

# OPEN FORUM

I had difficulty with statements James Heidinger II made in his article "Our Difficulty with Dialogue" (Nov./Dec. issue). Certainly "truth exists, whether we believe it or not..." but "to assume that one is 100% correct is immediately to be in danger of idolatry," as Marjorie Suchocki quotes from John Wesley in the following article "How We Might Become Deeply Loving People."

Jesus did not preach about doctrine. He talked about love. And the writer of Ephesians 4:12 tells us that the work of pastors and teachers is not to teach correct doctrine, but to equip God's people for ministry.

Mr. Heidinger missed the most important reason there is difficulty with dialogue. To have dialogue we must respect that our brothers and sisters see a different bit of the truth than we do. We must meet with them, as Dr. Suchocki points out, seeking to learn from them.

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The Jan./Feb. 2004 issue of *Circuit Rider* was filled with some very good articles intended to help raise awareness and practice of self-care among United Methodist clergy. This is an important issue and I commend *Circuit Rider* for addressing it.

However, a great opportunity was missed. I wonder why there was no mention of looking to our Wesleyan heritage and tradition as a valuable resource for forming and sustaining Christian spiritual leaders. In particular, no mention was made of guiding pastors into small groups for mutual accountability and support that helps them care for their bodies and nurture their souls through intentional practice of the instituted and prudential means

of grace (prayer, Bible study, worship, the Lord's Supper, fasting or abstinence, Christian conference, relationship and service with the poor, etc.).

My experience has taught me that pastors need to be part of at least two small groups. The first group is an accountability group with members of the congregation(s) they are appointed to serve. The purpose of these groups is to help the pastor attend to his or her own discipleship through weekly mutual accountability and support. These may be a Covenant Discipleship group or an Emmaus group reunion, or other form of accountability group that helps Christian women and me attend to all of the teachings of Jesus through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion. I have found that these congregation based groups are where the laity teach their pastors about the challenges and joys discipleship.

The second small group that pastors need is a peer group. Here pastors meet with other pastors monthly or quarterly to focus on three levels of accountability: spiritual, personal, and professional. In these groups pastors listen to and support one another in their common ministry. They are also accountable to one another for practicing the means of grace and caring for their bodies and souls.

The dynamic of both types of groups help to keep pastors centered in Christ and balanced in their discipleship and pastoral ministry. These small groups are the very heart of "connectionalism." They acknowledge that the work of ministry is too important for any of us to try to do it alone. When Christ calls us he calls us into covenant community. We need the connection of the community of love and forgiveness, centered in Christ, nurtured and experienced in small groups, in order to learn from one another how to faithfully live and minister in the world as faithful

disciples. The Christian conferencing that happens in small groups helps to foster the development of well-rounded, healthy women and men who have been called and commissioned by Christ and the church to do the work of ministry.

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