



# READY RESOURCES

*A Publication of the Memphis Conference Connectional Ministries Office*

## Spiritual Formation:

### PRODUCING AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES

When John Wesley and other young men at Oxford University formed the “Holiness Club” their goal was to live an authentically Christian life. Wesley had been greatly influenced by writers who emphasized imitation of Christ, like Thomas a’ Kempis in his work named precisely, *The Imitation of Christ*. The spiritual landscape of England and Europe at the time was filled with what Wesley termed “Christians in name only.” By seeking a “methodical” observance of scripture and spiritual disciplines, the Holiness Club’s dedication inspired the derogatory nickname that would characterize an entire movement and later denomination: METHODISTS. Early Methodists were ridiculed for at least two distinctive qualities: strict adherence to expectations of personal and social holiness and spiritual “enthusiasm.” Their discipline and passion for holiness became the first Methodist’s distinguishing marks of spiritual authenticity.

Ironically, Methodism has slowly lost its earliest distinctive marks related to spiritual formation. In the landscape of twenty-first century congregations and denominations, we are being “out-Methodist-ed.” Other branches of the Christian family have taken Wesley’s original intent to spread “scriptural holiness” across the land and translated it into highly structured methods of “discipling” people in small groups. The early genius of Wesley was combining his message of fully available and transforming divine grace with a highly structured “delivery system” of small groups for spiritual formation and maturation.

Today, by and large, most Methodist congregations have lost that emphasis, as Wesley feared when he said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodist should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out.” A renewed effort to reach people with the gospel and then shape them into genuine Christian disciples over time must be our renewed focus.

The challenge of most United Methodist congregations today is combining a renewed passion for evangelism with a well defined “system” of “discipling” people. That is to say our goal is not just producing “Christians in name only,” but authentic Christian disciples whose lives bear the evidence that they belong to Christ, align their lives with Christ’s teachings, and embody Christ’s transforming grace in the world. The key to genuine “discipling” is a clear understanding and compelling practice of “spiritual formation.”

## Quotes from How Is It With Your Soul?

by Denise L. Stringer

**From the beginning, the Methodist movement has sought to lead people beyond nominal Christianity into a vital relationship with God.  
(See Rom 3:22)**

**John and Charles Wesley believed that personal conversion, when properly nurtured within the Class Meeting, would lead to lifelong Christian discipleship and the spread of scriptural holiness across the land.**

**There was no room in Wesley’s movement for “almost Christians.” All around him he saw parishes where the bulk of the members called themselves Christians but did not demonstrate the character of a truly converted life. He sought to help lay persons “watch over each other’s souls.”**

**The continual questions of spiritual formation in the context of grace are: How is it with your soul? Do you find your soul as alive to God as ever?**

### REFLECTION/ACTION:

**\*Why do you think current Methodists have largely lost a systematic or “methodical” approach to Spiritual Formation?**

**\*What steps can your church take to have a “discipling plan” aimed at spiritual authenticity and maturity?**

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

## WHAT IS CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION?

Christian Spiritual Formation is generally understood as the daily practice of spiritual disciplines for the purpose of maintaining a personal relationship with God--- and prepares us to be more creative servants used by the Holy Spirit to point to the risen Christ.

In his book titled *Invitation to a Journey*, Robert Mulholland has defined spiritual formation as “a process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others.” In the context of divine grace, spiritual formation is the life-long process of being transformed by Christ. Henri Nouwen has described the process as intentionally seeking knowledge of and imitation of the heart of Christ. It is important, in the context of grace, to note that all pursuits of spiritual formation and maturation are in response to divine grace. As our awareness and responsiveness to divine grace increases, our calling to respond by ordering our lives in a manner that focuses on spiritual disciplines as “means of grace” also deepens and hopefully leads to gradual growth in spiritual maturity.

## WHAT ARE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES?

Spiritual Disciplines are intentional practices that become “means of grace.” They include but are not limited to **prayer, fasting, worship, meditation, confession, Christian conferencing, study, mission, service, solitude, silence, charity, and the sacrament of Holy Communion**. As we practice these disciplines we begin to allow ourselves and our agendas to decrease and allow God’s self and God’s agenda to increase in our lives. As a result, we begin to become “new creations in Christ Jesus.” We begin to embody the “kingdom” or “reign of God” in and through Christ.

## NEW LIFE IN CHRIST—IN COMMUNITY!

Our new life in Christ is lived out in accountable relationships with a Christian community of faith. Church life, at its best, reflects the heart and character of Christ. With this in mind, our congregational life offers opportunities for spiritual formation through worship experiences and prayer services, small groups, Bible study (including Sunday School), and age-level ministries, tithes and offering, service and mission opportunities, and Holy Communion. All that we are and all that we do together in the local church should contribute to spiritual maturation and authenticity as disciples and representatives of Christ.

**“SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION IS A PROCESS OF INCREASINGLY BEING POSSESSED AND PERMEATED BY THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST.”**

**DALLAS WILLARD**  
**THE GREAT OMISSION**



BOLD DECISIONS.  
FAITHFUL SACRIFICES.  
COURAGEOUS ACTIONS.

**Wesley’s method of nurturing Christian discipleship became known as the Class Meeting system. Its purpose was to provide for the nurture of members of the Methodist Societies.**

**The ONE condition for initially participating in an ongoing class meeting each week was “the desire to flee from the wrath to come.”**

**However, members of the classes had to “continue to evidence their desire for salvation” by following the “general rules” of the societies:**

- 1. Do no harm by avoiding evil of every kind;**
- 2. Do good of very possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all;**
- 3. Attend (to) all the ordinances of God.**

## **REFLECTION/ACTION:**

**\*What Spiritual Disciplines are you currently observing in your daily living? Which ones do you lack?**

**\*If you were in a Wesleyan Class Meeting today, what would you report when asked, “How is it with your soul? Do you find your soul as alive to God as ever?” What needs more attention and improvement?**

## **New Life in Christ—Personally!**

Christians must also engage in spiritual disciplines apart from congregational life to sustain a daily practice and personal relationship with God. Private prayer or prayer with a partner, devotional reading of scriptures and spiritual writings, fasting, solitude and silence can become part of our everyday journey toward a more disciplined life in Christ Jesus.

## **Going Deeper—Relinquishing Our False Self**

In his book, *A Deeper Journey*, Robert Mulholland leads us deeper into the heart of spiritual transformation. To truly move toward greater and greater transformation by grace, barriers to transformation and residue of sin's domination must be acknowledged and relinquished. In other words, to genuinely move toward authentic spiritual change and transformation, a person must “empty” himself or herself of all that is not of Christ.

This “deeper journey” into the heart of spiritual formation is described by Mulholland precisely as a process wherein the “false” self is relinquished—and displaced by the true self in Christ. The true self is increasingly able to let the Holy Spirit rule the self, to a point that evidence of spiritual maturation and transformation emerge as “the fruit of the Spirit.” (Gal. 5:22) A lack of the fruit of the Spirit is an indication of the degree to which the Spirit is not in control or “ruling.” As the Spirit displaces the destructive, false self, the self-giving love of Christ is able to emerge.

In our Wesleyan context and heritage, this deeper journey is described as “going on to perfection” (in love of God and love of neighbor and obedience). It is a life-long, intentional process of opening ourselves to grace and the transformation of our lives, our communities and our world that Christ intended. It is the life-long pursuit of aligning our lives with Christ. Genuine progress toward “being perfected in love” is rare, perhaps, because the deeper journey of relinquishing our false self is so demanding. Historically, only those surrounded by genuine communities of grace and immersed in prayer and humility have shown evidence of such a profound reshaping of the human will and nature capable of being labeled “sanctification”—being truly perfected in love. However, as the historic ordination questions express, we are all called to earnestly seek Christian perfection in response to divine grace—and press on with humble expectation of achieving it, even in this lifetime.

## **Authenticity—in the Context of Transforming Grace**

Simply stated, the goal of spiritual formation in Methodist congregations today is genuine discipleship in the context of grace. We have a historical “mandate” as Denise L. Stringer suggests: “John Wesley’s approach to spiritual formation was nothing other than an attempt to live ‘according to the method laid down in the Bible.’” That is our mandate today also... authentic Christian discipleship in our daily living that displays evidence of transformation by divine grace. The question is, can we reclaim our “methodical” heritage from Wesley which spawned the name “Methodist?”

# **Wesleyan “Spiritual” Practices**

(Means of Grace)

The Public Worship of God  
Searching the Scriptures  
The Lord’s Supper  
Family and Private Prayer  
Christian “Conferencing”  
Fasting or Abstinence

Feeding the Hungry  
Welcoming the Stranger  
Clothing the Naked  
Care for the Sick  
Visiting the Imprisoned  
Sheltering the Homeless

## **“Dust of the Rabbi”**

In the Rabbinic tradition of Israel, a student (who had distinguished himself with his study of the Torah) would present himself to a well known Teacher of the law and say, “Rabbi, I want to become one of your disciples.”

His desire was to take on the “yoke” of the Rabbi. The Rabbi would examine the potential student, follower, apprentice to see if he thought it was possible for the adolescent to “do what I do.” If the Rabbi believed the student had what it took to be successful, he would extend the invitation, “Come, follow me.” The student would devote himself to following the Rabbi everywhere. He would devote his life to learning how to do what the Rabbi did.

This kind of devotion is what it means to be a disciple. As a Jewish sage suggests, the goal of the disciple was “to be covered in the dust of your Rabbi.”

Are you covered with the dust of your Rabbi, “Jesus?”

-Rob Bell Velvet Elvis

## Resources for Spiritual Formation in the Local Church

### Web Sites:

[www.upperroom.org](http://www.upperroom.org)

[www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com)

[www.discipleshipresources.org](http://www.discipleshipresources.org)

[www.companionsinchrist.org](http://www.companionsinchrist.org)

DVD—"Opening Ourselves to Grace"

### Local Training:

Memphis School of Servant Leadership provides 12 week small group opportunities to provide participants help toward an ever-deepening journey of faith and service. For more information:

[www.servantleadership-memphis.org](http://www.servantleadership-memphis.org)

Upper Room Academy for Spiritual Formation

Fall 2008 Convocation: Accountable Discipleship

Leader: Dr. Steve Manskar

General Board of Discipleship

### Books:

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster—Abingdon Press

Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living

Bishop Reuben Job—Abingdon Press, Publisher

The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship

Dallas Willard—Harper Collins

Renovation of the Heart

Dallas Willard—Nav. Press

The Divine Conspiracy

Dallas Willard—Harper Collins

How Is It With Your Soul?

Denise L. Stringer—Upper Room, Publisher

A Spiritual Formation Workbook

James Bryan Smith—Harper, Collins Publisher

Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition (Workbook)

Steve Harper--Upper Room, Publisher

Invitation to a Journey- A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation (Vol. 1)

M. Robert Mulholland-- Intersivity Press

The Deeper Journey-- The Spiritual Discovering Your True Self (Vol. 2)

M. Robert Mulholland—Intersivity Press

Shaped By The Word

M. Robert Mulholland-- Intersivity Press

Spiritual Awakening-- A Guide to Spiritual Life in Congregations

John Ackerman- Alban Institute 1-800-486-1318

The Fruit of the Spirit: Becoming the Person God Wants You to Be

Thomas E. Trask and Wayde I Goodall- Zondervan

The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook by Adele A. Calhoun—InterVarsity Press

*Spiritual Formation is "a process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others."*

-Robert Mulholland

*"Become the change you want to see in the world."*

-Ghandi

### GETTING STARTED IN YOUR LOCAL CHURCH...

**Beyond *Disciple Bible Study* and *The Walk to Emmaus*, one of the best Spiritual Formation Resources for the local church is a series of curriculum for small groups called *Companions in Christ*.**

The 26 week core course offers a more in-depth study of the basic Spiritual Formation topics for small groups.

Other short-term studies are designed for a six week small group experience, with a retreat at the end.

Available titles include:

*Exploring The Way: An Introduction*

*The Way of Transforming Discipleship*

*The Way of Grace*

*The Way of Blessedness*

*The Way of Forgiveness*

*(For Children)*

*The Way of the Child*

Another model for United Methodist "discipling" is the Covenant Discipleship Group. This model is a contemporary adaptation of Wesley's Class Meetings. For more information, see the *Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups* by Gayle Turner Watson.

[www.discipleshipresources.org](http://www.discipleshipresources.org)