



G U I D E L I N E S



Small Group Ministries

Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability



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Steven W. Manskar

Discipleship Ministries

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Blessed to Be a Blessing

If you are reading this Guideline, you have said yes to servant leadership in your church. You are blessed to be a blessing. What does that mean?

By virtue of our baptism by water and the Spirit, God calls all Christians to faithful discipleship, to grow to maturity in faith (see Ephesians 4). The United Methodist Church expresses that call in our shared mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, or the *Discipline*, ¶120). Each local congregation and community of faith lives out that call in response to its own context—the wonderful and unique combination of God-given human and material resources with the needs of the community, within and beyond the congregation.

The work of servant leaders—your work—is to open a way for God to work through you and the resources available to you in a particular ministry area, for you are about God’s work. As stewards of the mysteries of God (see 1 Corinthians 4:1), servant leaders are entrusted with the precious and vital task of managing and using God’s gifts in the ongoing work of transformation.

In The United Methodist Church, we envision transformation occurring through a cycle of discipleship (see the *Discipline*, ¶122). With God’s help and guidance, we

- reach out and receive people into the body of Christ,
- help people relate to Christ through their unique gifts and circumstances,
- nurture and strengthen people in their relationships with God and with others,
- send transformed people out into the world to lead transformed and transforming lives,
- continue to reach out, relate, nurture, and send disciples . . .

Every ministry area and group, from finance to missions, engages in all aspects of this cycle. This Guideline will help you see how that is true for the ministry area or group you now lead. When you begin to consider all of the work you do as ministry to fulfill God’s mission through your congregation, each task, report, and conversation becomes a step toward transforming the world into the kingdom of God.

Invite Christ into the process to guide your ministry. You are doing powerful and wonderful work. Allow missteps to become learning opportunities; rejoice in success. Fill your work with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

God blesses you with gifts, skills, and experience. You are a blessing when you allow God to work through you to make disciples and transform the world. Thank you.

(Find additional help in the “Resources” section at the end of this Guideline, in *The Book of Discipline*, and through <http://www.umc.org>.)

H.O.P.E.

One of the key ways we develop leaders is through the core process for carrying out our mission in ¶122 of *The Book of Discipline*:

We make disciples as we:

- proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
- lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
- nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
- send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and
- continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.

To help remember and understand the core process contained in ¶122, think in terms of H.O.P.E.—**H**ospitality, **O**ffer Christ, **P**urpose, and **E**ngagement. When congregations practice H.O.P.E., disciples are sent to witness to God’s love for the world in Jesus Christ. We go into the world through outreach and mission, offering hope through proclamation of the gospel, extending **hospitality** to the least, the last, and the lost people of the world. We **offer Christ** by providing opportunities for people to commit their lives to God through baptism and profession of faith. We nurture people in Christian living to help them find **purpose** in life, learning what it means to love God and love their neighbors through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion. Through **engagement**, disciples are sent to serve in the world, helping to transform the community and offering **hospitality** in the name of Jesus Christ. Thus H.O.P.E. cycles back around.

Ask yourselves and the leadership of your congregation how your congregation might become a place of H.O.P.E. All congregations, small, medium, and large, need an intentional discipleship system like H.O.P.E. to develop leaders who cooperate with the Holy Spirit in pursuing the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Ministry and Small Groups

Why are small groups important? Why did John Wesley place so much confidence in them as a dependable means of grace for developing faith and holiness? Wesley's pastoral experience told him that when Christians meet in small groups for prayer, study, fellowship, and service, they form relationships of love and trust. Christ is encountered in the relationships that small groups make possible (see Matthew 18:20). Certainly, Sunday morning worship and general congregational activities play an essential role in Christian formation; but on their own, they are not adequate substitutes for the relationships formed in small groups. This is why an integrated network of small groups is essential to the church's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

A small group is three to fifteen people who meet regularly (weekly, biweekly, or monthly) to help one another grow in holiness of heart and life and equip the congregation to participate in God's mission in the world. Group members attend to the ways that God is at work in their lives and do all in their power to help one another grow in faith, hope, and love.

Holiness

Holiness is the way of life described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and summarized in Matthew 22:37–40. John Wesley described holiness as “universal love filling the heart, and governing the life” (“Advice to the People Called Methodists”).

Holiness of heart is the inward loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind through practicing the works of piety (the public worship of God, the ministry of the word, the Lord's Supper, personal and family prayer, searching the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence) (see “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies,” ¶104, the *Discipline*). Holiness of life is the outward love of your neighbor as yourself. We practice holiness of life by doing no harm, by avoiding evil and by doing good, to all, to their bodies and souls. Jesus describes holiness of life in Matthew 25:35–40. If you say you love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, then Jesus tells us you must love whom God loves, as God loves them. Wesley believed holiness is the means to the goal of “having the mind which was in Christ, and walking as he walked” (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §15; also see Philippians 2:5; 1 John 2:6).

Growth in holiness requires a community organized to help its members keep the promises made in the Baptismal Covenant (see *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 35). In the Commendation and Welcome, the congregation promises to “Do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.” This means congregations

must order their lives in ways that cooperate with the dynamic of grace that makes holiness of heart and life possible.

Contextual

Historically, the Methodist small-group system was pastoral and contextual. It emerged from the pastoral commitment of the Methodist society to do all in its power to increase faith, confirm hope in Christ, and perfect one another in love. Wesley did not find the system in a book or a program. It emerged from his study of Scripture, the way of salvation, and his knowledge of human nature. The groups described in this Guideline are the result of ideas that worked. Other attempts at groups that didn't contribute to the Methodist mission were discontinued.

The system that will work best for your congregation will not come from a "one-size-fits-all" program. It will emerge from the pastoral needs of the congregation. The questions to ask as you evaluate are:

- How does this system/group help this congregation cooperate with the Holy Spirit and the way of salvation?
- How does the system/group help people grow in holiness of heart and life?
- How does the system/group equip the people to participate in Christ's mission in the world?

The Wesleyan tradition teaches us that several types of groups are essential. We need groups that initiate seekers into the Christian life. Other groups promote continuing growth in faith, hope, and love through developing deeper intimacy and trust with one another and with Christ. Finally, people who provide leadership at all levels need a group for continuing accountability and support for growth in holiness of heart and life.

A Biblical/Theological Foundation

The baptismal covenant tells us that salvation and our place in the church are gifts from God. They are freely given because God made us. There is nothing you or I could ever do or say to earn or deserve these gifts. God gives them because “God is love” (see 1 John 4:7-21). The word that best describes God’s love is *grace*.

Understanding Grace

Grace is the presence and power of God working in the world. It is unlimited and free. Jesus Christ is grace embodied in human flesh and blood. His life, death, and resurrection reveal the nature and power of grace as God’s love active in, with, and for the world. Through him, God enters human life and history, saying: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV).

The way of salvation is grace working through faith to form us into the people God created us to be and equipping us to join Christ and his mission in the world. Prevenient grace prepares us to receive God’s acceptance and love. Justifying (or convincing) grace restores our relationship with God and those whom God loves by giving us the gifts of repentance and faith (outward, relational change). Sanctifying grace gives new birth and sustains us in the new life of holiness with Jesus in the world (inward, real change). God supplies the grace we need to accept the gift of his love and then to live as a channel of that love in the world. When we live the way of Jesus, we become fully the people God created us to be, in the image of Christ.

The Means of Grace

As we consider the “why” and “how” of small-group ministry, we begin with Jesus’ promise: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them” (Matthew 18:20). It’s because of Jesus’ promise that John Wesley believed small groups to be a “means of grace” he called *Christian conference*.

When two or more Christians regularly meet in Jesus’ name to pray, sing, serve, and watch over one another in love, grace opens their hearts to God and to the world God loves. Small groups are where people receive the support and accountability they need to follow Jesus in the world. Through relationships of love and trust, people learn the spiritual disciplines (acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion) that Wesley called the *means*

of grace. They form new habits and attitudes that reflect the character of Christ. Those are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV. To learn more, read Wesley's Sermon 43: "The Scripture Way of Salvation.")

The relationships of mutual support and accountability experienced in small groups are how the church keeps the promises it makes in the baptismal covenant.

Behaving, Belonging, Believing

Wesley understood that disciple making requires intention and discipline. *Discipline*, for Wesley, is simply a habitual practice of the means of grace shaped by a rule of life (the General Rules; see the *Discipline*, ¶104) and supported by weekly accountability with fellow Christians in a small group. Christian discipline is summarized by three words: *behaving*, *belonging*, and *believing*.

Behaving and belonging shape belief. John Wesley understood that people are much more likely to behave their way into believing than they are to believe their way into behaving as Christians. That is why he created a *rule of life* known as the General Rules and required all Methodists to participate in the weekly small groups known as Class Meetings. "A *rule of life* is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness... It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal life and human community, helping to form us into the people God intends us to be" (Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995], 138; italics added).

The General Rules shape the Christian life for Methodists.

Learning and practicing the means of grace in their class meetings is how most Methodists received the gift of faith. They behaved their way into believing within the love and acceptance (belonging) of their small group.

Behave, believe, and belong are all entry points into the way of Jesus. They are inter-related parts of the process of disciple formation that build upon the relational nature of human beings. "You become what you love." If the goal of Christian formation is for people to become more and more like Christ, then we need to know him as a living Savior.

A Historical Foundation

In the Wesleyan tradition, disciple making happens in an integrated network of small groups, shaped by a rule of life that enables people to receive and participate in the grace that formed them as disciples of Jesus Christ.

A Wesleyan Model

A good example of a system of small groups designed to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and the dynamic of grace is found in the early Methodist societies. John Wesley developed a system of groups, each with a different theological/pastoral emphasis. The system met people where they were and helped them to grow in holiness of heart and life. The Wesleyan system was composed of three distinctive types of groups:

1. The Class Meeting (for everyone)
2. The Band (for the deeply committed disciples)
3. The Select Society (for the leaders)

All the groups were guided by the General Rules:

- First: Do no harm by avoiding evil of every kind; especially that which is most generally practiced.
- Second: Do good as often as you can to all people.
- Third: Attend upon all the ordinances of God, such are:
 - the public worship of God
 - the ministry of the Word, whether read or expounded
 - the Lord's Supper
 - private and family prayer
 - searching the Scriptures
 - fasting or abstinence

The Class Meeting

When a person joined a Methodist society, he or she was assigned to a “class,” a small group of 12 to 15 women and men. Participation in a class was compulsory for all Methodists. Class leaders were laypeople who demonstrated Christian maturity and pastoral sense.

Classes met weekly, either in the leader's home or in the local Methodist meeting house. Meetings were typically an hour and consisted of prayer, hymn singing, and accountability for discipleship guided by the General Rules. The class meeting initiated Methodists into the life of discipleship. The theological emphases were prevenient and convincing grace;

that is, recognizing that God invites and leads us to receive his acceptance in Jesus Christ and adoption as beloved children in God's household.

The Band

The "band" was for Methodists who faithfully attended their class meeting and were ready to go deeper in holiness. Membership was limited to no more than eight men or women. Bands were organized according to gender and marital status: single men together, single women in a different band, and so on.

Bands met weekly for one hour with shared leadership. The weekly agenda included prayer and confession of sins to one another (see James 5:16). The theological emphasis of the band meeting was justification and justifying grace; that is, making a decision, with God's help, toward repentance and a changed life in faith.

The Select Society

Leaders were the disciples who made disciples and who led the Methodist society in its service with Christ in the world. In early Methodism, members of the Select Society served in some leadership role in the society and also in their parish church.

The theological emphasis of the Select Society was sanctification; that is, with God's help, devoting themselves to loving God with all their heart, soul, and mind. They loved their neighbors as themselves, and they loved one another as Christ loved them. They knew that the world would know they were disciples of Jesus Christ by the way they loved one another (see John 13:34-35).

A Contemporary Model

We recognize that Methodist societies were not congregations. They were religious communities of clear expectations, loving discipline, and a mission to “reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land” (John Wesley in “The Large Minutes”). That is why participation in a small group was required of all Methodists.

Obviously, 18th-century Methodist societies were very different from today’s congregations, so we should not try to replicate that system. Nevertheless, Wesley’s theological and practical understanding of disciple making is both valid and timeless:

- Making disciples requires a community that cooperates with the Holy Spirit and the way of salvation.
- Making disciples requires the relationships formed in small groups.
- Disciple-making congregations develop an integrated network of small groups that meet people where they are and help them grow in holiness of heart and life.

This Guideline is not a one-size-fits-all program. You will find here a guide for developing a small-group network that fits your local context. We know from the Wesleyan tradition that developing and sustaining small-group ministry is a process of trial and error. When an idea falls flat, learn from it and try again. Eventually, you will find the system that works best in your context. This, of course, assumes the work is guided by the Holy Spirit through prayer and openness to grace.

Rule of Life

In her book, *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson writes, “A rule of life is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness... It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal life and human community, helping to form us into the persons God intends us to be” (Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995], 138). Congregations striving to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world will adopt a congregational rule of life.

The General Rules found in ¶104 of *The Book of Discipline* constitute the historic Methodist rule of life. A contemporary alternative, derived from the General Rules, is the General Rule of Discipleship: “To witness to Jesus Christ in the world, and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (the *Discipline*, ¶1117.2a).

A congregation’s rule of life gives shape to and informs the disciple-making process. It also provides a guide for small-group accountability.

Grace Groups

Every congregation has small groups. They are more commonly known as the church council, the pastor/staff-parish relations committee, the trustees, the finance committee, the choir, Sunday school classes, fellowship or affinity groups, United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, mission/service groups, and so on. All can be places of faith formation and discipleship. Disciple-making congregations develop a network of interrelated groups designed to cooperate with the way of salvation (see John Wesley’s Sermon 43: “The Scripture Way of Salvation”). Such a network is how the congregation keeps its promise to do all in its power to increase faith, confirm hope, and perfect one another in love (see *The United Methodist Hymnal*, “Baptismal Covenant I, page 38). We describe the network of small groups as *Grace Groups*.

Examine the existing groups in your congregation and determine where they fit in a system of “grace groups,” described more fully in the sample below. Though these are presented in a linear structure, they are not so tidy, and they overlap. The goal is to organize the groups to help the congregation cooperate with the way of salvation, remembering that different activities and experiences may fit in more than one place. Within this system, lives are transformed as people grow in love of God, neighbors, and one another. This chart is suggestive, and you will want to order it in a way that makes sense in your context. (See the “Resources” section for more information about these types of groups.)

Grace Groups I Prevenient and Convincing Grace	Grace Groups II Justifying and Sanctifying Grace	Grace Groups III Sanctifying Grace
Class Meeting	Covenant Discipleship groups	Covenant Discipleship groups
New Member classes	Emmaus Reunion groups	Emmaus Reunion groups
Wesley Fellowship groups	Life Transformation Groups (LTG)	Academy of Spiritual Formation covenant groups
Bible Study groups	Renovaré groups	Accountability groups
Prayer groups	Administrative & Ministry committees	Leadership groups
Book study groups	Inspire Fellowship Bands	Life Transformation Groups (LTG)
Choirs		
Fellowship/Affinity groups		
Mission/service groups		

Grace Groups I

Grace Groups are needed for new Christians or people seeking to become Christians. These people may be new to the church, new to United Methodism, and/or new to

Christianity. These groups are led by mature disciples. Their mission is to initiate members into the Christian life. These entry-level groups emphasize Christian formation shaped by the congregation's rule of life.

Grace Groups II

As people grow in faith and begin to mature in holiness through support and accountability, they will reach a point where they need a group that nurtures continued growth as they attune themselves more closely to hearing and doing what they perceive is God's will for them.

Congregations need to provide groups that help people who are ready to go deeper in loving God and neighbors. The theological emphasis in such groups will be justifying and sanctifying grace. This means that they will emphasize the development of relationships shaped by trust, sharing, and confession.

The agenda for Grace Groups II is discipleship. At this stage, people will be ready to take responsibility for their own discipleship. The goal of these groups is to form disciples who disciple others. Some will serve as leaders for groups in Grace Groups I.

Grace Groups III

Grace Groups III is for leaders in discipleship. Their focus is upon earnestly striving after perfection in love. These groups are for people who have experienced justification by grace through faith and are pursuing Christian maturity. These leaders need to be equipped, empowered, and supported in their ministry of discipling others in Grace Groups I and II.

The examples of groups here include those that have a deeper dimension of discipleship. Ideally, each ministry group in your church tends not simply to the tasks for which it is responsible, but also takes care to shape and form the people in the groups as deeply committed Christians. These group members not only follow God's call in all aspects of their lives, but also identify the gifts in others and cultivate them in faith and leadership.

Getting Started

Small-group ministry is not a program. It is how the church has historically made disciples of Jesus Christ. The system of small-group ministry must reflect the personalities and needs of the people and the place.

The easiest way to begin with small-group ministry is to build upon existing groups. If the congregation is making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, then all the administrative and ministry committees can be places of disciple making. The following are some basic guidelines that will help build a small-group ministry that emerges from your context and helps the congregation fulfill its mission.

Understand Your Role

Your task as a leader is to develop a system of small groups that emerges from and works with the congregation's context and culture. (This is rarely tidy.)

Do not try to do all this alone! If you are in a large-membership church, you will probably share this responsibility with a member of the staff. If there is no staff other than the pastor, it will be all the more helpful to create a core team to work with you and the small-group ministries council—as partners in this ministry. The committee on nominations and leadership development may suggest team members. While the system of small groups may be vastly different among churches of different sizes, there are some basic leadership responsibilities. You and your team should expect to

- participate in the church council (you) and consult with the pastor;
- coordinate ministry with the leaders of existing groups;
- pray about and look for the gifts and graces in others that will identify them as potential group leaders;
- provide training for others who lead small groups;
- work with leaders to cultivate within them recognition and understanding of themselves as spiritual leaders;
- work with the working groups/leaders to help them understand that their group is a place of faith formation and discipleship;
- identify needed new groups, help to start new groups, and assist in the refreshment or retirement of faltering groups.

The Small-Group Ministries Council

Small groups require much intentional support. The danger of failing to provide leadership and support is that small groups may become self-centered cliques with little

connection to the church’s mission. A small-group ministries council can help prevent this from happening. If you have a staff person responsible for small-group ministry, then that person leads the council. Leaders of the various classes, teams, ministry groups, and other small groups will serve as members of this council. (Some of them—as will you—will also be members of the church council, whose function is different.)

If you are forming a small-group ministries council for the first time, your members may not expect to have this responsibility. Your first task will be to explain and interpret to them, singly or together, what the purpose of the council is, why their presence will benefit them and the church, and what the council will do.

The task of this council is to

- provide a place of covenant for the leaders of other groups, for their continued spiritual growth, accountability, and support;
- “take the temperature” of each group without going into details of anything shared by members of any group;
- assess the plans, goals, and accomplishments in the faith-formation system of small groups (along with the church council);
- provide a place for ongoing training in small-group leadership.

Convene this council at least each quarter for 60–90 minutes. Include prayer or another means of grace, a brief training time, and time for each council member to report briefly on the faith-formation issues of her or his group, within the bounds of the confidentiality agreements of the groups. The practice of regular reporting about each group’s progress and struggles ensures that small-group ministry plays a critical role in the congregation’s mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The work of the small-group ministry council will overlap the church council in membership, but should not duplicate the work of the church council. The principle focus of the *church council* will be the plans and strategies for the church’s discipleship system. The primary focus of the *small-group ministry council* will be on the spiritual growth and skill building of the small-group leaders, particularly as it pertains to the church’s and groups’ plans.

Center the Small-Group Ministry

Allow God to open your eyes, ears, heart, and mind to your context and the culture of the congregation. Test your ideas with a small group of trusted friends, both inside and outside the church. Pray, listen, and fast as you seek God’s will for this ministry.

We strongly recommend that the small-group ministry core team be organized as a Covenant Discipleship (CD) group. CD groups focus on mutual accountability and support for discipleship shaped by the General Rule of Discipleship: “To witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (the *Discipline*, ¶1117.2a). The group writes a covenant that states how the members of the group will obey the teachings of Jesus Christ, summarized in Matthew 22:37-40 and John 13:34-35. Writing a covenant and practicing weekly accountability for discipleship provides a strong foundation for developing and sustaining small-group ministry that helps the congregation live out its

mission with Christ in the world. (For helps on forming and sustaining CD groups, see www.umcdiscipleship.org/covenantdiscipleship or the “Resources” section.)

Take an Inventory of Existing Small Groups

Create a table with three columns: Grace Groups I, Grace Groups II, and Grace Groups III. (See the description of these groups on page 13, or use an organizing structure that better fits your context.) Place each existing group in the column where it seems most appropriate. Include all the various administrative committees, ministry areas, task groups or teams, choirs, classes or study groups, fellowship groups, affinity groups, service/mission groups, self-help groups, and any other small group that meets as a part of your overall ministry. The leaders of all these groups must be invited to the small-group ministry council and included in the small-group ministry planning. Remember, you will likely need to do some teaching and interpretation to those leaders who do not see discipleship as necessarily part of their purpose. Help them to see that they play an important role in helping the congregation make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

When you have finished, look for any holes in the small-group system. You should have at least one group in each column. If the congregation lacks groups in any of the columns, then that indicates a weakness in the small-group system that needs to be acknowledged and changed. Ideally, your small-group system will serve the entire age span of the church. At least, begin with the groups for older youth and all adults.

Leadership

The pastor plays a critical role in small-group ministry. He or she must be actively involved in planning, implementing, supporting, and participating in small groups. Ideally, the pastor participates in a Covenant Discipleship group. This helps the pastor with his or her own discipleship and models for laity that the pastor is a disciple who needs support and accountability just like everyone else. The pastor's participation in a small group sends the message to the congregation that this is important. Good leaders never ask followers to do anything they are not willing to do themselves.

Laypeople whose discipleship has formed in small groups provide the leadership of small groups. The role of pastors is to share pastoral power and work in partnership with the lay leadership.

Group Leaders

Small-group leaders are leaders in discipleship. They habitually witness to Jesus Christ and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion. These holy habits are essential marks of discipleship. If the mission of small groups is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, then leaders must be experienced, seasoned disciples who understand that they also need support and accountability.

Small-group leaders are people who are familiar with grace. They are comfortable in their own skin, acknowledge freely they do not have all the answers or need to know everything. They are good listeners who bring an atmosphere of grace with them into the meeting room. They pay attention to the people in the group and encourage everyone to participate.

Group leaders are aware of the gifts God has given them and look for gifts in others. They try to discern where God may be calling them to use their gifts on behalf of the church, community, or world.

Small-group leaders collaborate and cooperate with fellow leaders and the pastor(s). They work together as a team to focus on their ministries and to be clear that the group is an extension of the congregation and its mission with Christ in the world. Whether the group meets for Bible study, prayer, accountability, service, or ministry within the church, the leader helps the group to maintain its attention to the stated purpose. This is important because groups can easily slip into gripe or gossip sessions or be so intent on the task that they forget about discipleship. Good leaders will keep groups focused on the mission.

Identify Potential Leaders

The committee on nominations and leadership development will have a primary responsibility for selecting leaders for the various ministry groups. Your team and/or

council will generally focus on the leaders of new groups for some aspect of spiritual formation, self-help, weekday study, or other gathering that is not directly related to the work of the church council.

You may come at decisions for new leadership in at least two ways: a new group is needed to meet some ministry need, or new people are ready to enter into a leadership position.

You and your core team, working with the leaders of existing groups, will cultivate relationships with many of the laity participants in those groups whom God may raise up as new leaders. You and the small-group ministry council members are in a perfect place to observe the spiritual growth and gifts of these people and to name, encourage, and call forth those gifts. Many people do not realize (or admit to) the abilities they have, and it is gratifying to know that someone else recognizes their gifts and potential.

Through personal contact by telephone and face-to-face conversation, invite them to a small-group leader exploratory meeting. The agenda for this meeting is to put before the potential leaders the small-group ministry leadership team's vision for the congregation's small-group ministry. Invite participants to ask questions and discuss how the system will take shape and how they might play a role in its development. Conclude the meeting with an invitation to fast and pray and seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in how each of them should respond to the invitation to serve as a small-group leader.

Leaders will also be invited to serve on the small-group ministry council. They would need to be oriented to that council, with information about its purpose, when it meets, and what it is doing.

Leadership Training

You and the core team have a responsibility for leadership training. You do not have to do this training yourself; but under your guidance and direction, others may be recruited, either from the congregation or elsewhere, to provide occasional training.

Your group leaders will have different skills and abilities, and the gifts needed for leading the various groups may also be different. The committee on nominations and leadership development can be a partner in developing training opportunities. The annual conference and district may host training events about the various ministry areas. Your training may be more general, focused on group leadership, for example:

- group dynamics and group relationships;
- understanding the difference between facilitating, teaching, and directing meetings;
- agenda setting, planning, and achieving timely follow-through from group members;
- dealing with and healing from conflict;
- establishing good communication;
- dealing with under- and over-participation;
- starting, nurturing, and ending groups;
- understanding the lifecycle of groups and how to keep them healthy;
- establishing a group covenant, including dealing with confidentiality;

- offering hospitality and welcoming new members;
- understanding group culture and group norms.

Other ideas and priorities will come from the group leaders themselves as they run into obstacles or new situations. As group leaders meet as a council, they may realize that others are struggling with a similar issue or problem that could be resolved or alleviated with some added training.

Forming and Organizing Small Groups

New groups may arise from a personal need, a new ministry area, or a specific task. Whatever the new group is, it should fill a needed place in your grace groups system. Just because something *can* be done does not necessarily mean that it *should* be done. If the church is to be the church and do what only the church can do, all your groups should be oriented in some way to accomplishing the mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To that end, each new group has to have a clear vision of why it is being formed, what its mission is, and how it fits into the overall mission of the church.

Becoming a Group

Any group (or the church, for that matter) has a lifespan, which has been described in the shorthand of “form, storm, and norm.” People come together for some reason (form); they get to know one another and figure out the stated work of the group (storm); and then develop the stronger relationships and sense of mutual purpose that allows them to become an entity with common goals, values, and ways of working and being (norm).

The Healthy Group Lifespan

A longer description focuses more on functionality: “birth, formation, stability, decline, death.” *Birth* and *formation* are essentially the same as *form* and *storm*. *Stability* may be misleading, because *vitality*, not stability, is what the group needs. Vitality allows for the group to adapt, change, look ahead, evaluate honestly what it is and what it’s doing, and create. Perhaps a better way to think about *stability* is by understanding that *instability* is what leads to decline and perhaps death. Many things will destabilize a group: the presence of new members, the absence or loss of members, competing tasks, time pressures, change of leadership, change or loss of vision or purpose, change of the space, and discouragement, to name a few.

For a group to remain vital, the group leader must *always* attend to both the group’s life and the group’s vision. A healthy group stays in a “formation—stability” loop. When circumstances change, the whole group “regroups” or “re-forms.” It revisits its purpose, orients new people into the group vision and culture, reaffirms its “marching orders,” maintains effective communication within and outside the group as necessary, and makes intelligent adjustments to its plans and strategies. When a group slips away from this healthy way of functioning, it begins to decline.

Some signs of decline are obvious; for example, people “vote with their feet” and go elsewhere; withhold their time, money, or commitment; get cantankerous with one another; or create winners and losers by voting instead of working by consensus. Some signs are less obvious, but can be equally deadly: becoming too consumed with *doing* to pay attention to *being*, getting lax about maintaining the means of grace that mark the group as ministry, failing to welcome or properly orient new people, wishing for different circumstances rather than dealing with current reality, and so on.

The Death of a Group

A strong leader will act to keep the group stable and vital and may intervene at the point of decline. When the pattern of decline is not attended to, the group will eventually die, though that could take a very long time. We have all seen sad examples of a group that has dwindled in size to just a few people who most often have no real sense of mission or purpose anymore; they hang on because of their relationships or simply out of habit.

Even at the point of death, a creative intervention may breathe new life and purpose into a faltering group, though its members may have to agree to a change that seems radical to them. Dying, however, for a “Resurrection people,” can be liberating and should be handled with dignity. No one need feel as if his or her participation and the strong relationships have been wasted, but sometimes people don’t know how to come to a graceful end. As the small-group ministry leader, you may be the one who steps in to end a group.

Always remember the personal touch, and never underestimate the power of ritual. If you step in, visit each of the remaining group members, one at a time, with a member of your core team, if you can. (Witnesses to this conversation are important, as feelings may run hot and deep.) Having that personal attention, in which you invite the person to reflect on what the group has been and might yet become through a rebirthing process with others, sends the appropriate message that the individual and the group are valued. Invite remaining group members to be mentors or advisors or “seed members” of a new group. Celebrate their life as a group in worship or with some other recognition. Find a way to keep their group “story”—their contributions to the church’s story—alive.

Establish a Healthy Group Culture

It is far easier in a new group to establish a culture—which we might call a rule of life—than to try to change it. Disciple making in the Wesleyan tradition is guided by a rule of life, noted in the *Discipline*, that shapes the life and work of every group at every level of the congregation.

A Rule of Life

The General Rules are the United Methodist rule of life. The General Rule of Discipleship is a contemporary restatement (see the *Discipline*, ¶1117.2a). The purpose is to help Christians orient their lives toward Christ and his mission in the world. It is like a compass that keeps us on course to our destination of holiness of heart and life.

Accountability

Accountability in small groups is simply sharing what you have done, or not done, as you live the way of Jesus. This way of giving account is guided by the congregation's rule of life. The purpose is to support members' growth in holiness.

Accountability in small groups may take many forms, depending upon the nature of each group. For example, administrative ministries (finance, trustees, staff/pastor parish relations, church council) and discipleship ministries (education, mission, evangelism, membership care, etc.) may set aside time once a quarter to evaluate their work in light of the General Rule of Discipleship. They may ask how they have contributed to the church's mission through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion. Such corporate accountability would serve to focus the group's work on serving Christ in the world and contributing to the congregation's disciple-making mission. The key is to work together to keep Christ at the center of all they do.

The same model of accountability applies to the more traditional small groups, such as prayer, Bible study, support, nurture, cell, and accountability. These have a more explicit goal of Christian formation for their members.

Other groups, such as fellowship and service groups, could incorporate accountability for discipleship by forming groups of three who meet monthly. Each person takes five to ten minutes to share how he or she is applying the General Rule of Discipleship to his or her daily life. A prayer could be said following each person's account. Each time the whole group meets, it could set aside time for members to pair off and share with each other how they have followed Jesus Christ in the world since their last meeting.

We must be clear that accountability in small groups is simply each person sharing with the group what he or she has done, or not done, guided by the congregation's rule of life. The challenge is to share in ways that build up the group and help other group members with their discipleship. This practice is very important because it builds trust and intimacy within the group. As members grow closer to one another, they will also grow closer to God.

Support for All Small-Group Participants

Small-group ministry that is integral to the mission of the church requires regular, intentional support. Plan quarterly gatherings for everyone participating in a small group, not just the leaders. These gatherings will ideally include sharing a meal, a brief time of small-group training, informal conversation, and worship. These gatherings are important because they will build connections among all the various groups and provide ongoing training. They are an opportunity for groups to learn from one another.

Quarterly gatherings are ideally for small-group participants only. They are not open to everyone in the congregation. Members of the congregation who wish to participate in the quarterly meetings may do so on the condition they join one of the small groups.

Finally, the recommended order of worship for the conclusion of these quarterly meetings is the Love Feast found in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* on page 581. The Love Feast is an important part of Methodist spirituality. It is a powerful time of informal worship

that includes hymn singing, Scripture reading, prayer, testimony, sharing bread and water, and a collection to support ministry with people who live in poverty. One of its important features is that it is intended to be led entirely by laity. The Love Feast empowers people and builds community among people who share the common experience of participation in a small group.

Evaluation

Regular evaluation is crucial for faithfulness in any ministry. But what do we evaluate? How do we know when we have the results we want? If the ultimate goal is making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, how do we recognize a “disciple,” and how do we measure transformation?

Goals

There is not much point in evaluating if you don’t know what you want to accomplish, or if there has been no goal setting. Start with the mission or purpose of the group. If it is a Bible study group, a probable desired result is that you want group members who are moved by their study of Scripture to pursue growth in holiness of heart and life.

Envision what a successful and faithful result will be, given the purpose of the group, and then set three or four goals, with strategies that will help you get there. Goal setting begins with the stated mission or purpose of the group. Goals should be SMART—**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**easonable, and **T**imely. Goals should be specific; challenging, but not impossible; and doable over a designated short- and long-term. Accomplishing short-term goals encourages group members to keep going, and long-term goals help keep the group members’ eyes on the “main thing.” One easy question for your core team and each small group to consider is this: “If we continue on our current trajectory—keeping the same attitudes, ideas, plans, and activities without change—will we be likely to achieve the results we want?” If you’re not so sure the answer is yes, reexamine and rework your current direction.

To return to the example above, goals for that Bible study group might include teaching how to navigate the Scriptures; introducing the major themes and key biblical figures; and issuing a weekly challenge to group members that relates to a person, theme, or biblical value. Once those goals are set and strategies to achieve them implemented, you can measure the results. Remember—if you are not getting the results you want, then change your goals and strategies.

Measurement

There are two fundamental measurement criteria used to evaluate any process, project, or performance: *quantitative* and *qualitative*. *Quantitative* metrics measure in numbers and amounts. For example, a worship service achieves an attendance goal of exceeding 100 worshippers weekly; a children’s vacation Bible school sets a goal of 50 children a day; or a church sets a membership goal of five new members a month. Quantitative measures are easy to

apply—just count. *Qualitative* measures are a bit more difficult. Following the earlier examples, how well did worship connect the 100 people to a sense of God’s holiness? What did the 50 children learn about God, faith, and their Christian behavior each day they attended VBS? How well do the five new members this month grow in their discipleship, and how are they living their faith in the world? These are qualitative measures.

Measurement of small groups begins with missional counting. We begin with the obvious:

- How many small groups that fit the definition cited in the introduction are currently active?
- How many people are participating in small groups?
- What percentage of the congregation’s membership is participating in at least one small group?
- What is the percentage change (increase or decrease) of small-group participation from the previous year?

We can also combine quantitative and qualitative measurement. Another way to think about *metrics* is to identify the *standards* that illustrate faithful and effective discipleship. This helps remind us of the results we want through small-group ministries and how we know we have achieved them; for example:

- How many small-group participants are serving as leaders in discipleship for the first time this year?
- How many members served in mission in the community (i.e., served at a soup kitchen, visited the sick, visited a jail or prison, helped build homes for low-income families, visited the homebound, and so on)?
- How many members are serving in worship leadership for the first time (reading Scripture, serving as an usher, singing in choir, playing a musical instrument, serving Holy Communion, etc.)?
- How many people are certified lay servants for the first time? How many have completed advanced lay servant training?
- How many members are habitually practicing the means of grace through weekly worship, daily prayer (private and with friends/family), the Lord’s Supper, Bible reading and study, fasting or abstinence, or engaging in a service or justice ministry?
- How do the personal stories of the participants reveal that lives are being changed and becoming more like the image of Christ?
- How are those stories confirmed in the community of faith?

The success or failure of small-group ministries cannot be stated in numbers alone: the number of small groups, the number of people involved, how often they meet, or how many new groups get launched. Beyond these measures, it is important to understand how people’s lives are being changed and how they are growing in holiness of heart and life. Remember, a group of 10 people who reorient their lives to be full-time disciples has much more impact than 500 people who sit in circles in small groups talking about what fun activities they would like to do together.

One simple, periodic process to follow is to work with the church council to answer the following questions with the whole leadership of the congregation:

- What is our mission and purpose as a congregation?
- What roles do small groups play in helping us fulfill our mission and reach our goals as a congregation?
- What do we want small groups to provide for participants?
- How well are our existing small groups meeting these needs?
- How can we improve existing groups to offer more to participants?
- What other groups could we offer to enable more people to grow in holiness of heart and life and to help this congregation fulfill its mission?

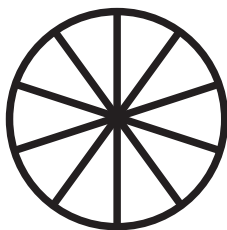
These questions cannot be answered quantitatively. Assessing the role of small groups in spiritual formation and helping the congregation fulfill its mission are only possible when we include qualitative metrics in our evaluation. By establishing the standards that you want to live up to and grow toward, and which you evaluate regularly, you have a strong base on which to build your ministries, groups, and members. For more helps on measurement, planning, and evaluation, see www.umvitalcongregations.com.

Conclusion

Discipleship is a process of growth in holiness of heart and life. It is a way of living that draws us closer to Christ and conforms our lives to his. A helpful way of visualizing this life comes from a sixth-century monk, Dorotheos of Gaza. He describes the Christian life with the illustration of a circle with lines radiating inward to a central point.

Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. . . . Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center: the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings. . . . Let us assume for the sake of analogy that to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.

(From *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* by Roberta C. Bondi)



Discipleship is how we move from the circumference of the circle closer and closer to the center. In the process, we grow in holiness of heart and life and are drawn closer and closer to our neighbors and to God. Pursuing this holiness within relationships of mutual accountability and support in small groups empowers and equips women, men, youth, and children to grow up and grow toward the One who is creating, redeeming, and sustaining them in love. Providing the means for adults, youth, and children to live out the baptismal covenant and grow in faith, hope, and love requires a system of small groups. Regardless of size, location, or ethnicity, small groups are the most effective means of inviting people into a relationship with Jesus Christ and equipping them to become fully the persons God created them to be as they join Christ and his mission in the world.

Resources

**Indicates our top picks

Small-Group Ministry

***Biblical Foundations for Small-Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* by Gareth Weldon Icenogle (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), ISBN: 0830817719.

***The Big Book on Small Groups* by Jeffrey Arnold (Grand Rapids: IVP Connect, 2004), ISBN: 9780830823703.

Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), ISBN: 9780310267102.

***Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups* by Julie A. Gorman (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993, 2002), ISBN: 9780801091452.

***Disciples Making Disciples: Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups and Class Leaders* by Steven W. Manskar (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2016), ISBN: 978-0881777741.

***Everyday Disciples: Covenant Discipleship for Youth* by Chris Wilterdink (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2016), ISBN: 9780881777932.

***Growing Everyday Disciples: Covenant Discipleship with Children* by Melanie C. Gordon, Susan Groseclose, and Gayle Quay (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2016), ISBN: 9780881776959.

Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know by Henry Cloud and John Townsend (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), ISBN: 9780310250289.

***Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World* by M. Scott Boren (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), ISBN: 9780801072307.

The Relational Way: From Small Group Structures to Holistic Life Connections by M. Scott Boren (Houston: TOUCH Publications, 2007), ISBN: 9780978877903.

Biblical and Theological Foundations

***Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* by Steven W. Manskar (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000), ISBN: 9780881773392.

***Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley's General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living* by Kevin M. Watson (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009), ISBN: 9780881775563.

The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance by David Lowes Watson (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), ISBN: 9781579109394.

Grace to Lead: Practicing Leadership in The Wesleyan Tradition by Kenneth L. Carder and Lacey C. Warner (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2010), ISBN: 9780938162766.

****Opening Ourselves to Grace: Basic Christian Practices** (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), ISBN: 9780881775082. CD with study guide.

Reclaiming the Wesleyan Tradition: John Wesley's Sermons for Today by Douglas M. Strong et al. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), ISBN: 9780881775198.

Websites

Discipleship Ministries Guidelines Website. www.MinistryGuidelines.org

Discipleship Ministries Small-Group Ministry Resources. <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/covenantdiscipleship>

The Upper Room—Small Groups. <http://www.upperroom.org/ministry-areas/small-groups>

UMC Agencies & Helpful Links

General Board of Church and Society, www.umc-gbcs.org, 202-488-5600; Service Center, 1-800-967-0880

General Board of Discipleship (d/b/a Discipleship Ministries), www.umcdiscipleship.org, 877-899-2780; Discipleship Resources, <http://bookstore.upperroom.org>, 1-800-972-0433; The Upper Room, www.upperroom.org, 1-800-972-0433; email: info@umcdiscipleship.org

General Board of Global Ministries, www.umcmmission.org, 1-800-862-4246 or 212-870-3600; email: info@umcmmission.org

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, www.gbhem.org, 615-340-7400

General Board of Pension and Health Benefits, www.gbophb.org, 847-869-4550

General Commission on Archives and History, www.gc ah.org, 973-408-3189

General Commission on Religion & Race, www.gcorr.org, 202-547-2271; email: info@gcorr.org

General Commission on the Status & Role of Women, www.gcsrw.org, 1-800-523-8390

General Commission on United Methodist Men, www.gcumm.org, 615-340-7145

General Council on Finance and Administration, www.gcf a.org, 866-367-4232 or 615-329-3393

Office of Civic Youth-Serving Agencies/Scouting (General Commission on United Methodist Men), www.gcumm.org, 615-340-7145

The United Methodist Publishing House, www.umph.org, 615-749-6000; Curric-U-Phone, 1-800-251-8591; Cokesbury, www.cokesbury.com, 1-800-672-1789

United Methodist Communications, www.umcom.org, 615-742-5400; EcuFilm, 1-888-346-3862; InfoServ, email: infoserv@umcom.org; *Interpreter Magazine*, www.interpretermagazine.org, 615-742-5441

United Methodist Women, www.unitedmethodistwomen.org; 212-870-3900

For additional resources, contact your annual conference office.