

## **The Method in Methodism**

By Bob Kaylor – February 18, 2020

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As traditionalists think about what a new Methodist movement might look like, one of the things we have heard often is how important some form of the name “Methodist” is. People have a lot of reasons for preferring that name, from connecting to our theological heritage to maintaining continuity with our organizational past. A word that was originally intended as an insult in the days of the Wesley’s “Holy Club” has become a cherished name for a people known for pursuing “holiness of heart and life.”

What we often miss in our celebration of this name, however, is the “method” part of Methodism. We have spent a lot of energy talking about doctrine, organization, structure, clergy deployment, and a host of other issues when considering a new denomination – all of which are vitally important. But the key to a new Methodism is going to be recapturing the method that fueled the original Methodist movement and created massive personal and social change – the “method” of accountable discipleship in class and band meetings. The class and band meetings were places where people “watched over one another in love,” where sin was confessed and confronted, where the curriculum was the state of a person’s spiritual life, and the goal to grow deeper in “holiness of heart and life.”

Most Methodists today know about the class and band meetings, but few have ever experienced them. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this intentional discipleship strategy was largely replaced in Methodist churches by the Sunday School movement and Bible study. While the study of Scripture is a priority for Methodists, as Wesley himself would have affirmed, the truth is that we have often become so enamored with *information* that we have given less attention to the personal and corporate *transformation* of people. This was the key for John Wesley – the “one thing needful” and the goal of sanctification – “the renewal of our fallen nature... to be formed anew after the likeness of our Creator.” The class and band meetings, along with the means of grace, were the method by which people could be formed in the image of God they were created to be from the beginning.

I was a Methodist preacher for more than 20 years before I became part of a band meeting with two other pastors. We have met every Thursday morning for several years now, and I have begun to see personally the transformational nature of this form of “social holiness.” Dave, Joel, and I use Wesley’s band meeting questions every week, which involve confession of sin and dealing honestly with the state of our souls. Many are the weeks where I have been directed by the Holy Spirit to avoid or overcome a temptation because I knew that, if I gave in, I would have to talk about it on Thursday! We also pray for one another, check in on each other during the week, and inquire about our personal relationship with God. This is not a “gotcha” group where everyone is pointing out flaws, but rather a kind of

“AA” for sinners where we recognize our need for God, for holiness, and for one another. These guys are my band of brothers and I am not only a better pastor but a better Christian because of this weekly discipline. The band meeting itself is not where discipleship happens, but where we make *sure* that it happens!

The church I serve, Tri-Lakes United Methodist Church in Monument, Colorado, has experimented with a variety of discipleship programs over the years, but nothing has been more powerful than the reintroduction of class and band meetings to our ministry (though we call our class meetings “Life Groups” because, in 2020, the two things most people do not want to attend are “classes” and “meetings!”). We still have Sunday School groups and Bible studies for information, but it is in these intentional, accountable discipleship meetings that we are seeing real life transformation.

That is one of the reasons why I responded with enthusiasm to an invitation to lead the Wesleyan Covenant Association’s task force on accountable discipleship. Not only is it the engine that fueled the original Methodist movement and can do so once again, it is also something that has been personally transformational for me. Imagine churches in a new Methodism where the “method” is not just a nice idea or yet another program, but the centerpiece of the church’s life and ministry; where people are meeting in small groups, inquiring about the state of one another’s souls; where people are being set free from patterns of sin, addiction, and the pain of the past; where people are encouraged and challenged to go deeper in their love for God and neighbor; and where people begin to look, speak, and act like the image of God they were created to be. That is the kind of church that can carve a unique niche in the landscape of Christianity and make “Methodist” not just the name of a denomination, but a description of a peculiar people pursuing holiness once again.

The Accountable Discipleship Task Force will begin meeting in late February and will focus on evaluating and creating some guidelines and models for local churches in a new Methodist denomination to create their own transformational and accountable discipleship groups. The goal is not to create a one-size-fits-all program, but rather to offer ways to bring this vital method of disciple-making to churches in a variety of settings and ministry contexts. Our hope is that accountable discipleship will not just be a wished-for add-on ministry in a local church, but rather an exciting expectation for new “Methodist” pastors and churches. We believe that embracing the best practices of our Methodist past, as well as contemporary techniques and models, will help us grow churches that are places of life transformation for all kinds of people.

We invite your input as we begin our work. I am excited to see how God will use this team to help make the name “Methodist” meaningful and transformational once more!

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