for better discipling and spiritual formation methods.

What this researcher was not ready for was the incredible sense of excitement among the participants as the process was reviewed. The weekly sessions appeared to be similar to countless other Bible Study groups and Sunday School classes that have dotted the landscape of discipleship efforts at the church. However, the sense of trust and willingness to share openly developed quickly and weekly discussions almost immediately entered a deeper, more personal level rather than superficial information gathering. Participants wanted to know what the material meant in their lives today, and were not afraid to put that question on the table. They were also ready to receive the hard answers. No doubt the agreements to confidentiality and non-judgemental attitudes made this atmosphere possible.

This initial covenant group desires to see similar groups continue within the ministry of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene. The group members have asked for

support in forming two more covenant groups in the next few months, deciding that gender specific groups would be even more beneficial for open dialogue. Feeling overwhelmed with the thought of doing one-on-one discipleship, participants now see that working together within a covenant group Christian discipleship can take place. As participant G noted, “Here I saw discipleship done in a group setting. Usually I see it as one-on-one or one-with-two people settings. I feel safer now to try discipling in a larger context.”²⁰⁶ The key here is “safety,” knowing that one is not left alone to carry the burden of discipleship but can share the responsibilities with others.

Though there are already small groups operating within the church the participants believe that adding the idea of covenant agreements to a group, especially including statements on confidentiality and non-judgemental attitudes, greatly benefits the congregation. The following were statements from the post project survey:

- “It would help the church if there were more groups. We need to have strong core values and this is how we get them.” (participant A)
- “I can see the potential that this church could bond so tight with small groups if all were involved, meeting on a weekly basis.” (participant B)
- “I wish my husband and I were at the same place spiritually... maybe we need covenant groups for married couples...” (participant C)
- “It is beneficial for those who want to commit and grow. But if we want a quick fix, “instant gratification” without putting the effort into it, we will not get much out of it.” (participant D)
- “It helped me and I know it will help them too in their spiritual growth and development in their reflection of God, and their involvement in the church as they will be encouraged.” (participant F)

These comments represent the optimism the group members expressed as they contemplated the possibility of continuing together and including others. Concern for

²⁰⁶ Post-project survey, Participant G.

others was one of the preferred outcomes of this project, seeing a link between spiritual growth and a willingness to be involved in ministry. This group came out of the research project ready to be involved in the lives of others.

True spiritual growth will affect not only the relationships one has within the study group, but with others in the church and community. The group was safe and the group got along very well, prompting one participant to say, “We were lucky”, while another noted, “If others had been in the group the dynamics would not have been the same.” However, participants also had spouses to live with, and children to deal with, fellow workers to get along with and other tenants in the building to live with. Every relationship could test the love discussed and experienced within the group setting. Having a safe place to share the successes and failures in these relationships opened the door for further growth and strength.

Sacrificial love that builds true community does not come naturally to people so God must act once again to supply what is lacking in our lives. This is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit who dwells within the life of the believer: “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”²⁰⁷ As God the Holy Spirit lives and works within the life of the believer the natural fruit of that relationship will be love, as Galatians 5:22 reminds us: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love...” When God’s love, through the Spirit, moves in a person the self centered, individualistic natural tendencies are replaced with a concern for others. Dennis Kinlaw speaks of this change God’s Spirit makes in one’s life noting that “instead of devising our own way through life, we will seek God’s way. Instead of applying our energies to fulfill

²⁰⁷ Romans 5:5.

our desires, we will seek to fulfill his desires. Instead of being self-serving, we will be self-sacrificing.”²⁰⁸

This speaks of a change of heart, something only God can accomplish. Rules and laws and structures and religion can never change the way someone thinks or feels. No wonder Wesley would say, “In a word, let thy religion be a religion of the heart.”²⁰⁹

Wesley was ordained in the Church of England and he observed in his church what happens when people let religious structures get in the way of a heart experience with God. Religion that is in form only is cold and dead. God desires to bring abundant life to those who willingly submit to God’s direction.²¹⁰

God was changing the hearts of the participants, evidenced by their responses to situations at home and work. Members honestly shared the struggles they faced, like the test of one’s honesty, or the test of integrity. A group discussion on sexual purity can be awkward, especially in a mixed group like this one, but the participants were very honest and upfront. When participants pointed out their own shortcomings they requested prayer for help to change, and asked the group to hold them accountable. Change came not because someone quoted them the rules of the church but because they felt this was what God wanted them to do. This is the work of God’s Spirit within the participants. This kind of sensitivity to the voice of God, nurtured in the fellowship of other believers, is what is desired of all Christians in the church.

²⁰⁸ Dennis F. Kinlaw, 27.

²⁰⁹ Cited in Gregory S. Clapper, *The Renewal of the Heart is the Mission of the Church: Wesley’s Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 11.

²¹⁰ Cf. John 10:10.

Wesley noted that Christians are called to cooperate with God in their lives, for grace enables people to both receive and reject what God desires for the believer. Christians can “grieve the Holy Spirit”²¹¹ by refusing to listen to and obey what the Spirit is trying to do in their lives. The key to fellowship with God and growth in the spiritual life is submission. For Wesley submission included participating in the means of grace. As Knight states, “Wesley believed if one intended to live a Christian life, one would freely undertake the discipline which nurtures that life.”²¹² It is through the practices of worship, scripture reading, prayer, participating in the Lord’s Supper, fasting, and ministering to those less fortunate that believers are brought into the presence of God, and there they may hear and respond to what God desires of them as God’s children and God’s holy people.

The means of grace do not feed an individualistic faith but are means of preparing believers to better live in loving community. They open the life of the believer to the presence of God so that the life of love can be formed within, as noted by Knight:

Some practices increase our sensitivity to God’s presence through the experience and practice of love in the Christian community and in service to the world. These practices counteract despair or complacency in the Christian life by moving us outward from ourselves and placing us in loving relationships with God, other Christians, and the world.

Other practices work against barriers to God’s presence. Fasting, repentance, and mutual sharing of perspectives counteract self-deceptive and presumptive attitudes toward God. They move us critically inward, and enable us to love with humility.²¹³

²¹¹ Cf. Ephesians 4:30.

²¹² Knight, 43.

²¹³ Knight, 13.

Wesley saw all spiritual practices moving the Christian towards this end, to fit the believer to better express love to God and others.

This project allowed for the exploration of the means of grace in two ways. First there was the discussion within the group following the readings in the book *Reflecting God*. Chapters 12 through 17 spoke on various practices that Wesley would call means of grace, including the study of scripture, prayer, worship, communion, fasting, baptism and small group fellowship. These chapters opened up good discussion and a deeper appreciation and understanding of these practices in the church.

Along with this study the members participated in the means of grace each session as we read scripture and prayed together. The sessions proceeded the morning worship hour, and participants noted that time together before service only heightened their anticipation for worship. Communion took on deeper significance and the Word proclaimed was attended to in a deeper way. In September a sermon series was started from the pilgrim songs of Psalm 120-134 which was of particular interest in light of the journey undertaken in this covenant group. The group realized that being a Christian is a journey, a pilgrimage that requires commitment, patience and support. “I want to have everything NOW,” commented one participant, “but I am learning it is a journey. I am hard on myself – I am a perfectionist. If I do not feel I measure up I am upset at myself. But the journey I now am on is a good journey!”²¹⁴

Participants came to appreciate more the disciplines of the Christian life to help them on the spiritual journey. There are no quick fixes that suddenly make them perfect. Some members of the covenant group are now committed to attend services regularly

²¹⁴ Post-project survey, Participant B.

where attendance used to be sporadic. The new believer in the group is planning to be a part of the baptism service to make a public declaration of faith, and to enter Bible College in the Fall. Some have indicated they will participate in the next church membership class as well. These practices of the church have taken on new meaning for the participants. The participants desire to do further studies on the means of grace, which may be the focus of the next covenant group.

Finally, this project is helpful in ministering in the context of the transient nature of our community. Nanaimo is one of those cities many pass through looking for better jobs and new opportunities. Over the past nine years dozens of families have come into the fellowship of the church and left as they were transferred to new jobs, schools or other commitments. People disciplined in a covenant group can take this ministry and spread it to other churches across the District and country when a transfer or move takes place. If the experience of future groups is like that of this pilot project then sharing the stories will certainly spark interest and possibly commitment to similar groups in the new church homes of transferred members. Meanwhile, in our own church commitment to the local fellowship will increase and fewer will fall away and cease to attend as they are connected to a group of people who will not let them go easily.

Limitations of the Study

At the start it seemed that six months may be too short of a time to develop the deep bonds of trust necessary to facilitate open and honest sharing, and to experience real growth in one's spiritual life. It was necessary that the participants be as transparent as

possible with each other if they were to truly grow together in Christ's love. Yet the group bonded quickly and started to grow together in love, for each other and God. Indeed, members of the group were disappointed when the allotted time was completed for the project. Six months was not a long time, but enough to allow participants a taste of the value of such a group for spiritual growth. Not unlike Wesley's classes which often stayed together for years²¹⁵ the participants wanted to stay connected as a group long after the project was completed. Most people today prefer making short term commitments and six months was not a long time. Had the project gone longer it may have revealed if the bonds were as deep as they appeared to be. Other interests within the lives of the participants would test the commitment of the group members to each other if it lasted longer than six months.

Having a study book was helpful to direct the discussion from week to week, and the study questions aided in the preparation of the participants for the group meeting. However, it was easy to slip into a familiar mode where learning material became the focus of the group rather than building relationships. To be successful the study book can only be seen as an aid to developing the relationships in the group, not a manual to be mastered. It is essential to ask questions that probe what the participants feel about the subject matter being studied or what they have experienced in relation to the topic. Like Wesley's class meetings, the subject matter was "personal experience, not doctrinal ideology or biblical information."²¹⁶ When the material studied is the focus of the group people tend to remain superficial and detached from the topic. When the focus is on how

²¹⁵ Henderson, 102.

²¹⁶ Henderson, 100.

the participants interacted with the topic people must share more of their personal story, becoming vulnerable to the group, where growth and accountability can take place.

This kind of conversation needs direction from the leader, for the group could easily dissolve into a story telling session. The goal is holiness of heart and life, so the stories must direct the thoughts of participants towards Jesus and his will for his people. This is why it is important that a committed, mature Christian lead the group. Again, consulting the example of Wesley, it is not so much about the leader's education or position in the church as to the state of his or her character and heart. Wesley simply looked for leaders who were faithful, honest and had a concern for people.²¹⁷ If a person demonstrated these qualities he or she could do well in the class meetings. A covenant group today can succeed or fail if the wrong person is leading the group. Though having a leader that has Bible School training is nice, it is not necessary. In fact, the covenant group may be a place to discover new leaders within the church.

This covenant group was formed by the pastor, and though the pastor was an active participant it was clear that the group looked to the pastor as the leader. Though it was hoped that leaders might be trained within this setting it would have been necessary for the pastor to step back so there was less dependence on him. When a participant led the study in the pastor's absence this person did a very good job. However, when pastor was present the group looked to him as the leader. It would be safe to say the pastor had assumed the role of a spiritual mentor in this group. This did hinder the opportunity for development of new leaders. The pastor would have to intentionally choose to mentor

²¹⁷ Henderson, 101.

participants into leadership roles if leaders are to be trained within the group meetings, and the pastor would have to step back and let them take the leadership role.

One of the challenges a pastor faces as a researcher is that the relationship already established with the subjects can influence the project. It is suggested that the good spiritual leader “must maintain some critical distance,” not “merge with the community” and stay “spiritually focused and self-differentiated.”²¹⁸ Within the covenant group designed for open, honest sharing this is difficult. To stand too much on the outside makes the participants uncomfortable and inhibits honest dialogue. To be too much a part of the group could hinder the leader’s ability to direct the group’s focus, and be objective in the analysis of the group in a study like this. Another challenge of the pastor as participant is that the group could feel that the pastor expects certain answers, as if their orthodoxy was being tested. The pastor/researcher must find a way to dispel this idea or else dialogue will be truncated. Encouraging each participant to share, limiting one’s own contributions, helps the group realize the pastor is not there as a teacher, but simply on the same level as the rest of the group, the “first among equals.”²¹⁹ With the pastor/researcher sharing his or her temptations and failures along with the successes helps keep all participants on the same level, humbled and vulnerable before each other.

Striking a balance between being too rigid with the time and being faithful to the group’s pre-established time constraints is a challenge. Time is an important element that can be a real limitation, for good discussion may need to be cut off when it starts to interfere with other commitments. Sharing can go on indefinitely if boundaries are not

²¹⁸ Moschella, 38.

²¹⁹ Henderson, 101.

established, so comments should be limited to what is pertinent to the discussion at the time. Typical of Wesley's "methodical" ways, band meetings were to start on time and move along with order. The meeting would end with prayer so all knew when they were free to leave.²²⁰ Punctuality speaks of the importance of the group meetings and challenges participants to be good stewards of each other's time.

Evaluating spiritual growth is difficult. Measuring love, as noted above, is a most difficult challenge. Even when a survey is used it can only capture the feelings in the moment it is administered which reminds the researcher to draw conclusions lightly from such instruments. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale is merely a snap shot of how the participants felt that day, in that moment. Though broad conclusions can be drawn from this kind of survey it will not answer all the questions a researcher asks. It tells what the participants feel, but cannot probe the why. Therefore it is important to have multiple ways of gathering information. The post project survey offered more information to the researcher than simply using the Well-Being Scale because participants could express in broader terms what their experiences were in the group. This was also helpful when it was discovered the Spiritual Well-Being Scale did not adequately take into account cultural differences, such as the Filipino reticence to ask questions in the negative and expect a positive answer. Noting the limitations of these feedback devices helps the researcher be careful in the conclusions drawn from the study.

Another limitation of this study was the absence of a control group to compare the results of the tests with. For instance, there was no way to test the impact of the study material on the group. It may be that this material impacted the participants as much as

²²⁰ Henderson, 117-118.

the relationships formed. If there had been a control group that also studied the book but did not function under a covenant commitment one might be able to measure the effect of the covenant agreements on the group better. Though the feedback through both the Spiritual Well-Being Scale and the post project survey indicate the covenant group members experienced spiritual growth, without a control group from the congregation it is impossible to tell if the growth was because of the covenant group experience or part of a larger happening within the congregation. The pastor was a part of the covenant group and was enriched by the spiritual formation study and the Wesleyan emphasis on means of grace. As the pastor experienced the spiritually rich environment of the covenant group renewed passion and excitement resulted which was passed on to the congregation through the sermons and Bible studies. If spiritual inventories were randomly conducted within the congregation spiritual growth may have been observed at the same time as the covenant group members were growing. The growth may not have been as dramatic, but it would be an important element to consider as one evaluated the effects of the covenant group.

Surprises Along the Way

Observing the anticipated results of the participants growing spiritually as they grew closer to each other made the project very rewarding. What came as a surprise was the way the group became so close in such a short period of time. Usually groups take months to establish trust and honesty but this group shared at a fairly deep level within weeks. It was also surprising that it was the male participants who took the lead in the

sharing, and often were the ones to take the group to a deeper level by their personal engagement with the material. The male participants seemed more willing to make themselves vulnerable than the women. These male participants suggested that it might have been due to the fact that they both had attended recovery groups in the past where avoiding games and honest sharing was the norm.

The study did expose the challenge of working across ethnic lines. Different cultures engage differently. The survey was a challenge to the participant with Filipino heritage as language is used differently in that culture than in the Anglo-Canadian culture. Culturally there is often a barrier between Filipino and non-Filipino peoples, with the Filipinos feeling inferior. Filipino peoples seldom volunteer ideas without being specifically asked to share. This was true within the covenant group and the Filipino participant had to be invited to share before anything was said. This may suggest careful attention must be given in the future to different ethnic groups as they participate, even determining if some groups may have to form their own covenant group for open and honest dialogue.

Through this study the participants shed pretences and facades exposing who they really were. Some who put on strong exteriors exposed a very insecure interior. Some who were silent and not well known found their voices and shared openly about themselves and what they thought. When volunteers were asked to share a testimony in a morning worship service three group participants stepped forward, something they had never done publically in this church before. On a Sunday morning they made themselves vulnerable to the whole congregation, something that would have been impossible

without the support and encouragement of the group. It was amazing and exciting to see this evidence of God's grace at work in their lives.

One participant commented that "the covenant group was about a group of people who loved their pastor, and that is why they joined... They wanted to help the pastor and respected what was going to be said in this context. It was very important who invited them."²²¹ Though this was one participant's opinion, I was left wondering how many joined the group to "help the pastor" and how many were seeking a deeper relationship with the Lord? Ideally participants joined the project out of a desire for spiritual growth, not just to aid the pastor in his project. Nonetheless, whatever the motivation, the grace of God used this experience to help all who were a part to grow spiritually.

Further Studies

The topic of discipleship and spiritual formation is such a broad topic that it is necessary to keep the focus as narrow as possible to gain any real information that can inform future projects. Topics such as means of grace can be a complete study in themselves so only a little emphasis was given to them in this study. They formed part of the study material which was used as a means to build relationships rather than becoming a project to undertake in its self. A focus on the means of grace within a group would make an important study for discipleship and spiritual formation. It could include not only a study of the various means but implement participation and practice of the means of grace.

²²¹ Participant G post project survey.

Additional work could also be done by looking at the relationship between the behavioural, affective and training modes of Wesley's small groups.²²² This would be beneficial in determining what type of change one desired in the group rather than a broad spectrum look at growth in spirituality in general. It would be easier to evaluate the effectiveness of the group if the focus was narrowed to the behavioural, affective or training mode. If one of these areas was to be explored more thoroughly then this could be set out in the design form.

Throughout this project the parallels between the covenant group and the group dynamics within support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous kept reoccurring. A study looking at the similarities and differences between these groups could benefit many believers who have or are struggling with substance abuse. An excellent paper on this subject is "The Holiness Movement in the Church Basement: How the 12-Step Movement Can Constructively Inform Wesleyan-Holiness Spirituality."²²³ It is interesting to note that this author agrees that "we would do well to draw more deliberately on the kinds of communal practice that the early Methodists used and that AA uses with such great success: small group meetings where struggles can be confessed, forgiveness accepted, and support and encouragement found."²²⁴ Though this theme came up often during this project, sometimes because of the background of some participants, time did not allow for a deeper study of this topic.

²²² See Henderson for brief summaries pages 93-125.

²²³ Mark H. Mann, "The Holiness Movement in the Church Basement: How the 12-Step Movement Can Constructively Inform Wesleyan-Holiness Spirituality" (paper presented at the 2005 Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society, Seattle, Washington, March 2005) with the title "The Underground Church: The Twelve Step Movement as a Holiness Movement."

²²⁴ Mann, "The Holiness Movement in the Church Basement."

A study on leadership within the covenant group could provide good material for another project. The dynamic of the group may have been quite different if there was someone else leading. With the pastor as leader there was a tendency for the group to wait for the pastor to provide the definitive answer. When the pastor was away and a participant led the group the dynamics of the group was different. The participant did a very good job but turned the meeting back to the pastor at his return. It is always a challenge to observe a group for that very practice influences the behaviour of the group and influences the outcomes. Making observations from a distance is very difficult, especially when trying to observe spiritual growth and change. It would be possible to make as one of the covenant agreements a statement saying the group must be led by a participant, someone other than the researcher. The covenant agreement could be worded so that the leadership is shared by several participants or even passed through the group so that all get a chance to lead. Obviously a study on the importance of leadership within the group dynamic is another possible direction further studies could take.

Concluding Remarks

The necessity of community for spiritual formation is an important topic for the church today. Much of the material on spiritual formation speaks of mentors or guides for the individual, or deals with practices undertaken by the individual. As a result many conclude that true spirituality is formed in isolation from others, by withdrawing.²²⁵ The results of this project give strong evidence that spirituality truly is a journey with others.

²²⁵ Stephen J. Harper, *Embrace the Spirit* (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press, Victor Books, 1987), 90-91.

When spirituality is defined as something obtained outside of the experience of loving community and loving service flowing from that fellowship, it can become very selfish and inward focused. The emphasis on the individual in our society has muted the call of spirituality being formed in community yet the church has always been about a community bonded together in love by the grace and presence of God. This community is being transformed to reflect God's character to this world so that others will be drawn to the God who loves them.

John Wesley understood this dynamic and in direct opposition to the individualism that the pietistic movement fostered he brought believers together through the society, classes and bands. The dynamic of spiritual accountability and training for holiness within the group setting changed the course of history in England. This project illustrates that there is still great power to transform in small groups committed to spiritual growth. The small group opens the heart of the believer to experience the love of God through others and to share that love outward to those in need. The Apostle Paul reminds us that of all the powers on this earth "the greatest of these is love."²²⁶ This is the power discovered and released through the covenant group for spiritual growth. It may not be the only way but it is an important way to facilitate growth in love in the heart of the believer.

By covenanting together a group of seven individuals discovered the joy of growing in their faith, challenged to not only live holy lives but to embrace others to join them on the journey. The group became evangelistic about their experience, ready to reach out to others so they too may know a deeper relationship with God. The

²²⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

participants felt the cost of commitment and self denial was worth it as they realized a new dimension to their faith. The bonds formed in a community of believers seeking God together overcame differences in age, gender, background, and even ethnic origins. All felt equally welcomed and important in the group.

The Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene has been changed by this project, and will continue to be impacted as the participants share their stories and involve others in similar groups. The participants have shared their story from the pulpit in worship services, planting the seed so that more in the congregation want to be involved. They have told their families about their experience, causing them to want to know more. They have shared with neighbours and friends, co-workers and other Christians with this one great message: what we experienced you can have too. We have much to learn about covenant groups and discipleship, but we know this for certain; we will learn together.

The covenant group did not take away the desire to grow in the faith, but only made the participants desire to grow more. They knew they had not discovered all that God had for them, and were eager to press on. That is the heart of a disciple. One participant expressed this desire saying: “I want to keep on growing. I know this is an on going journey. I understand what is meant by brothers and sisters in Christ. We are growing together. We have passed the surface level of growth. I am more aware of my walk.”²²⁷

For the spiritual health of the church and all who come within her fellowship seeking to know more about God and how to live as the holy people of God, small groups for mutual support and accountability are recommended. The covenant can provide a

²²⁷ Notes from the last class together.

way for the group to bond at a deeper level, forming “true community” quickly. The leaders sought by the church have a place to be nurtured and trained within this fellowship. Commitment to the fellowship of the church will flow naturally from loving relationships; not membership pledges. Finally, the church will have the courage and desire to reach beyond itself to a hurting world because the base is strong. “I learned how important this type of relationship is for the growth of the church, gathering together, growing together,” said one participant. “This leads to commitment to each other, the church and the Lord. It also protects against false teaching.”²²⁸ Certainly this is something every church desires, no matter what the denominational label. To have this means to see members grow in their faith, and desire to reach out to others, not out of a sense of duty but because of genuine, God-inspired love is something the church cannot turn its back on. Wesley lived many years ago but the cry of human hearts for loving community that helps draw believers closer to God and to one’s neighbour is still with us. Wesley’s plan of forming covenant groups for spiritual nurture and care can work today even as it did in his day. It seems it is true: “*unus Christianus, nullus Christianus*” — “one Christian, no Christian.”

²²⁸ Post-project survey, participant C.

Appendices Index

Appendix I: Sermons	137
- Covenant Forms Community – Hebrews 8:6-13	137
- Covenant Means Commitment – Hebrews 9:1-10	142
- Covenant Means Consistency – Hebrews 8:1-7	147
Appendix II: Invitation to Join Covenant Group	152
Appendix III: Introduction to Covenant Groups	153
Appendix IV: Spiritual Well-being Scale	160
Appendix V: Covenant Group Agreements	161
Appendix VI: Chapter Work Sheets for <i>Reflecting God</i>	162
- Chapters 1 through 20	
Appendix VII: Post Project Survey	176

Covenant Forms Community
Hebrews 8:6-13

Early in the morning of July 4, 1952 thirty-four year old Florence Chadwick waded into the water off of Catalina Island and began swimming towards Los Angeles, California. Florence had already become the first lady to swim across the English Channel – both ways - and now she was attempting to become the first lady to swim the twenty-one miles across the San Pedro Channel.

This distance was not a problem for Florence. She was a world class swimmer, and already had earned a place in the long-distance hall of fame. But this day would prove more challenging than she anticipated.

The morning started with a heavy fog over the waters, nothing unusual for that area. It would usually burn off by 10:00 am. Several boats formed the team that would escort her across the waters, some going ahead to scout for sharks; others were there to provide encouragement when the swimming became difficult, including her own mother and trainer.

After swimming almost 15 hours in the bone chilling waters of the Pacific Ocean Florence asked to be taken out of the water and be allowed to ride in one of the boats. She was not fatigued from swimming, but was numb from the cold water. As she peered through her goggles she could not see the coast of California. The fog had not lifted as it usually did. But her mother and trainer knew she was close to the shore so they encouraged her to keep swimming. She stayed in the water and continued swimming for another hour.

After swimming for 15 hours and 55 minutes she asked again to be hauled out of the water. Fearing for her safety the team obliged her and brought her out of the water. Then the boats headed for shore through the fog, and to Florence's great dismay she discovered she had quit just ½ mile from her goal.

Later when talking with a reporter she was cited as saying, "It was the fog. I am not making any excuses, but I know that if I could have seen land I would have made it."

Florence had lost sight of her goal, and she gave up too soon. (The good news: two months later she completed the swim – again in fog – beating the men's record by over two hours!)²²⁹

Florence said if she could have seen the goal she would have succeeded – not given up. This is true in so many areas of our lives – if we can see the goal we will stay in the race – we will not quit. The question is, do we always know what the goal is? For instance, what is the goal for the Christian life?

The Westminster Confession of 1647 says that "man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."²³⁰

²²⁹ Gary L. McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work With God to Build A Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 49-51.

²³⁰ Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 1 cited in McIntosh, 52.

Appendix I: Sermons

This is our goal: not to build churches, win souls, run Sunday Schools or promote good in the community. These are not bad things, but we are called to greater things – the greatest of all being to bring glory back to God through our lives – which may mean building churches, evangelizing and teaching Sunday School...

With this as the goal for our lives, is there anything that can help us, and keep us from giving up before we reach our destination as we travel through the fog of life?

Sickness or death, financial crisis, family troubles, work problems, business, laziness, friends, foes, the neighbour's cat... there are so many things that can bring fog into our lives. How can we keep our eyes on the goal of glorifying God when there is so much fog all around us?

Without a doubt the most certain way to keep our eyes on the goal is to keep our eyes on Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2) "He is the way, the truth and the life and the only way to the Father." (John 14:6)

It is as we open our lives to the presence of God in Christ that the Spirit of God can work in us to shape us and mould us and move us in ways that will bring glory back to God.

There is nothing more exciting than watching God work in the life of a believer, watching the person estranged from the family bow and pray for those people; watching people transform from selfish, angry persons to become kind, patient and caring. The grace of God at work in people brings glory back to him.

Yet many will come to Christ, and still get lost in the fog. They may find they are stagnant in their Christian journey. They may find Christian practices a chore – or a bore. They may even drift from the Lord, starting to wander back into the world: lost in the fog.

In John Wesley's day it seemed almost everyone was lost in the fog. The churches were almost empty, people entertained themselves by getting drunk and beating on each other, the rich cared little for the poor, and the poor were angry at the rich for having so much. Corruption, vice, greed, disillusionment and hopelessness plagued the people: fog. (Sound familiar?)

Wesley took seriously the admonition of Hebrews 10:25:

²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

To encourage this 'meeting together' Wesley formed societies, classes and bands where Christians could grow together in their faith to the glory of God. Whenever you bring people together for any purpose there needs to be guidelines or rules as to what should be expected in the group. From the game of street hockey to the

gathering of friends to play a table game, there must be rules. Even the boy's club boldly posts its one rule on the club house door: "No girls allowed."

Of course God knew we would need rules if we were going to live side by side and not destroy each other. While forming a new community out in the desert under the care of a man named Moses, God gave some very clear rules about how this group of people ought to live. He told them they must have only one God – him. He told them not to make idols to worship. He said to take a Sabbath, a day of rest, each week for worship and renewal. He said not to misuse his name, to honor your father and mother, do not kill, or commit adultery, or steal, or give false testimony, or covet. He told them how to worship – even what the worship space should look like.

Then God said, this is what I expect of you. And here is what you can expect from me: I will go before you and guide you and protect you and provide for you. To the Israelites he then said in essence, "Do you accept my terms? If so, say "We do!"

And that day Israel made a covenant with God: a promise of sorts. A covenant outlines what can be expected from all involved in the relationship. God kept his end of the covenant, but the people failed – miserably. Even when warned, and disciplined by God they still did not bring glory to God in the way they lived.

So God decided a new covenant was in order. As God so often does, he gave a warning that a change was coming. 600 years before Jesus was born God spoke through a man named Jeremiah who foretold the new covenant. We read of that in our passage this morning. That new Covenant would come through Jesus.

In our passage this morning from Hebrews 8 we notice that we are in a long discussion that basically says Jesus is greater than anyone who ever lived or will live as he is God revealed to us. And anything Jesus brings is better than anything else that has been or will be – and that includes the covenant. The old covenant established in Moses with its sacrifices and regulations was good, as it came from God, but there was a problem: people never upheld their end of the bargain.

Hear again verses 7 and 8:

⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said:

"The time is coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.

The new covenant will be different from the old one in that before the laws were outside of the people, now God will plant them into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God will "write his law" on our hearts – he will guide us by his Holy Spirit. And God will do something even greater than guide our stubborn hearts – he will forgive us. It is sin that separates us from God, and it is sin that keeps us from following his plans for our lives. This will be dealt with – for the mediator of this better covenant, Jesus Christ, will suffer

and die in our place. He will carry our sins away so that we can be a holy people before a holy God, filled by God's holy presence and led by him.

No wonder the writer of Hebrews is so excited: this is so much better than living by just a bunch of rules, following rituals that did not change the heart of the believer. Now we can be born again, and start a new life following God as his Spirit leads us.

And as we enter the new covenant we are not alone. Not only is God with us but so is every other person who said "Yes" to the covenant. Covenant has a way of building community.

Jesus said on the night of the last supper that the cup he shared with his disciples was the blood of the new covenant. Each time the cup is shared it is a time of gathering together those who have entered that new covenant by faith in Jesus. Those who drink the wine and eat the bread say, "We gladly accept the covenant terms – we will put our faith in Jesus alone for salvation, and we will be obedient to all he tells us through the Holy Spirit. We will open our hearts to learn to love as we have been loved." And at the table of Jesus community is formed.

Jesus said if we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves we will have fulfilled all the conditions (laws) of the new covenant.

And together we will work towards the goal of our lives – to bring glory to God. We will help each other along the journey, encouraging the discouraged, lifting up the weak, exhorting the wayward. In chapter 12 of Hebrews we read:

¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

This speaks of a band of people who have linked arms together and if one stumbles, the rest will help them stand. If one starts to fall behind, the rest wait. Together, united under the new covenant as a new community, the Christians move towards the goal of glorifying God despite the fog.

Listen to this verse and those which follow from the Message paraphrase:

So don't sit around on your hands! No more dragging your feet! Clear the path for long-distance runners so no one will trip and fall, so no one will step in a hole and sprain an ankle. Help each other out. And run for it!

14-17

Work at getting along with each other and with God. Otherwise you'll never get so much as a glimpse of God. Make sure no one gets left out of God's generosity. Keep a sharp eye out for weeds of bitter discontent. A thistle or two gone to seed can ruin a whole garden in no time.

Too much has been written about how I myself can have a personal relationship with God, and we forget we were called into community when we entered the new covenant of God. We are his people – together. And we need each other.

Reuben Welch in a little book entitled “We Really Do Need Each Other” writes,

Jesus brings to us, into our world, all the way into our world,
the very life of God. And the life He brings is a shared life –
and it always creates a community.
It isn't Jesus and me, it is Jesus and we.
We really do need each other. God has made us this way.
The quality of life within this fellowship of those who share the life of Jesus
is to be one of openness and confession and honesty before Him.²³¹

This is what the new covenant community looks like. And why is God so interested in forming community? Because this is where we often will meet him. One story from Reuben Welch to conclude.

Reuben Welch was a professor at a Christian University, and he recalls a student who was just about to graduate, but was diagnosed with cancer and died. This student was a ministerial student so the head of the department went with Reuben to visit with this young man. They had long talks about life and death and God.

The student knew he was dying and said, “I know God has helped me in the past, and I know he will be with me when I cross the river. I know he will be there... it is those times in between that sometimes are rough.”

Reuben Welch adds, “We know exactly what this student is saying. We know God has been with me, and will be with me in the crisis, but here I am right now. With the student we say, “I wish I was conscious of his presence at all times, like now... when I need it.”

The head of the religion department simply said to the student: “...Jesus comes to you in the persons who come to you.”

Welch concludes, “Now that is true. Have you experienced it? I have.”²³²

This morning we are reminded that God has graciously given us a way to keep going in the midst of life's foggy days: through the new covenant of grace he has given us one another. God has formed a new community around Jesus, called his church, of which we are a part.

And with Reuben Welch I would say, “We really do need each other.” Amen?

²³¹ Reuben Welch, *We Really Do Need Each Other* (Nashville: Impact Books, 1973), 68.

²³² Welch, 33.

Covenant Means Commitment
Hebrews 9:1-10

This week I had to make a trip to Vancouver, so I took this opportunity to look up a long time friend. Our friendship goes back to college days. I was anxious to see his house, for last year he had remodelled his 60 year old home in North Vancouver. When he described it he said they basically kept one wall and the foundation from the old house so that it was technically a renovation and not a construction project, as his contractor could only do renovations.

The house was amazing – a brand new high end bungalow that was so beautiful that a realtor featured it on his calendar with a before and after picture. I was totally amazed as my friend took me on a tour of his new yet old house....

Our passage today takes us on a tour through the temple. It is called the “earthly sanctuary” in verse 1 and we are told there are two main rooms in this building:

- In the first room we find a lamp stand and a table with consecrated bread on it. This is called the holy place.
- In the second room we find the altar of incense and the gold covered Ark of the Covenant, with the cherubim or angels on the top. This room is the most holy place.

This, of course, does not describe everything, anymore than saying my house has three bedrooms and three bathrooms tells you everything about my house. We know there is more to the temple, but these are the most important features that we need to know about. As verse 5 says, “We cannot discuss these things in detail now.”

In verse 6 there is a transition from a tour of the building to what happens in that space. We are told how the priests – and only the priests – enter into the holy place to perform their religious duties. We are now talking about worship in the temple.

Next we are told of the high priest who came once a year into the most holy place, always with a blood sacrifice as an offering for his sins and the sins of the people. Verse 8 points out that the high priest was the only one allowed into the most holy place because access to God was not yet made available to all the people. And this becomes the starting point of why a new covenant was necessary.

Before we jump into the new covenant, ask yourself why we have this detailed tour of the temple, with instructions of how worship here.

One of the things God wants us to understand is that covenant calls for commitment. When we enter into a covenant relationship with God we are agreeing that God gets to make the rules and we will follow them. In the covenant we acknowledge that God is God and we are not, and we submit to his leading in our lives. We are committed to

doing things the way God tells us to, we have agreed to do so, because we have come to understand that **this is what is best for us**.

Why does the sanctuary look the way it does? Because this is the way God told the people to build it (you can read about it in Exodus 26 and following). Why did the priests carry on worship the way they did – accessing only parts of the temple, bringing blood sacrifices and following a certain schedule in their worship? They did so because this is the way God told them to worship.

This was all a part of the covenant that was presented to them by God at Mount Sinai. Most of us remember Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from the mountain after meeting God, but if we look closer he brought much more away from that meeting that established the covenant between God and his people. There were many regulations and rules for the community, the way God wanted community to look, and the people were asked by God: “Will you commit yourselves to following these rules as my people?”

To say “yes” to the covenant meant the people would have to commit to doing things God’s way. No longer could they do things the way the Egyptians did, or the Hittites or any other group: they needed to commit to doing things God’s way. In chapter 40 of the book of Exodus we read how Moses set up the tabernacle, and the words repeated over and over throughout that chapter are these: Moses did this “as the Lord commanded him.”

And when it was all done we read that the Lord God was pleased and he let his glory descend on that place, and so great was the presence of God there that not even Moses could enter the tabernacle. That glory would lead the people through the wilderness towards the Promised Land – God would be their guide and protector, his part of the covenant agreement.

You may ask why God gave so many details, and why they were preserved for us in scripture. Why are the details of the covenant so ... detailed? Why does God have so many regulations he wanted followed within the covenant? And why should the people commit to them?

Let me use an illustration from our own lives.

When our son, Peter, was in high school he joined the school’s football team. This meant that he was making a commitment - committing himself to be at the practices – whether they were 6 am or 4 pm or Saturday mornings...

Being a part of the team means commitment to the team – the coach told the players that they must live according to a certain standard to be a part of the team – no drugs, no alcohol, keep up with school work and be respectful. The players were even expected to dress up on game days so everyone at the school knew something was happening. For baggy pant teens that was quite the stretch!

The process of pledging themselves to live up to the standards of the team is what is meant by forming a covenant. It is agreeing to abide by the rules and the expectations of the coach, with consequences if the rules are not kept. Sadly, not all the boys abided by the rules – and some were asked to leave the team. Then there were those who broke the rules and they lived in fear of being caught. But for those who committed themselves to the team they could wear the team jersey, they were given the opportunity to play a position on the field, and they shared in the glory when a game was won. The coach committed himself to help those who lived by their commitment to the team, and they all worked together to do the school proud.

Of course the players did not always understand why they had to make these commitments. Like many young people they could not see a connection between their abstinence from alcohol and drugs and being a good football player (even professionals seem to miss this link). The coach knew these substances inhibit the performance of the players – sometimes permanently – and wanted to protect them from this.

Players did not always appreciate 6 am practice, but coach knew that the drills would help them in the heat of the game to perform better. Coach also knew the rigorous work outs at practice would serve the boys well in the grind of the game – the better conditioned they were the better they would perform. Coach did not want the boys going home wishing they could have done better – he pushed them to be at their best at all times.

This whole agreement between players and coach is the kind of thing that happens in a covenant. Covenant is the scriptural term God uses to describe His relationship with his people, outlining his promises of care and love and help along with the expected response of the people: faith, obedience and loving trust. When God makes the covenant the commands are always for our good. And God who is infinite in wisdom knows what really is for our good and what is not. He simply calls us to trust Him.

But as we read in Hebrews 8:8 the people did not keep the requirements of the Old Covenant. They violated its rules time and time again. They turned their back on God and instead chose to worship other gods: the gods of other nations, the gods of greed and violence, the gods of selfishness and oppression. Again and again God called the people back to himself, and though there were times when the people responded to God's call to return to him, usually they failed, or remained faithful for only a very short time.

And this is why, the writer of Hebrews tells us, God promised a new covenant, one that could deal with the root of the problem. Our hearts have been infected by the most terrible, fatal disease: sin. We are born with the seeds of this condition in our hearts and as we grow up those seeds take root and grow into acts of rebellion against God. Because of sin we think we can live without God, that we are wise enough and strong enough to live without him. Sin causes us to shake our fist up at God and say, "I don't need you!"

And sin always destroys us. The Apostle Paul would say, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). When there is no room for God in our lives there is death. Death may not mean our heart stops beating and we no longer breathe the air, but it does mean that we do not know how to love and live in relationship with others. God created us to live in community – with each other and with Him. Sin destroys our ability to do that.

Our passage today ends with a sad note: the ceremonies of the old covenant could only deal with what was happening to people on the outside. Verses 9 and 10 read:

⁹This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. ¹⁰They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

The good news is that the promised new order came in Jesus Christ. God offers us the opportunity to enter into covenant with Him still, but it is a new covenant brought to us by Jesus. Unlike the old covenant that dealt with only the externals like how to eat, how to dress and how to act towards our fellow man, the new covenant would shape us from the inside out:

I will put my laws in their minds
and write them on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people. (Hebrews 8:10)

Jesus would break all barriers down that separated people from God, and in a great gesture of grace and love would invite us not only to be his covenant people, but his family. We can be called the sons and daughters of God!

Our guilt and sin would be dealt with through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary. We will read later in Hebrews 9:

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (verses 12-14)

God has established a better covenant, one that can clean us through and through as we invite God into our lives. God will not only forgive our sin and give us a new start in life, but will lead us and guide us, protect and help us through the journey of life. And where God’s people of old failed over and over again as they tried to live the laws of the covenant in their own strength, we are promised the Holy Spirit, the presence of God himself, within us to give us power to be the kind of people that would please a holy God.

Appendix I: Sermons

“But you will receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you... and your lives will be a witness of God’s presence in this world...” (Acts 1:8 expanded)

Moses came down the mountain with page upon page of requirements for the old covenant. And over the years people added to these as well. What about the new covenant – is there a long list of “do’s and don’ts” as well?

When Jesus was asked what a person must do to do the works of God under the new covenant his answer was amazingly simple – yet life changing. Jesus said, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:29)

And to believe is not to just have a head knowledge about a man named Jesus. To believe is to surrender to His Lordship in your lives – let him be in control. If you like, let him be the coach of your life, knowing his game plan will lead you to victory. Any other game plan will lead to defeat and failure.

This morning Jesus invites us to enter the new covenant, committing ourselves to do the things that please him, and staying away from those things that would not please him. He is calling us to be his people. We do not deserve to be called the people of God, nor can we earn this right. We can only enter the new covenant by faith in Jesus: we enter by grace. And those who enter that new covenant will heed the words of Jesus: ““If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) We will trust and obey.

This morning we partake of communion, the bread and wine reminding us of the broken body of our Lord and shed blood. They remind us of what it cost Jesus to establish the new covenant: his life. But as we take the bread and wine this morning may it be an opportunity for us to say, “I renew my commitment to follow Jesus, to live my life to bring glory to God as I obey the leading of His Spirit. I do so gladly because I know this is a covenant of love: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Covenant Means Consistency
Hebrews 8:1-7

The last two weeks we have been talking about the concept of covenant, God's way of pledging his faithfulness to us and calling for a response from us, his creation. Within the covenant we find we form community, for everyone who says "Yes" to God's call is united by His rule. We also saw that covenant calls for commitment - from God and from us. God has never failed on his end of the commitment and has promised to help us stay true to fulfill our end of the commitment.

Today we take one more look at the topic of covenant and focus on the fact that covenant means consistency.

Consistency is an important virtue in our lives – from our ethics and moral behaviour to our sports.

How many of you golf? Once a year or so I take my clubs out and swipe at a ball or two as we walk through the pristine grounds of the golf course. I once was given a certificate to a round of golf on a prestigious course in Kelowna, and a golf instructor was paired up with me as I smacked the ball down the fairway. He watched me without saying a word for two holes and then in disgust said – "You need lessons!"

What I lack in skill I make up in luck. I remember golfing with my Step-father and I would slice the ball way to the right – out of bounds, out of play – except it hit a tree and bounced back to the center of the fairway! Don, my stepfather, said that was no fair – God was helping me!

One day on the par three at Beban Park I actually shot a hole in one. Peter, my son, and I went out and I chipped the short shot down the hill and into the cup – one shot! Now that is what the pros do. So because I shot that hole in one I should go pro – shouldn't I? I should pack my bags and get ready to make my fortune playing golf, right?

Wrong! The difference between my golf game and that of the pros is consistency (and distance). Where I get one good shot in four rounds of golf the pros make great shots on harder courses time after time after time. Even the pros who do not make the cut are far more consistent than I will ever be. Time after time after time they will make great shots that put them where they ought to be to sink the ball in as few strokes as possible. Me – I have to give up counting sometimes.

Consistency – doing the right thing over and over again.

In Acts 2:46 we read of the consistent pattern of the early Christians that would help them grow in their faith:

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts

This morning we return to the book of Hebrews where we read of how God brought a new covenant into being through the sacrificial death of Jesus. By the blood of Jesus a new way was made for people to enter the very presence of God, and there find mercy and grace. Through Jesus we have the assurance that God will not only live outside of us – watching over us – but he will live within us, guiding us in how we ought to live.

The theme of consistency is throughout the old covenant, from regulations on how to sacrifice animals to the Ten Commandments. Read with me the first seven verses of Hebrews 8, and listen for the call to consistency from God.

- read text -

In this text the focus is on the new high priest, Jesus Christ, who has gone to the perfect tabernacle that was not built by human hands. But here on earth the priests ministered in a tabernacle that was a copy of the heavenly tabernacle. When Moses went up the mountain to meet God he received instructions on how to build the tabernacle, how to take it down and how to move it.

Note the words of verse 5:

This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”

Have you ever wondered why God gave detailed instructions of how to build the tabernacle? Why was this so important?

Listen again to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:33:

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

Here the context is in reference to worship in the church: God wanted order, not confusion. And our God who is the same yesterday, today and forever demonstrated His desire for order through the instructions given to his people in regards to worship in the tabernacle so many years ago.

Yesterday in my devotions I was reading in the book of Numbers and there it detailed the duties of the Levites, and how one clan would care for a certain portion of the tabernacle when moving it, assigned four oxen and two carts to carry the materials, another clan had four carts and eight oxen to carry their portion, and yet another clan had no carts and no oxen because what they were responsible for items that needed to be carried with poles on their shoulders. This would include the Ark of the Covenant and the altars.

Why was God concerned about the tribes knowing their roles? It was to preserve the tabernacle. It would be set up and down dozens of times over the forty years in the wilderness and if people just haphazardly threw things together it would soon be broken

and battered. But consistently doing things God's way the tabernacle would last all those years.

Consistency: God called for it in the way the animals were to be killed for the sacrifice, knowing this would protect the people from sickness and food poisoning. Consistency in what to eat – and what not to eat. And consistency on how to show gratitude back to God for his protection and care: feasts and festivals throughout the year, offerings and gifts to God.

So what does God have to say about consistency to his new covenant people? Here are just a few words he gives us:

From Hebrews 10 starting at verse 19:

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Can you hear the calls to consistency?

- draw near to God with a sincere heart and faith – consistently
- hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess – consistency
- spur one another on toward love and good deeds– consistently
- do not give up meeting together – be consistent in your attendance at Church
- encourage one another consistently

The apostle Peter gets at the same thing when he says:

² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Within the new covenant, with its laws written on our hearts, we are called to live for God not just on Sunday but every day. The way we are at church should be the way we are throughout the week. You should meet the same Gary at Superstore on Friday as you meet on Sunday at the church. Sometimes we put on our Sunday best for church – a smile, courteous manners, gentle words, a listening ear – but when church is done we are different people. Being people of the covenant says we are people of consistency – the same kind of people wherever we are.

And if there are settings where we cannot live out our covenant character, a character shaped by the Spirit of God living within us so that we are loving, joyful, peaceful,

patient, kind, good, gentle and self controlled then we must avoid those places . Or if there are activities that cause us to turn our back on our covenant vows to put God first in everything – then we must stop these.

In the early church many soldiers left the army, even on threat of death, because they could not reconcile their vow to love all people with the violence and killing required of a soldier. It was not consistent with what they saw in Jesus' life.

The new covenant we are a part of because of our faith in Jesus calls us to live a certain way. Our lives are to bring glory back to God in all we do – in our business, in our homes, our leisure, our studies, our relationships, our private times and our public times. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God,” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31.

People are curious creatures; because we sometimes can fool ourselves into thinking no one is watching us. We can pretend to be very disciplined in our spiritual lives – consistent in our prayer life and Bible Study, our worship, our giving, our sharing, but in reality we are not. Of course God sees all we do, but there are those watching around us as well.

Throughout the history of the church men and women have used this knowledge – that others were watching them – to help them remain consistent in their Christian walk.

While in Oxford attending classes John and Charles Wesley formed a small accountability group with some other students, calling it the holy club. Each week they met to ask each other hard questions like:

- Have you done your daily devotions?
- Have you joined in worship, celebrated the Lord's Supper, and presented your tithes and offerings?
- Have you overcome temptations and sins?
- Have you served members of the Body of Christ and the community at large?
- Are you being truthful in all your answers?

Later, as the Methodist movement grew under their leadership they organized into societies, classes and bands so that people could encourage one another on their spiritual journey. The Wesleys knew that to form consistency in the life of the believers they needed to be accountable to one another. And it worked.

I am sure you have felt the power of accountability to keep you consistent. Certainly your boss helps you arrive at work on time every day because of your accountability to him or her. Your teachers at school do the same thing – and if we are not consistent then there are consequences.

Thanks to the hard work of our treasurer, Brenda Michaelis, you will be getting a tax receipt for your giving to the church over the past year. This is one more form of

accountability – for as you look at your receipt you will see what you really gave to God’s work this past year.

Each Tuesday morning a group of us meet at the church at 7 am for sharing and prayer. We hold each other accountable – not because we made a rule to be there, but we know we will be missed if we cannot be there. This subtle form of accountability has often made it easier to roll out of bed when I would prefer to keep on sleeping.

We have discovered that living in the new covenant we have a new family, a new community called the church. This community challenges us to stay committed, and consistent. This is not because we judge each other – far from it. We expect the best of each other and we live in such a way that we do not want to disappoint one another. We realize that how we live does make a difference – certainly to our own family, our children and spouse, but also to our church family.

This awareness that we are responsible to and for each other is very much a part of our covenant commitment. And this awareness helps us to live more consistently the life that pleases God and points others to Jesus.

Some of you are very consistent to get the garbage out on time each week. You consistently change the oil in your vehicle and have it serviced. You consistently go to the dentist and brush those teeth. You consistently pay your bills on time. You consistently contact your family members who live far away, and you consistently remember their birthdays and to send a card at Christmas.

With all this consistency in your life it is good to stop today and ask, do I show the same consistency in my walk with Jesus? Am I consistent in my spiritual practices that open the door to His presence in my life: Bible Study, prayer, worship, ministry? Is there a consistency in my character, so people will see Jesus in my life Monday through Saturday just as clearly as on Sunday?

This morning take a moment to commit once again to the covenant of his grace – committing to allow Jesus to be Lord of all in your life, and then ask Him to help you be consistent in that commitment. And also ask what person or group of persons you can turn to to help you be consistent in your Christian life.

Hebrews 4:14 says, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.²³³

²³³ 1 Peter 5:10-11.

Covenant Group

As part of Pastor Gary's doctoral program he is running a covenant group for six months, May -October. As schedules are busy for everyone he wants to meet those who want to participate:

Sunday mornings from 9 am - 10:00 am

The Study book is called "Reflecting God" and in its chapters covers basic themes of discipleship and knowing God better.

The group will also share about the progress in spiritual development with each other in a safe, confidential atmosphere.

If you want to be a part, please fill out the form below and give to Pastor Gary.

Thanks.

Name: _____
Tel: _____

Introduction to Covenant Groups

Covenant Group Background

It is my assumption that there is far more to Christianity than I see evident in the lives of many Christians. I grew up in the Christian church, attending since I was just an infant, and at some stages of my life attended three to four times a week the religious services of the church. As a child I opened my life to the living God by inviting Jesus into my life after forgiving my sin. As a youth I surrendered all I knew of myself over to the work of the Holy Spirit, particularly concerned about a violent temper I could not control. As a teen I had an unmistakable encounter with God, and I sensed a call to be a pastor. I was thrilled, for I held the position in high esteem, but I was also scared to death. I was shy, reserved and lacked self confidence. Claiming the promise, "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13) I started on the journey to become a pastor. This took me to college, where a great serendipity was that I met my wonderful wife, Lise, and then further to seminary. At twenty-four years of age I accepted responsibility to pastor my first church: that was twenty seven years ago.

Over the years I have met some very godly people, people I have wanted to emulate and follow as they followed Jesus. I have also met some people who did not seem to be changed much by their experience with Jesus. They seemed as hard, judgemental, unforgiving, selfish, greedy or self-absorbed as the many non-Christians I rubbed shoulders with. Indeed, some of the non-Christians sometimes shamed those within the church. I would preach harder on the carnal vices and many made their way to the altar for prayer, truly desiring change in their lives. Nonetheless change seemed infinitesimal if at all after a few months, as people soon slipped back into old patterns of behaviour.

Could there be a better way to help Christians be Christian? If a Christian is a follower of Jesus of Nazareth and his or her desire is to reflect the character of Jesus in all manner of speech and behaviour, then most Christians are far from the goal. Even where there has been evidence of supernatural occurrences, where there are conversions, miracles and speaking in tongues the character of Jesus has not always been evident. There must be more to being a Christian than supernatural power to perform certain acts.

It was this conviction that moved godly men and women through the history of the church to call Christians to a deeper walk. Names like Benedict and Wesley bring to mind a call to a deeper spiritual life from within the ranks of Christians. John Wesley, in the eighteenth century, observed a church that seemed unable to deal with the deep and abiding problems within the hearts of the people. His England was torn apart by class divisions that often spoke more of wealth and position than any social graces. The church attracted the wealthy and privileged while the common folk slaved to eek out a living, angry and bitter for their lot in life. Neither group seemed to have much of a sense of God. Wesley also feared there was less of God in much of the religious establishment than politics and power plays.

It was within this environment that Wesley felt led to seek a deeper spiritual life through fellowship with other believers. This was a fellowship quite unlike the worship services

where everyone stood at arm's length from one another, but was a fellowship that grew out of mutual accountability and support. His journey started with the Oxford Clubs while he was still at school as a young man, patterned, no doubt, on the societies his parents had been a part of while he grew up under their roof, groups like the "Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge."²³⁴ Though these groups often centered on study and information gathering, Wesley was led to introduce a relational component to his groups, believing that it was through relationships that Christians grow to be Christian. In fact the focus of the teaching of John Wesley was on holiness or perfect love. All of Christian life revolved around the call to love God and to love the neighbour.²³⁵ The Methodist societies with their basic building block being the class meeting of accountable relationships were instrumental in bringing revival and spiritual transformation to Wesley's England.

Over the years of my ministry there have been seasons when the small group was the focus of spirituality in the church. Sunday School certainly was one of those effective small group ministries, and after that came cell groups within homes for study and fellowship. These all had some success, but in time lost momentum and effectiveness. They did not become building blocks in the lives of contemporary Christians because they were set aside as easily as last year's fashions. It may have been that the focus of many of these groups was on the study, the information gathered in these groups rather than on the heart transformation. Though many lasting friendships were established in these groups, few discipleship relationships remained.

It seemed appropriate, then, to explore practices from the past, like John Wesley's class meetings, and try and see if they would be appropriate for our setting today. Certainly the needs of people for relationships where spiritual formation can take place are the same. If groups focused on relationship building – learning to love as we have been loved – would they last longer, impact lives greater and be a source of spiritual nurture for the church today? Reuben Welch wrote a book entitled *We Really Do Need Each Other* where he drove home the fact that Christianity is about going together on the journey. Listen to the closing words in his book:

You know something –
we're all just people who need each other.
We're learning
and we've all got a long journey ahead of us.
We've got to go together
and if it takes us until Jesus comes
we better stay together
we better help each other.

And I dare say

²³⁴ Heitzenrater, 21.

²³⁵ John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist", *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 9: The Methodist Societies; History, Nature and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 35.

that by the time we get there
 all the sandwiches will be gone
and all the chocolate will be gone
and all the water will be gone
and all the backpacks will be empty.
But no matter how long it takes us
 we've got to go together.
 Because that's how it is
 in the body of Christ.

It's all of us
 in love
 in care
 in support
 in mutuality –
 we really do need each other.²³⁶

I tend to hear the same thing in the book of Hebrews:

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰ Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³ “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷ Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.²³⁷

So, together, we embark on a journey to build community through a covenant group. May God bless and guide us as we journey together.

²³⁶ Welch, 111.

²³⁷ Hebrews 12:7-17.

Covenant Group

The heart of Methodism during the life of John Wesley was the Methodist Class Meeting. This was a small covenant discipleship support group where members were accountable to each other. They confessed their faults one to another, prayed for each other, and stirred up one another to love and good works. Here the teachings of the Bible were examined in light of actual personal experience and leaders were nurtured and equipped.',
"The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God,
"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."
"Confess your faults one to another and pray one for another..."
"Bear ye one anothers burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

John Wesley's Rules for the Band-Societies (drawn up Dec. 25, 1738)

The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."

To this end, we intend,

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us; to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may be to this effect:

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2. Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?
3. Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God?

Appendix III: Introduction to Covenant Groups

4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6. Do you desire to be told your faults?
7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?
8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?
10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11. Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

***Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion offers; the four following at every meeting:**

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?

Conditions of Membership into Methodist Society:

There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies: a desire "to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins:" But, wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation. Thus we say to those who unite with us:

You are supposed to have the faith that "overcometh the world." To you, therefore, it is not grievous:

I. Carefully to abstain from doing evil; in particular:

1. Neither to buy nor sell anything at all on the Lord's day.
2. To taste no spirituous liquor, no dram of any kind, unless prescribed by a Physician.
3. To be at a word both in buying and selling.
4. To pawn nothing, no, not to save life.
5. Not to mention the fault of any behind his back, and to stop those short that do.
6. To wear no needless ornaments, such as rings, earrings, necklaces, lace, ruffles.
7. To use no needless self-indulgence, such as taking snuff or tobacco, unless prescribed by a Physician.

II. Zealously to maintain good works; in particular:

1. To give alms of such things as you possess, and that to the uttermost of your power.
2. To reprove all that sin in your sight, and that in love and meekness of wisdom.
3. To be patterns of diligence and frugality, of self-denial, and taking up the cross daily.

III. Constantly to attend on all the ordinances of God; in particular:

1. To be at church and at the Lord's table every week, and at every public meeting of the Bands.
2. To attend the ministry of the word every morning, unless distance, business, or sickness prevent.
3. To use private prayer every day; and family prayer, if you are the head of a family.
4. To read the Scriptures, and meditate therein, at every vacant hour. And:
5. To observe, as days of fasting or abstinence, all Fridays in the year.

These are the General Rules of our societies; all which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written word, the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these, we know, his Spirit writes on every truly awakened heart. If

Appendix III: Introduction to Covenant Groups

there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul as they that must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways; we will bear with him for a season: But then if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls. - Wesley's Works Vol. 8. pp. 270, 271, 272-274.²³⁸

²³⁸ John Wesley, *John Wesley's Accountability Discipleship Groups*, Discipleship Resource Centre http://www.discipleshipresourcecenter.com/Articles/Discipleship_Articles/John_Wesley%27s_Accountability_Discipleship_Groups/ (accessed May 4, 2013).

Appendix IV: Spiritual Well-Being Scale

Buyer: Gary Nawrocki (gnawrocki@shaw.ca)
Transaction ID: 5VV49285VV607952A

SWB Scale

For each of the following statements circle the choice that best indicates the extent of your agreement or disagreement as it describes your personal experience:

SA = Strongly Agree	D = Disagree
MA = Moderately Agree	MD = Moderately Disagree
A = Agree	SD = Strongly Disagree

1. I don't find much satisfaction in private prayer with God. SA MA A D MD SD
2. I don't know who I am, where I came from, or where I'm going. SA MA A D MD SD
3. I believe that God loves me and cares about me. SA MA A D MD SD
4. I feel that life is a positive experience. SA MA A D MD SD
5. I believe that God is impersonal and not interested in my daily situations. SA MA A D MD SD
6. I feel unsettled about my future. SA MA A D MD SD
7. I have a personally meaningful relationship with God. SA MA A D MD SD
8. I feel very fulfilled and satisfied with life. SA MA A D MD SD
9. I don't get much personal strength and support from my God SA MA A D MD SD
10. I feel a sense of well-being about the direction my life is headed in. SA MA A D MD SD
11. I believe that God is concerned about my problems. SA MA A D MD SD
12. I don't enjoy much about life. SA MA A D MD SD
13. I don't have a personally satisfying relationship with God. SA MA A D MD SD
14. I feel good about my future. SA MA A D MD SD
15. My relationship with God helps me not to feel lonely. SA MA A D MD SD
16. I feel that life is full of conflict and unhappiness. SA MA A D MD SD
17. I feel most fulfilled when I'm in close communion with God. SA MA A D MD SD
18. Life doesn't have much meaning. SA MA A D MD SD
19. My relation with God contributes to my sense of well-being. SA MA A D MD SD
20. I believe there is some real purpose for my life. SA MA A D MD SD

SWB Scale © 1982 by Craig W. Ellison and Raymond F. Paloutzian. All rights reserved. Not to be duplicated unless express written permission is granted by the authors or by Life Advance. See www.lifeadvance.com.

Covenant Group Agreements

1. We will try to meet together as a group at least once a week. This will be a priority and we will do all we can to be present.
2. We pledge ourselves to confidentiality. What is said in the group will stay in the group and never go beyond.
3. This is a closed group, meaning we will not be adding new members now that we have started, and we will make our meeting safe with closed doors and no access to others.
4. We will be sensitive to each individual's experience, respectful and free of judgement. When someone shares we do not express disgust or shock, only support and encouragement.
5. We are not there to "fix" the others in the group, but to encourage. Only God can fix us, and our goal is to help each other grow closer to Him and find His answers.
6. We will share as honestly as we can. If we do not feel comfortable sharing something we have the freedom to remain silent without being judged.
7. We are free to ask for prayer and encouragement, even words from scripture that may help us. If, however, a request is not made we will be careful to respect that and not start "preaching" at one another.
8. We will pray for one another through the week.
9. We give each other permission to contact us for prayer, encouragement, or advice through the week. To this end we agree to share our contact information with one another.
10. We will read our chapter each week and reflect on it, ready to share at the next session.
11. Testimonies of how God has led us will be welcome, but they will be shared without an agenda ("Hope he hears this!").
12. Each opinion is valid, and we are not to correct each other but listen. We trust the Holy Spirit to guide us and correct us when needed.
13. We will each endeavour to read scripture and pray through the week so that we might be prepared spiritually for our times of gathering for worship and sharing.

Chapter 1
“Somehow I Expected More”

1. The authors describe all kinds of spiritual searches. Describe your own journey.
2. In what ways do we observe the sense of “lostness” in our world today?
3. Do you believe people are searching for something more? Why?

Chapter 2
“Who Am I?”

1. What makes the story of Rebecca Thompson so tragic?
2. Which description of who we are (pages 21-22) do you relate to best?
3. In what ways is the quest to be god seen today?
4. Does it matter what we think of ourselves? Why?

Chapter 3
“What Am I Searching For and Why Am I Here?”

1. What are the things people do today to try and “save” themselves?
2. Would you agree with the statement on page 26: “... our deepest desire isn’t to possess things but to belong”? Explain.
3. What are the three purposes to our lives according to scripture (pp. 28-29)?
4. Which of the three purposes for our lives excites you the most?

Chapter 4
“What Went Wrong Anyway?”

1. Read 2 Cor 4:4. In what ways have you seen this in others? In yourself?
2. What does Romans 1:29-32 mean to you?
3. Explain Isaiah 53:4-6 in your own words.
4. What did the story of the tiger say to you?

5. What three elements of sin were revealed in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve's sin?
6. Is it fair we have all been born into sin? Explain?
7. Is sin a good master? Explain.
8. What does Ephesians 2:8 teach us?

Chapter 5 **“Is It True What They Say About God?”**

This is a rather deep chapter as it explores who God is. Comment on each of the following as essential to the nature of God:

- a. Holiness (p. 43)
(what does this mean to you? Have you ever had a glimpse of God's holiness like Isaiah did? Explain.)
- b. love (p. 44)
(Why is it important to keep this on the forefront of our understanding of who God is?)
- c. Good (p. 44)
(Why would this be important to your spiritual journey?)
- d. Trinity (p. 45)
(How is the idea of God as Trinity tied into the notion of God as love?)
- e. Sovereign Creator (p. 46)
(What is most important about this attribute to you?)
- f. Personal (p. 47)
(Why is it important that God reveals God's self as personal?)
- g. What are the moral attributes of God? (p. 47)
- h. What does the story of Max tell us about God?

Chapter 6 **“Invitations from God: RSVP”**

1. The Authors write: “If you are like most postmoderns, you don't care much for rules and regulations. You're not a child. After all, you are a responsible adult.

You can be depended on to do your Christian duty, to do the prudent and loving thing each situation demands.” (P. 49)

- What are the authors getting at?
 - Are they right?
 - How do you fit into this?
2. What saved Jeff Litchfield from making a terrible mistake?
 3. Explain the “house of God” analogy used on pages 50 and 51.
 4. What parts of the house of God have protected/helped you most?
 - The four cornerstones?
 - The solid floor?
 - The protective walls?
 - The roof?
 5. Contrast the use of Law by Jesus and the Pharisees.
 6. How does the concept of the Bible as an invitation to God help us see it in a more positive light?

Chapter 7: “What’s So Special About Jesus?”

There are many opinions about who Jesus is – from moral teacher to spiritual guru. C.S. Lewis argues most opinions of Jesus do not stand up looking at the Biblical records and the claims of Jesus himself. Lewis says:

I am trying to prevent...the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a moral teacher. He would be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil from Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*).

1. What do you think about what Lewis says? Understand? Agree? Disagree? Explain.

2. What is your view of who Jesus is – and how did you get to this point?

The following terms were in this chapter. Identify them and explain their significance.

- a. Ancient of Days
- b. At-one-ment
- c. Bridge builder
- d. C.S. Lewis
- e. *diabolos*
- f. Faust
- g. Ignatius of Antioch
- h. Incarnation of Jesus
- i. Jesus, His baptism
- j. *JESUS* film
- k. Jesus Seminar
- l. John 1:1,14
- m. *Metanoia*
- n. Psalm 49:7-9, 15
- o. Romie Paday
- p. Second Adam
- q. Suffering Servant

Chapter 10 “Songs of the Stairway”

1. What do stairways and sanctification have to do with one another?
2. What is grace? What types of grace are described in this chapter?
3. What is your experience of grace?
4. What is the essence of sanctification (p. 87)? How is this evident in your life?
5. What does the testimony of Bronwen say to you (p. 88)?
6. What is your testimony of self denial?
7. What is the difference between the *sinful self*, *natural self* and *true self*? How must each be dealt with?
8. Could you sing the song from Papua New Guinea?
*You boss me, God, You boss me.
You are the Papa, me pickinini (child).
Suppose me got sin, You straighten me.
Me cry long (to) You, You come boss me.*

9. This chapter ends with a prayer for sanctification and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Write out your own prayer and, if you wish, share it with the group. (I will attach a prayer I wrote earlier)

Complete Surrender (Holiness)

*Heavenly Father, humbly I bow in your presence,
seeking your aid and rescue.
Deep within lies a beast I cannot tame,
a beast I sometimes loath and at others I feed.
This beast wars against what you want for me,
and when I feel close to you I want nothing more than to see the beast gone.
Yet all too often I drift off to go my own way,
distracted by the howl of the beast within,
missing the way you laid out for me.
I have wrestled with the beast many times,
and sometimes have succeeded in silencing it,
but never for long, for it roars back to life.
It scares me that when I look in the mirror as the beast roars
I see my own face, and I know it is a part of me.
Yet I believe you have more for my life,
For freedom you have set me free.²³⁹
I have come to the end of my trying to slay the beast –
I ask that you deal with it once and for all.
Let that part of me that shelters and protects the beast
be put to death.
The beast craved the things valued by the world,
Destroy that appetite and replace it with a hunger for you.
In the rooms of my life that once housed the beast
may your Spirit take up residence.
I pray that when I look into the mirror I no longer see the beast
but instead the image of Jesus will be seen.
Lord, I am ready to die
so that you may breath life into me.
Take me, I am yours.
And teach me to live so that the beast is never welcome in my life again.
I humbly pray these things in Jesus' name.
Amen.*

²³⁹ Galatians 5:1.

Chapter 11 **“In Step With the Transforming Spirit”**

1. What did you think of the summary of the turtle story: “That’s one reason why God gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us. With the Spirit leading us, we don’t have to swallow trash, even if it looks good enough to eat.” (p. 93)
2. In what ways is the world the Apostle Paul addressed in his letter to the Corinthians similar to that which we live in today? (p. 94)
3. Why is love the key in discussing the fruit of the Spirit?
4. Of the nine fruits of the Spirit where do you see the greatest “fruit” and where do you see the greatest need for more “vinedressing” (the Spirit’s work of causing the fruit to grow in our lives)?
5. Describe in your own words how the Spirit is producing His fruit in your lives.

Chapter 12 **“Nurtured by the Light of the Word”**

We all know as Christians that we need to read the Bible to grow. Is that enough? How should we read the Bible? Should we memorize it? Why is the Bible so important?

This chapter zeros in on the importance of not just reading our Bibles but studying them. As Christians we read the Bibles not for **information** but for **transformation**. If this is God’s Word to us, and it is, then it will make a difference in our lives, shape how we live. The following is a story about the Bible being used as information, not transformation.

“That Boy Will Go Far” – Niki’s Story

Niki loved candy. Gooey nougats, orange slice jells, lollipops, chocolate bars – he loved them all. But times were hard in the neighbourhood in which Niki grew up. Bread was hard to come by, let alone candy.

But Niki had a plan, and a special source for candy. Every Sunday, the priest would give candy as a prize to the boy who memorized the most Bible verses. Niki was a bright boy. He studied the Bible hard. And almost every Sunday, he won the sweet, sweet candy prize.

“This boy will go far,” the priest would say to Niki’s mother. “He is storing the Word of God in his mind.” You see, the good priest believed that if you memorized the Scripture, you learned them. So he stressed memorizing Bible verses. Besides the regular Sunday competitive recitations, he scheduled Bible quoting meets the way some people do spelling contests or basketball tournaments. If you had to give out candy to get boys to memorize Scripture, then you gave out candy – peppermint sticks, caramels, jelly beans, and for the tournament winner, a big bag of mixed candy.

So Niki worked hard. He memorized the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. For one tournament, he recited the whole Gospel of John, having to be prompted only four times. “This boy will go far,” the priest said. “He is storing up the Word of God in his mind.”

Well, the priest was half right. The boy did go far. In fact, he became the number one leader of his country – Communist Russia. You see, the boy who memorized all the Bible verses, the boy I have called Niki, was better known as Nikita Khrushchev. Under his rule, God was outlawed, preaching was illegal, and people forbidden to read the Bible.

Nikita Khrushchev had memorized the Scriptures, but had he really learned the Scriptures? At what level had he learned them – information? Transformation? If you recite the *information* perfectly, does that mean that *transformation* has happened?

- David Knaile

1. Contrast the above story with the one in our text (p. 103). What was the difference?
2. Does viewing Scripture as the guide map for a great adventure make it easier to study the Bible?
3. We are introduced to a five step process for studying scripture (this is the process each pastor uses in preparing sermons). Explain what each step is about:
 - a. Observation
 - b. Interpretation
 - c. Correlation
 - d. Evaluation
 - e. Application
4. Where does the fellowship of others come in to Bible Study?
5. Use the above steps to look at John 3:16.

Chapter 13 **“Nurtured by the Light in Prayer”**

1. Describe your prayer life.
2. How does Psalm 73:1 tie in to the thoughts found on page 112: “Complete trust in the Father”?
3. Again on page 112, what of the five “steps” in prayer do you find most difficult?
4. How helpful are “songs” in your praying? (hymns, Psalms, choruses)

5. The authors break down the “Our Father” in this chapter. What was new to you in this discussion? What was most helpful?
6. What would you like to know about prayer that was not covered in this chapter?

Chapter 14 **“Nurtured by the Light in Worship”**

1. On page 119 we read, “A great vulnerability of the spiritual formation movement with its emphasis on personal spiritual disciplines is that the spiritual life “will be considered an individualized, privatized, and largely hidden experience... [that] can be *practiced alone*.”²⁴⁰ As significant as private devotion is, we never outgrow our need for the worshipping community.”
 - a. When you hear the term “spiritual formation” do you think of the Church? Why might this be?
 - b. Why is it essential that we be with others for true spiritual formation to take place?
2. Do you think Maria Harris overstates the case when she says, “One Christian is no Christian; we go to God together or we do not go at all”? Why?
3. On page 120 it is suggested that people should be warned about the “dangers” of worship, even suggesting “ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. For ... the waking God may draw us out where we can never return.” What do you think is meant by this, and do you agree? Has worship ever left you feeling this way?
4. Worship teams work hard to present the music and other elements of a worship service in a way that is as professional, uplifting and appealing as possible. Often we may think this effort is for the congregation. Who is the true audience in worship (p. 121)? What does this mean?
5. What are the main elements of worship in the Christian church? (ref. p. 122) There are myriad of ways to express these elements, and often these differing expressions of worship have divided the church. What, according to John Wesley, should unite all expressions of worship?
6. In the discussion on the Lord’s Supper the authors outline 13 meanings of this sacrament. Which ones speak to you the most as you partake of the Lord’s Supper?

²⁴⁰ Stephen J. Harper, *Embrace the Spirit* (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press, Victor Books, 1987), 90-91.

7. As you read through these, do you think unbelievers should be allowed to partake of Communion? Explain.
8. Why is baptism so important to the Christian?
9. The authors list weddings and funerals as places of worship. Would you agree? Is it always a place of worship? Explain.

Chapter 15 **“Nurtured in Community”**

1. Comment on the quote from Luciano de Crescenzo: “We are, each of us, angels with only one wing, and we can only fly embracing each other.”
2. Comment on John Wesley’s statement: “It is a blessed thing to have fellow travellers to the New Jerusalem. If you do not find any you must make them, for none can travel this road alone.”
3. Define hospitality (the Christian way).
4. Explain the importance of accountability.
5. Define brotherly kindness, and how that is demonstrated in your life.
6. How can shared adversity bring people together?
7. What is a “Teflon” church? (p. 131) Why is this a problem?
8. Describe the difference between Wesley’s society, class meeting and band meeting?
9. What is a “Twin Soul” or “Spiritual Friend”? Why is this important?
10. Did your family have a devotional time? What was it like? Would you have liked one if you did not have one?
11. The blessing on each child (p. 134) suggested by Wesley, whether the child behaved well or not, is a powerful practice. Why?
12. How important is it to you that you are connected to other believers in your journey?

Chapter 16 “Nurtured by the Light in the Rhythms of Life”

This is probably one of the most challenging chapters as it deals with a very difficult topic: what do you do when you are disappointed with God? It does not mean you have given up the faith – yet – but you certainly are at the point of questioning and maybe even doubting the goodness of God. The authors talk about those times when you have to let go of the trapeze bar and hope upon hope that there will be another bar for you to hold onto.

Have you had that experience in your spiritual life yet? Those times when you have nothing left to hold onto but God?

I can recall at least three times when I have let go of the bar and was not sure where I would land. The first was when I was eighteen and my father died of cancer. That was a time of intense spiritual and character shaping.

It was followed by a second leap where I was not sure where I would land, and that was when I went to Bible College to prepare to be a pastor. There, it seemed, everything I ever thought I knew about God and faith and religion was challenged, dismantled and left dangling in pieces. I remember going to a good friend in the wee hours of the night and saying, “I do not know what I believe anymore. The only thing I know is that Jesus loves me.” I did not find another bar to hold onto until my second year in Seminary during an Ethics class. There God threw me a bar of hope to hold onto that has helped me since that day.

The third time I felt the leap of faith was around our tenth anniversary in the Kelowna Church. Things had gone so well – we were growing, a new building was just completed, and we even hosted a District Assembly. Then it felt like the wheels fell off the wagon, and false accusations started to fly, and people were upset and even Board members were leaving the church. Looking back I can see I was burned out, as were many of the other workers, but we did not see that. For two years I hung on to the trapeze bar afraid to let go, but not enjoying the ride. Finally I let go and followed where the Lord would take me.

How about you? If you were given the exercise the authors proposed, having to answer the question, “Something I used to believe about God but no longer think is....” How would you complete that? Try it....

1. Something I used to believe about God but no longer think is....
2. During his time of *disorientation* one father quipped, “The Bible is only answering questions I am not asking” (p. 138). What does he mean by this, and can you relate?

3. *Disengagement* causes you to withdraw from the support of the church when you need it most (p. 138). What things might keep a person from wanting to come to church? What has tempted you to stay away?
4. In the *disenchantment* phase “every false image we have of God He must, in mercy, shatter” (p. 139). How might this process affect people?
5. Comment on this quote: “*The trapeze stage is so scary that we might want to leap right over it and plunge into a new beginning. But that will not work. We know that a developmental task of one stage left untouched shows up as excess baggage in the next. We need the in-between times. Some wisdom we can gain no place else. That is why God, who is too good to be unkind and too wise to make a mistake, permits, even requires, the in-between times for us.*” (p. 139)
6. What is your experience with “new beginnings”? (pp. 141-44)

Chapter 17 **“Nurtured by Disciplined Living”**

1. Do you think many people believe that becoming a Christians means “things get easy”? Explain.
2. What has been your experience with fasting? Has our reading added anything to this understanding?
3. How helpful were the “test” questions for our entertainment (pp. 147-148)? Which were most helpful to you? Which have you been careful about already? Which ones might you have overlooked?
4. Do Christians today believe the statement found on page 148: “...trashy entertainment can smother the Light within”? Why did you answer as you did?
5. “Sexual sins are the ones we most want to hide, least want to give up, and most permissively excuse in policing our own hearts.” Comment on this quote found on page 149.
6. Which family most resembled your family of origin as you celebrated Sabbath? Which family resembled the family you raised (are/will raise)? What attracts you to one family over the other?
7. We read in the Manual for the Church of the Nazarene the following about entertainment in The Covenant of Christian Conduct:

*Our people, both as Christian individuals
and in Christian family units, should govern themselves by
three principles. One is the Christian stewardship of leisure*

time. A second principle is the recognition of the Christian obligation to apply the highest moral standards of Christian living. Because we are living in a day of great moral confusion in which we face the potential encroachment of the evils of the day into the sacred precincts of our homes through various avenues such as current literature, radio, television, personal computers, and the Internet, it is essential that the most rigid safeguards be observed to keep our homes from becoming secularized and worldly. However, we hold that entertainment that endorses and encourages holy living and affirms scriptural values should be affirmed and encouraged. We especially encourage our young people to use their gifts in media and the arts to influence positively this pervasive part of culture. The third principle is the obligation to witness against whatever trivializes or blasphemes God, as well as such social evils as violence, sensuality, pornography, profanity, and the occult, as portrayed by and through the commercial entertainment industry in its many forms and to endeavor to bring about the demise of enterprises known to be the purveyors of this kind of entertainment. This would include the avoidance of all types of entertainment ventures and media productions that produce, promote, or feature the violent, the sensual, the pornographic, the profane, or the occultic, or which feature or glamorize the world's philosophy of secularism, sensualism, and materialism and undermine God's standard of holiness of heart and life.²⁴¹

How does this compare with the material in our chapter?

Chapter 18 **“Sharing the Light with a Hurting World”**

1. The introduction to the last section of our book, “Sharing the Light”, starts with a story about “Angelina.” Tell of Angelina’s you have met.
2. The authors suggest that we likely do not want to be remembered as the person who died trying to save a chicken. What would you like to be remembered by when your life is through?
3. Aristides description of Christians early in the second century is enlightening and challenging: “They love each other. They never fail to help widows; they save

²⁴¹ Dean G. Blevins, et al., ed. *Manual/2009-2013 Church of the Nazarene*, (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2009), 48-49.

- orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God" (p. 156). What challenges you the most in this description of a Christian? Why?
4. How do you respond to Wesley's comment that he would not "acknowledge him to have one grain of faith who is not continually doing good, willing to 'spend and be spent' in doing all good, as he has opportunity, to all men" (p. 156)? Compare James 2:14-16.
 5. Early Wesleyans that "service was as much a spiritual discipline as prayer", and "spiritual life would wither like a leaf without active, sacrificial service." Would you say this is true in your own spiritual walk?
 6. Should Christians be looking for people like Emily Ann? What can we do?
 7. Do you find it harder to give love or receive it? Explain.
 8. Does the average person find it hard to be a *domestique*? Why?
 9. How has the Lord blessed the lives of Bill and Sharon Murphy (p. 159)? How is this different from how many in the world might call a blessing?
 10. If the writers are correct, that "Evangelical Christians are doing more good around the world than all the governments, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, or the World Bank", why don't we hear about it?
 11. What causes Evangelical Christians to give their lives away to others according to the authors (ref. Matthew 25:40)?

Chapter 19 **"Sharing the Light that Transforms"**

1. When you hear the word "evangelist" what comes to mind?
2. What was so tragic about Margaret Sangster's story about the little boy? How can that happen in the church today?
3. Why should Christians carry the message of Jesus to others? (ref. John 20:21)
4. Summarize the Gospel message here:
5. What objections have you heard from people about sharing the Gospel?

6. What is the number one reason we should be sharing the Gospel (ref. Frank Laubach's story)? Where does this come from?
7. What methods have you used to share the Gospel?
8. Who are the people maybe only you could reach?
9. Have you ever had a faith mentor? Have you ever considered mentoring someone?
10. What does a missionary look like?

Chapter 20
“Going Forward: Leaning into the Future”

1. Do you live with the thought that tomorrow will be better than today, or worse than today? Explain.
2. The authors state, “No Resurrection – no Christianity!” What do they mean by that?
3. What does it mean to say we have eternal life now (not just in the future)? (ref. p. 174)
4. What excites you most about heaven?
5. Matthew 24:13 says, “He who stands to the end will be saved.” Do you believe people must “keep on choosing Christ throughout life” to make it to heaven (p. 176)?
6. The chapter (and book) ends with five rules for the road. They are:
 - a. Take the Long-Range View (p. 177)
 - b. Run Toward the Roar (p. 178)
 - c. Walk in the Transforming Light (p. 178)
 - d. Reach Out to Your Companions on the Way (p. 179)
 - e. Do All the good You Can (p. 179)

Explain how you see evidence of these rules being lived out in the other members of the covenant group.

Post Project Survey

The purpose of the Covenant Group experiment was to see if gathering together intentionally, with accountability and focusing on relationship rather than studies would help us grow spiritually. The group has only met for six months yet it is believed that is enough time to make some observations. Please complete the following survey and return it to Pastor Gary by October 31, 2013. Thank you again for your participation and help through this feedback.

1. How was this group similar and how was it different from other small groups you have been a part of?
2. What was the most significant thing you learned through this process?
3. Would you recommend covenant groups to others within the church? Why or why not?
4. In what ways has this experience helped you in your spiritual development?

Appendix VII: Post Project Survey

5. What would you suggest could have been done differently to make this a better experience?

6. In what ways will this experience affect how you will approach discipleship in the future?

7. Are there any other comments you want to pass on to Pastor Gary?

Bibliography

- Arnold, Clinton E. "Early Church Catechesis and New Christians' Classes in Contemporary Evangelicalism" in *Journal of Evangelical Theological Studies*, 47/1 (March 2004). http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/47/47-1/47-1-pp039-054_JETS.pdf (accessed October 22, 2013).
- Barna Group, "Sunday School is Changing in Under-the-Radar But Significant Ways," <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/175-sunday-school-is-changing-in-under-the-radar-but-significant-ways#.Ui9VR39temU> (accessed September 10, 2013).
- Bibby, Reginald W. "Why Bother With Organized Religion? A Response to Joel Thiessen" in *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 49:1, 91-101, 2012. *found on his website* http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/Bibby_Response_to_Thiessen_CRS_2012.pdf (accessed February 10, 2014).
- A New Day: The Resilience and Restructuring of Religion in Canada* (Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, 2012),
- Blevins, Dean G. and Mark A. Maddix. *Discovering Discipleship: Dynamics of Christian Education*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2010.
- Charles D. Crow, David E. Downs, Paul W. Thornhill and David P. Wilson, ed. *Manual/2009-2013 Church of the Nazarene*. Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2009.
- Chilcote, Paul Wesley. *Recapturing the Wesley's Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2004.
- City of Nanaimo, "Nanaimo: Community Profile, Economic Development Office of Nanaimo," <http://www.nanaimo.ca/assets/departments/economic~development/why~nanaimo/communityprofile.pdf> (accessed September 13, 2013).
- Clapper, Gregory S. *The Renewal of the Heart is the Mission of the Church: Wesley's Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010.
- Eavey, C.B. *History of Christian Education*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1964.
- Ellison, Craig W. and Paloutzian, Raymond F. *Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWB)* Obtained through Life Advance. <http://lifeadvance.com/> (accessed September 10, 2013)
- Dudley, Carl S. "Using Church Images for Commitment, Conflict and Renewal," in *Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform*. ed. Carl Ellis Nelson. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

- Foster, Charles R. *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Galloway, Chester O., "The Historical Development of Christian Education" in *Exploring Christian Education*, ed. A. Elwood Sanner and A. F. Harper. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978.
- Gorman, Joe. "Recognizing Our Limitations: The Wisdom of Self-Care," in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011.
- Halverson, Delia. *The Nuts and Bolts of Christian Education*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.
- Harper, Steve. *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition: A Workbook*. Nashville: Upper Rooms Books, 1995.
- Embrace the Spirit*. Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press, Victor Books, 1987.
- The Way to Heaven: The Gospel According to John Wesley*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- Hempton, David. *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Henderson, D. Michael. *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meeting*. Anderson: Francis Asbury Press, 1997.
- Kinlaw, Dennis F. *The Mind of Christ*. Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1998.
- Kornfeld, Margaret. *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities*. New York: Continuum International, 2000.
- Knight III, Henry H. *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1992.
- Leclerc, Diane, "Being Whole: Holiness and Sanctification as a Wesleyan Paradigm for Spiritual Formation," in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011.
- Leclerc, Diane, "Finding the Means to the End: Christian Discipleship and Formation Practices," in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011.

- Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity: Volume 1: to A.D. 1500*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
- Lyons, George. "Knowing the Scriptures: How to Study the Bible as a Spiritual Practice" in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*, ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011.
- Maddix, Mark A. "Living the Life: Spiritual Formation Defined" in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011.
- Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994.
- Mann, Mark H. "The Holiness Movement in the Church Basement: How the 12-Step Movement Can Constructively Inform Wesleyan-Holiness Spirituality." Paper presented at the 2005 Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society, Seattle, Washington, March 2005 with the title "The Underground Church: The Twelve Step Movement as a Holiness Movement."
- McIntosh, Gary L. *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work With God to Build A Faithful Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003.
- McMillan, Amy. "Are Christian Teens Leaving the Church Because of Unfulfilling Youth Groups?" *Christianity Today* (October 24, 2013) under "Church," <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/are.christian.teens.leaving.the.church.because.of.unfulfilling.youth.groups/34475.htm> (accessed February 10, 2014).
- Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, "My Journey Into the Orthodox Church" in *Response*, Winter 2009, Volume 32, Number 1. <http://www.spu.edu/depts/uc/response/winter2k9/features/orthodox-church.asp> (accessed January 28, 2013).
- Moschella, Mary Clark. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008.
- Peterson, Brent D. "Worshipping as Created: God's Gift of Communal Worship and the Sacraments" in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2011.
- Peterson, Eugene H. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Paloutzian, Raymond F. and Craig W. Ellison, "Manual for the Spiritual Well-Being Scale" by Life Advance, first published 1982. SWB Scale © 1982 by Craig W. Ellison and Raymond F. Paloutzian. Obtained through Life Advance. <http://lifeadvance.com/> (accessed September 10, 2013).

- Runyon, Theodore. *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Stewart, Teena M. *Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2007.
- Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt. "Christian Perfection: A Methodist Perspective on Ecclesiology" in *Our Calling to Fulfill: Wesleyan Views of the Church in Mission*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2009.
- Stowell, Joseph M. *Shepherding the Church into the 21st Century: Effective Spiritual Leadership in a Changing Culture*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994.
- Tracy, Wesley D. "Spiritual Direction in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition" in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices*, ed. Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Tracy, Wes, Gary Cockerill, Donald Demaray, Steve Harper. *Reflecting God*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2000.
- Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1973.
- Valicu, Adrian. *Civic Catechisms and Reason in the French Revolution*. Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.
- Vennard, Jane E. *A Praying Congregation: The Art of Teaching Spiritual Practice*. Herndon: Alban Institute, 2005.
- Watson, David Lowes. *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991.
- Called and Committed*. Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1982.
- Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991.
- Welch, Rueben. *We Really Do Need Each Other*. Nashville: Impact Books, 1973.
- Wesley, John. "A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 5, ed. John Emory. New York: Carlton and Porter. <https://archive.org/stream/theworksofwesley05wesluoft#page/88/mode/2up>. (accessed March 25, 2013).

A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity, (Bristol: William Pine, 1761), 5
http://books.google.ca/books?id=8ixcAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed February 25, 2014).

“The Character of a Methodist,” *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 9: The Methodist Societies; History, Nature and Design*. ed. Rupert E. Davies. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.

How to Pray: The Best of John Wesley on Prayer. Uhrichsville: Barbour Publishing, 2007.

“John Wesley’s Accountability Discipleship Groups,” *Discipleship Resource Centre*
http://www.discipleshipresourcecenter.com/Articles/Discipleship_Articles/John_Wesley%27s_Accountability_Discipleship_Groups/ (accessed May 4, 2013).

“Plain Account of the People Called Methodists” *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 9: The Methodist Societies, History, Nature and Design*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.

“*The Sermons of John Wesley – Sermon 2: The Almost Christian.*” Wesley Center Online, Northwest Nazarene University. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-2-the-almost-christian/> (accessed September 4, 2013).

“*The Sermons of John Wesley – Sermon 16: The Means of Grace.*” Wesley Center Online. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-16-the-means-of-grace/> (accessed March 25, 2013).

The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 5, ed. John Emory (New York: Carlton and Porter) 88.
<http://archive.org/details/theworksofwesley05wesluoft> (accessed March 25, 2013).

Yust, Karen Marie and E. Byron Anderson. *Taught by God: Teaching and Spiritual Formation*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006.